



Loose Id

Marie Harte

RETROCOG

a PowerUp! story



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RetroCog
(a *Power Up!* story)

Marie Harte



www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

Bend, Oregon

His flesh pebbled with the cold, but Noah First didn't feel the brisk wind as it roared over his sweat-soaked skin. Instead his mind was locked on the scene in front of him. Intrigued, he studied the rich scale of detail he saw in the woman kneeling on the ground. He placed her in the mid-1800s. Though he stood on a paved lot in the dark of early morning, he clearly saw the woman wearing a blue pioneer dress cradling her infant son in the light of day. She lifted her head, and under the brim of her bonnet, he saw the ghost of a smile.

Her young son cried, and she opened her blouse to feed him. The child suckled greedily while she crooned to him, her voice clear against the crisp backdrop of rustling grass in a small field near an uncluttered forest. The beauty of the moment struck

Noah dumb. So peaceful. Nature devoid of the rough concrete, electric lights, and the constant sense of urgency of the city.

“Oh hell. Noah, break out of it, big guy. Hey, Noah.”

Hands tugged his arm, and he regretfully pulled back from the images that looked and felt more than real.

“Christ, you’re like a block of ice. It’s October, numbskull. Where’s your jacket?”

He blinked and stumbled, almost knocking Chloe over. He would have crushed the petite woman if Nathan hadn’t grabbed him and hauled him upright.

“Dude, I step out for a few minutes, and you desert me. You left me alone downstairs with Jack. Seriously, do you hate me that much?”

Nathan grinned, but Noah could see the concern in his gaze.

“I came up here for a break and got sidetracked.” A tale they’d heard all too often, but Noah couldn’t help what he saw. The images

appeared where emotion had been strongest. And here, in this parking lot, a small child had once been born to loving parents who'd barely survived the trip west. Over a hundred and fifty years ago.

Jack Keiser, their boss and slave master, appeared in the doorway of the gym behind them. He frowned.

"Quit fucking around. Noah, with me. Chloe, go man the desk. You know we're a body short tonight with Aidan out sick. Nathan—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Go see who needs help inside. Man, I'm seriously beginning to hate this job. Who the hell works out at two in the morning?" He glared down at his T-shirt, where the PowerUp! logo blazed in white on red cotton. "Power up, my ass. More like dumb down. My skills are so underappreciated." He sulked, glaring at Jack.

Jack raised a brow, and Nathan broke eye contact in a hurry. He muttered under his breath but scooted past Jack and went inside. Instead of heading for the Employees Only door that led to a private downstairs—where Noah and Nathan had just been training—he continued down the hall

toward the gym, Bend's newest success story. In a town where people biked, swam, and hiked for fun, the fitness business was booming, despite the dour economy.

"Noah?" Jack asked again, his low, gravelly voice not as harsh as it normally was with the others.

"Sorry, boss." Noah couldn't control a shiver as the brisk fall wind whipped through him and preceded Jack back into the gym and down the private stairwell few knew existed.

Though PowerUp! had more than a dozen employees, only ten of them had come from Washington, DC, leftovers from the government's Psychic Warfare Program, or PWP. Like so many other experimental programs, the PWP had been disbanded and scattered due to funding problems. Or so he'd been told.

Noah hadn't exactly liked the clandestine work. But he'd more than appreciated the gene-altering drugs they'd given him, injections that expanded his abilities beyond anything he might have hoped. He could now focus the power, whereas before, he'd simply tried to live around it. Best of all, he didn't

suffer the aftereffects of withdrawal like the others on his team did. Noah didn't turn psychotic from withdrawal, and he didn't suffer mood swings if he didn't exercise his mind or body. He simply lapsed into a strange lethargy that sometimes made it hard for him to feel excited about anything.

"Sit down," Jack said from behind him as they entered Jack's office.

Noah sighed, burdened with reality once more. Though he appreciated this new start in life, away from the government's prying eyes, the night shifts made it difficult to function during the day. And Kitty kept giving him crap, more therapy nonsense he had no intention of following. A lifetime filled with doctors and drugs had done more harm than good, until it had led him to the PWP, where he'd finally found his place. He wished Kitty would understand that and leave him the hell alone. Unfortunately, the empath thought she could fix everyone and everything, even those who didn't want or need her help.

He blinked, amused to see a young Asian man furiously digging right where Jack's head should have been.

Jack snapped his fingers. “You with me, Noah?”

Noah coughed to cover his embarrassment at zoning out again and focused on the here and now. “Yeah.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. The light blue color always made Noah think of an arctic wolf, and he remained alert, cautious around a man who was a true predator. His boss’s massive chest, arms, and neck attested to the workouts they all practiced. Jack never acted out of sorts, but from the size of him, Noah figured the guy needed the constant physical exertion to keep his cool. And frankly, he didn’t even want to think about what Jack might be like out of control.

“I have a job for you. A retro job.”

Retro, short for retrocognition—the ability to perceive past events. The reason he’d been handpicked to join the PWP in the first place.

Despite not wanting to participate, Noah’s interest stirred. A few months ago, two of the guys working the day shift had gone on a road trip and

returned with a woman and a supposedly powerful artifact. There'd been rumors that Jack was restarting the PWP, and the road trip proved it. Yet Noah was in no hurry to join the ex-agents keen on heeding Jack's call to arms. Far away from the government that had often used them to discreetly clean up their messes, Bend provided them with normalcy. A fresh start away from conspiracies, bad guys, and the ever-present threat of death.

Noah had been delving more and more into the rich history of central Oregon. He felt no hurry to leave.

Jack ran a hand through his short dark hair and sighed. "You're not surprised about this job. I knew Price and Foreman wouldn't keep their damn mouths shut."

"It wasn't that hard to figure out." He wondered how to reject the job without seeming like he was refusing.

Jack swore under his breath. "Fine. But for the record, we're *not* restarting the PWP. We're a discreet, and I'm emphasizing *discreet*, service that specializes in investigations and security. Our

current client wishes to remain anonymous.”

Owen Stallbridge, a multimillionaire and one of Jack’s few known associates. Noah had seen the two of them planning the building of the gym in one of his visions of the past, but he kept that knowledge to himself.

“Anonymous. Right.”

Jack glared at him. “Sometimes I really hate working with psychics.”

Noah smothered a grin, surprised to find one wanting to curl his normally sober lips.

“Our client owns a warehouse that was broken into some time ago. Lately, items from the warehouse have started to reappear. Understand that no one but myself, our client, and the thief or thieves knows he was robbed. The items taken were...unusual, to say the least.”

Intrigued despite himself, Noah asked, “Unusual how?”

“Things people like us would understand. Powerful heirlooms our client needs to get back. In the wrong hands, some of his treasures can do

some serious damage.”

“Like kill?” Noah asked bluntly. Half the guys he worked with could do harm to others with a thought—controlling fire, moving and hearing things with their minds, knowing the future... All of which made for some dangerous potential. Probably why the government still kept tabs on them even eight months after the PWP had closed down.

“Some of the artifacts are lethal, yeah. But the item you’re going after isn’t dangerous. It’s just, well... Hell, read the file.” Jack paused to dig a folder out of his desk.

“I didn’t say I’d do the job.”

“I didn’t ask.” Jack slid the folder over to Noah and opened it up to reveal a picture. “That’s what you’re going after—a rare portrait, one of Emilio Vala’s earliest works, commissioned in 1854. According to Sotheby’s, it’s worth a few hundred thousand.”

Shit. From the look on his face, Jack wasn’t budging. Noah had no choice but to follow orders or get the hell out. After finally finding people who for the most part understood him, he had no wish to

move from his new home. Though he didn't relish the idea of leaving Bend, even for a few days, he'd do it because Jack had asked. *Ordered*, he corrected himself.

Noah studied the picture and felt his enthusiasm for the case build, regardless of wanting nothing to do with it. The picture was a portrait of a woman from the waist up, the backdrop a blue curtain. She wore a red dress trimmed with black lace that exposed her shoulders and the upper swells of her breasts while hinting at so much more. Little jewelry adorned her body except for a pair of glittery silver rosebud earrings. Her shoulders looked pearlescent, giving her an almost ethereal appearance. Until you looked at her eyes. Sooty lashes shuttered dark brown eyes that hinted at pleasures a man could only dream about. Pouty lips, a dainty nose, and a stubborn chin tugged at him to take a second look, to see what secrets she refused to share.

The artist had captured her charm and sensuality, yet there was something more that made Noah sit up and take notice.

After several minutes of quiet study, he glanced away from the picture to see Jack's smile of satisfaction. "What?"

"I knew you'd see more."

"What am I seeing, exactly, except a beautiful woman?"

"You tell me." Jack paused. "Noah, you like to think you're more grounded than the rest of us, but the truth is, you need to exercise your abilities more, not less, than everyone else so you can control them."

"I'm fine."

Jack snorted. "Yeah, that's why you're always staring off into space. I don't even want to know what you were looking at a few minutes ago, because it sure as hell wasn't my face."

Noah flushed. *Guilty.*

"I need you to find the painting and bring it back. Kitty booked your airfare already. She left the ticket sitting with the front desk. If nothing else, at least it'll get you out of this place for a while. You're starting to distance yourself more and more from

everyone. Don't think I haven't noticed."

Noah didn't like being on Jack's radar. "You mentioned a ticket?"

Jack nodded. "You fly out tomorrow afternoon."

Thank God he wouldn't have to drive. "Where am I heading?"

"You'll fly into Phoenix, but your destination is a small town called Superior."

Noah paused. "Any reason you didn't send me out right after Price and Foreman told you where the painting is?" Noah could see the scene in his mind's eye as his friends debriefed Jack on everything in this very office. Two months ago, they'd told Jack about that painting, as well as a half dozen of Stallbridge's other treasures littered across the states.

Jack scowled. "I needed to iron out a few details with the client before any more of our team tracks down the artifacts."

"The anonymous client, right." Noah paused. "So Stallbridge is okay with me going?"

"You're a real pain in my ass, Noah." Jack

sighed. "Our *client* leaves the manning of the cases to me. There was some question as to the ownership of one of his items after the first job, so we spent the last eight weeks cataloging and verifying the others. The painting is the real deal. It belongs to our client, and it's part of his collection. I need you to get it and bring it back without a scratch."

"Gotcha."

"And Noah? This should be a simple retrieval."

Right. Like the last one, in which their guys had nearly been killed. Price had been more than chatty during last week's Seahawk's game. Man had no head for liquor and the attention span of a gnat with his new fiancée and Foreman around.

"But be prepared for anything," Jack added.

Their new company motto, it seemed.

Noah stood, nodded, and left with the folder tucked under his arm, itching to go home and stare at that picture in private. He needed to see what it was that drew him, because Noah knew better than to go into a situation without all the facts. He fingered

a tiny scar at the corner of his left brow as he left the gym, his mind on other things.

* * *

Three days later

Lara Graham checked in an enthusiastic pair of out-of-towners, pleased to introduce the Lady Fine Inn to yet another group of art collectors. Brownville, Arizona, had been growing in leaps and bounds ever since the Associated Press had run a story revisiting famous outlaws and hidden treasures of the West. Brownville's claim to fame was one Finnegan Fury. The press had chronicled the scandalous robber who'd bankrupted several nearby banks and involved himself in a forbidden romance with Cecilia Fine, the local madam and namesake of the current Lady Fine Inn. The tragedy of their deaths and the rumor that Finnegan had killed her in a fit of jealousy made the tale one that still had people speculating over a hundred years after the fact.

"Enjoy your stay." Lara nodded to the elderly

couple and locked their credit card receipt in the old-fashioned register. The nine-room inn, once an infamous saloon and brothel, now boasted polished pinewood floors, comfortable southwestern décor intermixed with nineteenth-century antiques, and the modern conveniences of air-conditioning, spa bathrooms, and a state-of-the-art kitchen Lara used to its fullest. Nine rooms of rental bliss for those who wanted the real Southwestern atmosphere of a brothel done in tasteful hues and tacky tassels. Lara had loved the place the minute she'd laid eyes on it six months ago.

And if she had her way, she'd own it in a few short years.

She watched a couple people relax in the formal living room while their newest guests went upstairs. To both her relief and suspicion, the voice in her head remained quiet. So far, so good. That made two weeks of relative peace.

"Not bad," Frank said from directly behind her, making her jump. He chuckled. "I am the king of stealth."

"And a pain in my ass." She grinned along with

him. Lara didn't take to people, but from day one, something between her and Frank had clicked. Before she could start a volley of verbal abuse that would be sure to take them past their daily insults into truly raunchy rhetoric, a man entered the inn.

Everything around Lara came to a complete halt.

Hello, handsome. About time you arrived.

Lara winced. Oh hell. The voice had returned with a vengeance.

"Honey, I have this one." Frank preened as he slicked back his shoulder-length dark hair, which emphasized his good looks.

Lara ignored the husky voice clucking in her mind. It really had been a stretch to think she could outrun her past. Especially with all the ghost stories in Brownville. Doing her best to compose herself, she donned the veil of normalcy she'd worked most her life to perfect and huffed, "No way he's gay."

"Sexuality has nothing to do with this. It's all about charm. Just watch me work my magic."

"Please. Even you can't turn a straight man gay

within five seconds of meeting him. You're not that good."

Frank snickered. "But I'd love to try. Come on, Lara, get your head out of the gutter. I'm not after sex."

"Yet."

He ignored her. "Ten bucks says I can finagle dinner with tall, dark, and handsome. A friendly face to show him around town; that's all. Sex on the first date is too tacky, anyway. I'm not that easy."

Yes, he was. Used to Frank's amusing arrogance, Lara nodded. "You're on."

Frank approached the stranger with his typical swagger, one of youth and confidence that never failed to attract attention from both men and women, regardless of their orientation. With bright blue eyes, a trim frame, and a sunny disposition, Frank could charm the scales off a snake. In a town that welcomed temperamental artists of all sizes, shapes, and sexualities, her part-time coworker fit in perfectly. Frank Hanover—popular figure on the art scene and her right-hand man when it came to running the inn.

He rarely struck out when presented with a potential bedmate, and as Lara watched from her position behind a section of the inn's original bar, she couldn't help feeling a tingle of disappointment. The stranger took Frank's hand in a firm grip and seemed to hold it a minute longer than he had to. Just more proof that all the good ones were taken.

She and Frank had the same taste in men. Tall, rugged, and intense. The stranger had shaggy brown hair flecked with gold and paired with light brown eyes that looked closer to...green when he turned his head and the light hit him just right. He had an arresting face, one more interesting than classically handsome. Intelligence shone in his eyes set beneath dark brows that angled in confusion at something Frank said.

Lara couldn't help noticing the man's broad shoulders even under the long tan field coat he wore. Oh, and what nice thighs he had. She felt like the big bad wolf angling for a tender morsel and chuckled at the image. Her inner voice chuckled with her, and that quickly, her amusement fled.

At the sound of her laughter, the man looked

over Frank's shoulder and met her gaze.

His eyes widened as if he recognized her in some way. But Lara would never forget a man like him. It wasn't his looks so much as his presence. He screamed intensity just by standing there. Frank walked with him toward Lara, and she did her best not to smirk at her friend's barely disguised disappointment.

The stranger looked even taller up close.

They stared at one another, but he didn't speak. She added *silent* to her tall, dark, and handsome description.

"Welcome to the Lady Fine Inn." She wished she didn't sound so breathless. "I'm Lara, the manager, and I see you already met Frank."

"I just got into town. Do you have any rooms available?" His voice rushed over her like liquid heat, and to her embarrassment, Lara felt her body respond.

Glad for the short-sleeved sweater masking the tight beads of her nipples, she forced a smile. "You're in luck. We have two rooms. A standard

single that shares a bath with one of the other rooms, or the deluxe suite. It has a king-size bed and its own bath, but it's more expensive than the standard."

"Great. I'll take the deluxe."

Good Lord, but his rumble sounded like a mountain lion's purr. A glance behind him showed Frank biting his lower lip and silently thumping his heart. So it wasn't just her.

Lara cleared her throat. "How long would you like the room?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I—"

"Put me down for a week."

Talk about the decisive, take-charge type. A forbidden thrill zinged through her warped libido. "Can do." She pushed the guest book toward him. "Please sign in, Mister..."

He handed her his credit card.

She read out loud, "Noah First."

He showed her his Oregon driver's license and scrawled his name and a phone number in the guest book while she ran the card.

The sight of his hands arrested her. Strong hands. Large hands.

Odd flashes of heat filled her belly, and she shivered as something inside told her this man had a purpose here. He'd come for *her*.

And he'd always come for her, a husky feminine voice echoed in a bawdy laugh.

Noah reached for his card. Their fingers touched. He must have felt the jolt between them because his breathing quickened and he leaned closer. When he glanced down at her mouth, she froze, overcome with the desire to taste his firm lips, to see if they felt as sexy as they looked.

Peppermint. He always tastes like peppermint.

They remained unmoving for what felt like forever but was in fact no more than a few seconds. Then Noah took his card back and placed it in his wallet, and their odd connection faded as if it had never been.

He stepped back. "Thanks."

Lara stared at him, not sure what to think. For a

moment, she'd felt so close to him, as if she knew him. But how could she? He stared back at her, a question in his eyes, and she wondered if she'd imagined that brief connection because she wanted there to be one. When was the last time she'd felt a flutter of anticipation in her belly because of a man?

"Right, Lara?" Frank was saying as he reached behind her for the key to room 8.

She looked at him and felt like an idiot for missing the conversation, lost in a stranger's eyes. "Ah, sure. Right. Enjoy your stay, Mr. First."

"It's Noah." He gave her one last strange look before turning away to follow Frank up the stairs.

Before she could question her odd response to her new guest, one of the antiquers who'd checked in a few days ago waved her over. She lost herself in the discussion of some of the town's best places to visit and didn't realize how much time had passed until Frank tapped her shoulder.

"Lara, if I could have a word?" Frank nodded to the guest and pulled her away but not before slipping a ten dollar bill into her hand.

"Told you." She pocketed the money.

Frank sighed. "Yeah. He never once checked out my ass. But Mr. Sexy might be a problem."

Lara glanced around to ensure their privacy. "What about him?"

"He was asking a lot of questions about you."

She felt flattered. "About me?"

"Yeah, you. But Lara, there's something about this guy that's not all there. The minute we walked into the room, he stopped. Wouldn't move an inch and just stood there, staring at the bed like it was about to eat him. When I asked him if he was all right, he took a few seconds to answer, then waved me away, as if he hadn't just pulled a Dead Zone. I don't think he's firing on all cylinders." Frank huffed. "Too bad too, because if anyone could break that celibate streak of yours, it'd be Noah of the dreamy eyes."

"Frank, shush."

"Oh yeah, he's just what you need. A little fun under the sun. Six foot four, I'm guessing, no fat on him anywhere, and honey, that package was awe-

inspiring. I peeked when he took off his jacket.” Frank smacked his lips, and Lara couldn’t stifle her laughter.

Unfortunately, other laughter joined hers, creating a chorus of womanly mirth only she could hear. One voice hers, the other...not. *Dammit*.

Someone tapped her shoulder, and she turned to see Ida Knowles, her boss. The older woman’s short, frosted hair stood on end, as it normally did. Watery blue eyes smiled up at Lara with sincere appreciation.

Lara smiled back. “Hey, boss. Nice to see you made it for the evening coffee.” She glanced at Bill, Ida’s nephew and the town’s fire chief. Since Lara’s arrival in town, she and Bill had become friendly but nothing more. Lara had a hectic schedule and a need to prove herself. Men weren’t high on her list of priorities lately, which made her reaction to Noah First strange.

“I wouldn’t miss it, dear. I’ve been meaning to come for some time, but my health, you know how it is. Rumor has it you made sticky buns.” Ida reached for Bill’s strong forearm.

Bill grinned. "A great cook, a pretty innkeeper, and a heck of a hostess. Where've you been all my life?" The look he gave her reminded her she had yet to answer him about the date he kept bugging her to accept.

Blond, blue eyed, and seriously built, Bill Knowles had garnered a reputation in town for being an all-around good guy. He'd taken over for the old chief just as she'd arrived in town, and he seemed to be doing well. The ladies sure seemed to like him. If she hadn't been so busy settling in and working around the clock to upgrade the inn's services, she might have tried to see what so many found so captivating about the fire chief. But Lara had goals, and a relationship didn't exactly factor into owning her own inn.

"Sorry, Ida. No sticky buns. We're having lemon blueberry scones tonight, but I promise, they're delicious. The dining room is all set up. Let me show you to a table."

She skirted the center of the large dining area filled with smaller tables. An old oil lamp in the center of each table provided mood lighting for the many

regulars joining the inn guests. She liked to think of it as a throwback to the old days, when the inn had functioned as a saloon.

After seating Ida, Lara turned around to leave and bumped into Bill. "Oops, sorry."

Bill stepped closer. She had the overwhelming urge to flee, an abnormal start of hysteria when she saw something flash in his eyes that didn't belong there.

Finn's gonna be so pissed. Need to get out of here before... He ran a finger down her cheek. When she shivered, he smiled. But the expression didn't reach his eyes, which impossibly darkened into *brown*. Brown? Bill had *blue* eyes. She blinked, and Bill chuckled her chin.

"Thanks, Lara. You really do make the best coffee in town." His blue eyes twinkled as he stepped back and sat next to his aunt. They both ordered coffee and scones as if nothing had happened.

As she left to get them their order, she decided she must have imagined the creepiness in Bill's gaze. An oddness in itself. The voices she heard

sometimes grew too loud, but they never impacted what she saw or knew to be real.

As she readied their orders in the kitchen and helped Shelly with a few other requests, Lara couldn't shake the notion that there just might be something to the new voice she kept hearing after all.

Chapter Two

Noah had a hard time doing anything more complicated than breathing as he stood in an honest-to-God brothel. The place had sexual vibes echoing as if they'd been made yesterday.

"So okay, then. If you need anything else, dial nine on the phone."

Frank waved and left him alone in his room. *Finally.*

From the moment he'd stepped foot in this town, Noah had sensed the vast history throbbing just under the street's concrete. Impressions of gunslingers, miners, and the occasional drunk strolling through town had told him he'd stepped into another place—time—entirely. Some areas were like that, full of history that reached out and slapped him. But nothing could have prepared him for the impact this building had. Or its manager.

According to the oh-so-helpful Frank, Lara

Graham had arrived in town six months ago. She worked for Ida Knowles with the hopeful intent to eventually buy the property. The place had recently begun to prosper as guests from far and wide came to stay in the very place where the lusty madam Cecilia Fine and the infamous outlaw Finnegan Fury had loved and lost back in 1856.

The history of the place seeped through the walls of the building, but it was the image of Lara that had held him fast. She looked *exactly* like the woman in the portrait he'd been ordered to bring back. A living, breathing work of art come to life. The same full lips curved up in a smile, those expressive, rich brown eyes, so mysterious yet daring. And that body...

He stifled a groan, wishing he'd indulged in some quick, meaningless sex before flying out here. Because a man who hadn't had sex in nearly five months, confronted with even half the things he was now seeing, would be hard-pressed to focus on this case. Downstairs, when he'd looked at Lara's mouth, he'd seen a ghostly overlay of slick, glistening red painted over her lips. Then a woman's

transparent tongue had darted out to lick suggestively, hinting at all kinds of things Lara might do for him.

No, *not* Lara. That other woman. The one from the portrait.

Noah tried to get a handle on his sweltering libido when another image coalesced into a moving picture on his bed.

“Oh fuck. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Two naked men were all over a woman clad in nothing but garters that held up netted stockings. He had a sense she was a working girl, one of the Lady Fine whores and two of her customers who’d paid for a tumble. Cowboy hats, dusty clothes, and grimy boots lay strewn in one corner, while the rest of the room lay under flickering shadows of candlelight.

As he watched, the noise only he could hear grew louder. Moans and groans, the sucking and smacking sounds of lips over moist flesh. Noah’s cock thickened in seconds—already hard from his recent thoughts of Lara—now eager to participate.

Noah liked to watch, and he liked to play

—*rough*. So the sight of one guy's head between the woman's thighs, his cheeks rubbing against her smoky hose while he gorged on a wet cunt, was bad enough. But when the other fucked her face hard enough that she choked around him, Noah had to move to better see the three of them in action.

In and out, the rough guy pushed into the whore's mouth with eager strokes, his balls mashing against her chin with each shove forward. The woman didn't seem to mind it much, or she was that good an actress, because she pulled his thighs toward her, encouraging his advances. She shivered and sucked harder as she made whimpering sounds hinting at a climax. The rough guy stilled and yelled out as he came, then pulled away from her. He stepped back and stood next to Noah, the pair of them keen on the outcome still pending. The man kneeling between the whore's plump thighs reared back, mounted her, and fucked her until he too climaxed.

No condoms, no talking other than grunts and groans. A small pile of coins sat on a washstand across from the iron-post bed, and the creaking of

the bedsprings told its own story. After the last man came, he pulled out, and the three lovers smiled at one another.

The ghosts of yesterday vanished until all that remained in the room were Noah, his hard-on, and the same bed soon occupied with new patrons. The scene shifted into another vision of oral sex, this one between two women totally intent on one another. Sixty-nine had become his new favorite number.

Unable to rebuild his shields until he took care of his own needs, Noah grabbed a few tissues, undid his pants, and masturbated to the hottest sex he'd seen in some time. To his annoyance, he kept imagining Lara Graham on her knees, on her back, taking a nipple or a cock between her lips. The urge to dominate Lara, to bend her to his will, tempted him to let loose the bands on his honest needs. The dark desires he normally kept secret threatened to overtake him. Lara, bound and pliant. Submissive, his to play with, his to *own*... The fantasy only made his rushing orgasm that much more powerful.

Though he didn't want to be here, and he didn't like his odd sense of connection to the woman in the

painting—to Lara—he couldn't ignore it. But he could avoid the shame accompanying his base hungers by pretending they didn't exist. Like he always did. At least his release abated the need, if not his desire. But when a new couple materialized, fucking on the floor, he focused hard to will away the visions still pressing his psyche, for fear he might inadvertently seek out Lara to make his fantasies all too real.

Nothing is ever fucking simple when it comes to Jack Keiser's missions.

Noah should have known better. When he'd arrived in Superior two days ago only to find the painting had been stolen, it seemed par for the course that this simple retrieval, like Price and Foreman's own mission two months ago, would be just as complicated. Tracking down the painting hadn't been too difficult, but seeing the identity of the thief hadn't panned out. In his visions of the past, Noah saw nothing but a dark shadow mired in the disappearance—as well as in the death of the painting's last owner.

He grimaced, missing the simplicity of the

pioneer mother and her infant son in the parking lot of the gym back in Bend. The minimalism of life before man and civilization encroached on the splendor of the mountains had been a beautiful thing.

The unique perfume of danger and intrigue saturated this case. His fascination with the missing painting bordered on obsessive, and he knew it. But now, having seen Lara, he knew the real thing didn't hold a candle to Emilio Vala's portrait.

A coincidence the inn's manager just happened to be the spitting image of the woman in the portrait? Noah didn't believe in coincidence. There was something going on here, something more he hadn't yet seen. And what about that ghostly image layered over Lara? What the hell had he stumbled onto here? And why had Jack assigned him this case, considering the bevy of talent they had at home?

Nathan could touch an object and know about it and the people who'd touched it. Avery knew the future. Chloe heard truth. Aidan could ferret secrets out of a person's mind. Why send Noah, a man who often lost himself in dreams of the past, on this wild-

goose chase? Even after Noah had reported the painting stolen, Jack had insisted he remain on the case. Why? What was his bastard of a boss up to?

An hour later, after cleaning up and lugging his bag up to the room, Noah locked his door before descending the stairs. The noise of people laughing and talking grew as he studied the busy lobby and dining area. A good crowd enjoyed the heady aroma of coffee and sweets, and his stomach rumbled.

Wanting to eat as much as he wanted to find answers, he decided on the quickest way to accomplish both. Sliding through the mass of cheery patrons, he found Lara and Frank comparing notes as they studied the cash register.

“It’s Lara, right?”

The pair blinked at him.

Lara blushed and glanced down at some receipts, and Noah would have given a lot to know what she was thinking. Telepathy would have been more than welcome right then. He concentrated on keeping his inner shields taut when a transparent coil of dark hair slithered over her face. A closer study showed her hair held back in a ponytail, though

a few strands had escaped that she'd tucked behind her ears—ears studded with familiar rose-shaped silver earrings.

“Hi Noah. Everything okay?”

He blinked, and the earrings vanished. He shored up his internal shields, praying they'd hold.

“Noah?”

“Yeah. I'm great, thanks.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, wishing he wasn't so awkward around the living. Dead people ignored him but never made him feel unwelcome. The past wasn't choosy about its participants. The present, however, could be brutal. “You think you could show me a good place to get something to eat?”

He sounded harsh, even to his own ears.

“Um, I guess.” She sounded hesitant, her eyes searching as she studied him with a curiosity he could all but feel.

Frank gave her a gentle nudge in Noah's direction. “I'll watch over everything here, Lara. Shelly has the evening coffee all taken care of. Why don't you go grab some dinner. You've barely caught a

break all day.” Frank ran an assessing gaze over Noah. “Take your time. I’ll bet a man as big as Noah has a huge appetite.”

The red on her cheeks was gratifying. This might be easier than he’d thought. Noah would find the information he needed to get the damn painting, then hightail it home. And maybe take a taste of Lara while he was at it. A gentle, *normal*, sexual taste. A small test, to prove to himself he could be happy with easy, consensual sex.

“I am a bit hungry.” She considered Noah. “Or I can give you directions, if you’d rather. Not everyone likes company, and you’ve been traveling today. You must be tired.”

To his surprise, the exhaustion he might have expected after being up for twenty-four hours didn’t register. “I’m good.”

She shrugged and drew his attention to her breasts. Nice, just as round and attractive as her fine ass. Noah had more ideas about exploring her body than he did about retrieving the painting, so he forced himself to focus on her face once more. Since she’d been rummaging behind the counter for her

jacket, she hadn't noticed his study.

Frank smiled. "Have fun, you two."

Then he wiggled his eyebrows and leered at Noah without a seeming shred of remorse.

Lara shrugged on her thin coat. "Ignore him, and he'll go away. Or so I keep telling myself. It's been six months, and he's still here."

Noah guided her to the front door, his hand on the small of her back. Even covered by a shapeless nylon jacket to ward off the wind, she looked feminine. Not petite, not someone he'd break if he bent her over and gave her a firm smack on the ass, but a woman built to suit a man's needs. He could too easily imagine her dressed in garters and stockings and nothing else. Her panties absent, just those pearl-white cheeks shining back at him as he pushed himself inside her. Then he'd reach around to grab her tits and pinch her nipples hard. She'd cry out for more. With Lara, the rougher the better...

"Noah?"

He inwardly cringed, hoping he hadn't said or done anything to draw attention to his raging

erection. *Fuck, why is this happening now?* He'd spent years avoiding this side of himself. So why now? Why here? He could only thank his long coat for disguising his arousal. What the hell was it about this woman that he had constant sex on the brain? He wanted to blame it on the old brothel. But with the exception of Lara's vanishing earrings, the ghosts of the past now remained absent.

Quickly joining her outside, he did his best to ignore the sway of her hips. "Sorry. My mind wandered."

To his relief, she said nothing about his distraction. "You like spicy food?"

"Sure."

"Great. Then you'll like this place."

They walked in companionable silence to a cheerful café down the street. Painted in bright colors against an adobe backdrop and brick floor, the small restaurant had plenty of customers when they entered, as well as a smell that made him salivate. Mexican food—his favorite. His stomach chose that minute to growl.

Lara smiled. "Guess you're hungry."

As they took off their jackets and sat, she studied him, and he wondered what she saw. He was about to ask her...something...when the waitress arrived with chips, salsa, and water. She handed them menus and left.

"The enchiladas are my favorite." Lara closed her menu and poured herself some salsa into a small bowl. As she munched on chips, she started in with the questions. "So you're from Oregon?"

He'd been prepared. "I live there now. Pretty area. My parents live out East, but I got tired of all the traffic and hustle."

"I've always lived in Washington, the state, not DC. I moved out here on a whim not long ago and found the inn."

I, not we. She had to be single. She didn't wear a ring. And no way some dumb-ass boyfriend would leave a woman who looked like Lara alone at night to go out with male guests.

He grabbed a chip. "The Lady Fine Inn has a lot of character. Great history to the place." Whores

and cowboys galore.

She nodded. They ordered their food and continued with conversation that, to Noah's surprise, felt easy. Nothing as mundane as the weather, their talk veered from the difference in the coasts to exercise and books, what they both liked to indulge in during their spare time.

"So why this place, Lara? What brought you to Brownville?"

Lara sipped her water. "History. Ever since Finnegan Fury became a legend, they've seen a lot of interest in town. Once I heard the love story between the outlaw and the madam, I had to see where it happened myself. Then I found I couldn't leave. The main street, I'm told, used to be really run-down. But the past few years have seen a real turnaround. There are art galleries and shops all over the place. The AP did that story, and tourists started pouring in. Now there's great food, incredible art, a wonderful inn..." She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"I like it."

"So why are you here?" She dipped her chip

and opened her mouth in expectation of food.

But as she did, he swore he heard a woman's suggestive comment. *Open wider, sugar, he's a lot bigger than that.*

"What's that?"

Her eyes widened before her gaze dropped like a stone to her plate, along with her chip. "I didn't say anything." She wouldn't meet his gaze.

Weird.

The waitress arrived with their dinners. They ate in silence, intent on the savory dishes before them. Then Lara prodded him again.

"So, Noah, why are you in Brownville? You don't seem like a typical art collector or tourist."

"How do I seem?"

"I don't know." She lowered her fork and looked at him. "You're obviously into some kind of physical fitness, but I get a sense of something else. Something academic, maybe."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're intense, quiet. And you listen."

The woman was perceptive. He weighed the consequences of showing his hand too quickly. What the hell, he had nothing to lose but time. "I'm actually a personal trainer. That and a part-time investigator."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah." He reached into his wallet and dug out the picture of the portrait he'd looked at way too often for his peace of mind. "Don't freak when I show you this."

"Why would I?"

He opened the paper and pushed it across the table to her. Watching her reaction, he learned a good bit. She hadn't seen the painting before. And she couldn't stop looking at it. Like him, she was captivated by Vala's work.

"Who is this?" Her eyes darkened with suspicion. "Is this a joke?"

"It's a painting by Emilio Vala called *The Lady*. You can look him up."

"I will." She quieted as she studied it.

"So you have no idea who she might be?"

"Not a clue."

“Well, if she’s not your twin, who do you think it could be?” The research Jack had done had turned up surprisingly nothing on the identity of the woman in the picture.

“I have no idea. Heck, she could be Lady Fine. I’ve never seen a picture of her, but now that I think about it, this picture matches a few descriptions of her I’ve read.”

“It matches you too.” He took a few bites of food, slowing down the conversation. To his surprise, his hunger for dinner had been replaced by his hunger for Lara. “When I saw you earlier, I couldn’t believe the similarities. You don’t recognize her as a relative, maybe?”

“Sorry. I don’t look like anyone in my immediate or distant family that I know of. And before you ask, I’m not adopted.” She traced the woman’s face with her finger. “Why do you want her?”

Such apt words. The realization bothered him. Noah wanted both the painting *and* Lara. Sex was all well and good. Noah liked women. He didn’t crave anyone in particular. Until Lara. *And this is why you*

need to get laid more often. See what a dry spell will do to you?

He took a long drink of water before answering. "The painting belongs to my client. It was stolen a year ago. My firm tracked it down, but when I went to pick it up, I learned it had been stolen again."

"No kidding."

He frowned. "No, I'm not kidding."

"I wasn't being literal. So you think it's here in Brownville?"

"From what I've learned, yeah."

"Well, I can tell you that no one's said anything to me about it. The locals in town take care of each other, and though I'm still the new girl on the block, I've met all the shop owners. Trust me, Brownville thrives on gossip. If anyone had seen your painting, they would have come to tell me about it." Lara traced the picture with a fingertip. "I'm stunned by how alike we look. It's eerie."

"I wouldn't say that." *I think she's beautiful.* He glanced from the picture to Lara, taken with the hidden depths in her eyes. She held so many

secrets, and he had an insane urge to plumb the answers to each one.

At the thought, he clenched his jaw tight and rubbed his eyes. He didn't have the patience for this nonsense. He was here to do a job. Period. Lack of sleep must have finally caught up to him.

"You okay?" Lara covered his hand on the table with her own. The minute they touched, he felt a spark rush through him—familiarity, need, desire.

"Just tired, I guess." He refused to let her sever their touch and grabbed her hand when she would have withdrawn.

She froze.

He slowly turned her hand over and rubbed his thumb over her palm. The startled expression on her face turned to one of arousal, and it was all Noah could do to keep his calm. Every instinct he possessed demanded he take Lara back to the inn and possess her. Fuck her until she pleaded with him to stop, then pleaded with him not to.

He frowned, not liking this loss of control. He didn't hurt women, not even when they begged him

for it. Not anymore.

Oh, I'll beg you for it, sugar. I promise.

Lara ripped her hand away and dug into her plate with sudden gusto.

Noah ignored the pounding of his heart and waited until Lara had relaxed. He finished his dinner, finally sated. In one way, at least. "That voice. I heard it before." He studied her worried reaction, sure now she'd heard the same. More of the past seeping into the present, no doubt. But how the hell had Lara heard that? "You a psychic?"

"What?"

"A legitimate question. People out here see a lot of strange things."

"Arizona's like that, yeah. But I'm not psychic." She wouldn't look at him, but he could see the sense of unease she couldn't quite hide. "I just, maybe... There are rumors a few places in town are haunted. I chalked up the odd talk to ghosts."

"What kind of odd talk?"

"The—I don't know."

"Ghosts?"

She raised her gaze to his and glared. "This whole discussion is ridiculous."

"Not to me. I need that painting. You look exactly like her." He pointed to the picture. "And we both just heard a voice no one else did. Explain all that if you can."

Lara withdrew a few bills from her jacket and tossed them on the table. "I need to get back to the inn. Enjoy the rest of your dinner."

"We're not done talking about this, Lara." He watched her, wanting to know what drove her, scared her, aroused her...

She scurried from the table. "I'm done talking. I have to get back. Frank's waiting." She darted out of the restaurant in a blur of motion.

Noah saw nothing of ghosts or the past as he watched her go. He had eyes only for Lara. A mystery within a mystery. And a puzzle he had every intention of solving. The sooner the better.

Lara whipped down the dark and surprisingly

empty street, knowing she'd made a fool of herself by mentioning ghosts. God, when would she learn? Her family had never believed her odd experiences during her childhood, and they'd tried. What made her think a man she'd just met might?

Growing up labeled the neighborhood mental case hadn't helped her attract many friends. Even after she'd suppressed those ghostly voices, when she'd finally convinced herself they'd gone for good, she was never quite sure. Leaving home had been painful because she loved her family, but she'd wanted to leave behind her freakish past to start fresh. Away from home, she'd focused on her future. A degree in hotel management, internships, learning and adding to her experience while striving to attain a new goal. She'd found success and a new beginning.

She'd drifted from place to place until Brownville. The Lady Fine Inn had intrigued her from the first. Ida planned to sell it in a few years, and the place provided Lara with the opportunity to run it from the ground up. An artsy town, nice friends, and even a few attractive, single men who acted

interested. All of it made for a bright future.

If she bought the inn, her business would flourish with the incoming tourists. Especially with the town's fascinating history centered on the infamous love affair between a bank robber and a madam. Her first night in the hotel had been incredible. She hadn't heard one ghostly voice during her stay. Ida had hired her on the spot. She'd made a true friend in Frank and learned to like the small, artsy town.

Just when she'd thought she'd put the literal ghosts of her past to bed, she'd heard the voice. Proof she'd never be normal. But here in Brownville, she might just fit in. The artistic bunch liked quirkiness. And the voice that spoke to Lara was naughty but not cruel, and gone as much as she was there. Lara had started to think she could make a go of things. She'd be known as a successful business woman, not a crazy lady who thought she heard voices.

Then Noah had to show up, asking her if she was psychic. The beginning of the end. No, no, and no.

She wondered what he might really be after

and intended to Google the name Emilio Vala. She knew little about art, but if this artist existed, he'd be on the Internet.

Lara hugged herself, shivering despite the temperate breeze, aware of the strange emptiness of the street. A sudden urgency to return to the inn hit her, and whether she could attribute that to the voice or her own odd instinct, she didn't much care. She hastened her step. As she raced past the last alleyway before the inn came into view, a hand reached out to grab her.

She shrieked and ran to the Lady Fine, unsure if her imagination played tricks with her or if someone really had been there. On days like these, she wondered if she'd finally gone around the bend. It seemed like no matter how much she tried, she couldn't outrace misfortune.

Entering the inn, she noticed the thinning crowd. *Thank God for small favors.*

"Lara, you okay?" Frank took her coat from her. "You look weird." His eyes narrowed. "Mr. Sexy, he do something to you?"

"Not a thing. And keep your voice down." She

tugged him aside for privacy. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Anything, honey. You know that." Frank kissed her on the nose, and she hugged him, glad for the friendship they shared.

"There's something strange with Noah." She told Frank about the painting and her likeness to it, but when she mentioned Emilio Vala, he started.

"Emilio Vala is real. He was a genius with portraits. A skilled artisan known for his work even back in the mid-nineteenth century. You're saying Noah showed you one of Vala's portraits? That thing would have to be worth a lot of money." Excitement colored his words. "Think what we could do with the cash."

"Frank, focus. The painting was stolen."

"According to Noah. What do we really know about him?"

"Good point." She chewed her lower lip. "You research Vala. And see what you can find about Lady Fine. I'm starting to wonder if the painting might be of her. Odd coincidence it's here in town and

looks just like Finn's descriptions, not to mention me."

"You could be a direct descendant, because what are the odds you'd look exactly like her or that you'd move here, of all places, to manage her old bordello, now a profitable bed-and-breakfast?"

"Inn," she corrected, preferring the loftier term.

Frank rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Okay, I'm out of here. I'll get to work on Vala."

"I'll check out Noah."

"I'll just bet you will."

Frank made a few more lewd comments, teasing her mercilessly. His banter eased the panic that had been building inside, and she relaxed in the comfort of being home.

Then Noah returned to the inn, glanced her way, and continued up the stairs to his room.

Frank had made a suggestion that haunted her well into the night. "Why not seduce the truth out of him? Use those luscious lips to make him beg, then get him to fess up? Between that rack and that ass, he'll be dying to tell you everything he knows."

She didn't like the temptation to say yes to everything. And that bothered her more than the damn voices.

* * *

He watched her walk down the corridor to the room in the back. Lara's private quarters. While the rest of the guests were free to retire to their rooms for the night, Lara relaxed in the back, always prepared to help if needed. Just one call would have her up and moving to assist a guest.

He liked that about her. Her willingness, the sweet submission she tried so hard to hide but couldn't. Not from him. He'd known it the moment he'd first seen her. The moment he'd known he had to have her.

Leaving her, though he wanted to stay, he felt safe in the knowledge that she wouldn't sleep with the new guy. Not yet. Lara liked to think of herself as progressive, but she had an old-fashioned sense when it came to men. He'd seen her attraction to the bastard, the wary looks and subtle body language. He didn't like it. But he had something else to attend

to.

After driving back to the house, he quietly entered through the front door and walked to the attic. There, in the center of the room, he lit the candles that gave off the perfect light to illuminate his future. The gilt frame, the curled edges of craftsmanship that no one these days could match. All of it centered on perfection. No monetary value could match what the painting promised, what it pointed to.

The dark brown eyes promising forever. The sultry lips beckoning for a kiss. The timeless portrait of femininity just waiting to be tamed by the right man...

A noise downstairs reminded him he'd left company waiting.

He leaned close to the frame, softly caressed the oiled canvas, and knew the time had finally arrived.

He left the attic as quietly as he'd arrived. Downstairs in his bedroom, he joined his new girlfriend. "Now, sweetheart. Don't be so hasty. We have all night. And then some."

She squirmed and tugged at her restraints, no doubt chafing at the need to touch him again. She liked to pretend to discourage him, in order to arouse him. And it worked, but only because she had the look. Dark hair, dark eyes. Large breasts and a bountiful ass. Such a narrow waist made prettier by the bruising lash of his crop.

The tears sparkling on her cheeks were a nice touch but not necessary.

“So eager, aren’t you, my love?” he crooned and removed his clothing.

He wanted to hear her, but he knew from experience that her screeching was a pitch higher than it should have been, and it ruined the mood. So he left the gag on.

He leaned closer. “I’m here, and it’s time.” A soft stroke over her hair, a bit coarser than the feel of Lara’s earlier, when she’d raced past him in the dark. “Soon, Cecilia. Soon we’ll be together again. But for tonight, a small sample of our pleasure, hmm?”

She danced for his whip, but when he brought

out the knife, the fun really started.

Chapter Three

Lara didn't see Noah at all for the next three days. She disliked the fact that she'd looked for him and chalked up her interest to wanting more explanations than she'd been given.

She'd done her research. Noah First existed. He had family in Maryland, if they were the same Firsts she'd tracked through the Internet. His driver's license was legitimate. Of course, getting that news had meant trading favors with Mike Buckman, the pushy deputy who thought himself God's gift to women. Not that Shelly seemed to complain.

The inn's cleaning woman and sometime cook, Shelly currently sat with Mike at one of the dining tables. Most of the guests were eating dinner in town at this hour. Since the inn served evening coffee every other night, Lara had the opportunity to simply relax.

"Free coffee and treats for a whole month, hmm?" Shelly batted her eyes and flirted with the

deputy.

A vain but pleasant enough girl who had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, Shelly seemed stuck in limbo, wanting to leave town but with nowhere to go. At twenty-two, pretty but with no prospects on the horizon, she seemed as likely to get knocked up as she was to get fired if she didn't soon change her attitude. More than one rumor had alluded Shelly did her best work flat on her back. She apparently had her sights set on the large man in charge of the law.

"Yep. Lara promised to make homemade doughnuts too." Mike bit into a cookie Shelly had earlier sneaked him and hummed his approval. "Law appreciation month." He winked at Lara. "Lucky me, surrounded by the prettiest women in town."

Shelly quivered like an eager puppy, and Lara turned away in disgust. She admitted she had a thing for a man taking charge, but acting like a doormat annoyed her. Shelly had a tendency to say yes to everything with a penis.

Amused at the thought, she turned around to leave and accidentally ran into Noah.

“Whoa.” He steadied her, and she worked hard to ignore the heat that flared to life between her legs.

Just from his touch. God, she needed to get laid. Maybe Frank was right. Life without sex could, in fact, lead to brain damage.

“Enjoying your stay?” She mustered a pleasant face and smiled. A solid presence from behind boxed her in between walls of muscle at her front and back.

“You staying at the inn?” Mike asked, his deep, authoritative voice in cop mode.

“Yeah, I am.” Noah didn’t offer any more than that.

Lara could practically smell the testosterone, making it hard to breathe. “Um, guys? Excuse me.”

Noah wouldn’t move, but he did at least break eye contact with Mike. “Lara, we need to talk.”

Curious, she nodded. He didn’t sound annoyed; he sounded...worried.

“Sheriff, want more cookies?” Shelly asked from behind them, holding a tray.

Mike ignored her, and Lara turned around to

look him in the eye. As usual, interest and suspicion lingered in his gaze. If she'd been a less honest person, she would have been alarmed. But Lara had nothing to fear other than being bullied into a date, and she had no intention of succumbing to Mike's questionable charm.

Mike frowned. "Lara, you okay?"

She realized Noah's hand rested on her shoulder. *Proprietary-like. The way a man oughta be.*

His fingers tightened over her, and she swallowed hard. "Fine, Mike. I'll leave you in Shelly's capable hands." She turned and nodded to Noah. "We can use my office."

"Lead the way." He laced his words with seduction, and she knew without looking that Mike's gaze had narrowed on them both.

Once in her office, she closed the door to give them privacy. The small area had once been a larder, until she'd convinced Ida to remodel for some much needed administrative space. The older woman had furnished the room with a handsome

Queen Anne desk, chair, and filing cabinets, as well as a narrow preacher's bench that sat against the wall. Pretty but functional.

Noah didn't sit. Instead he loomed over her when she sat behind her desk. "Did you research the painting?"

"Yes." Frank had verified that Emilio Vala was a real person. Mention of a missing painting had turned up online, yet no picture had been attached.

"So?"

"So what?" Lara tapped her fingers on her desk in a jarring rhythm. "You aren't lying about the painting."

"No, I'm not. I'm also not lying about my name or why I need it back." He sighed. "This should have been a simple job. I should be home right now instead of arguing with a mule-headed woman."

An archaic insult, and one she didn't intend to let pass.

"Mule-headed? Look who's talking. Ever since you arrived, you've been acting like you own the place." Even though she knew her reaction made no

sense, she felt a sudden rush of challenge. Lara stood and rounded the desk, alien anger filling her as she poked him in the chest. "You arrogant ass. You think you can stroll into my place like you own it, make demands? Hell no. I don't care how handsome you are, or how deadly."

Everything fogged. Reality blended with a vision of cowboys and scantily clad women strolling around the establishment. Lara felt the remembrance even as she heard Noah calling her name.

"Darlin', you're just beggin' to feel the bite of my belt." The big man stepped closer. "And the kiss of my cock," he growled before plastering his mouth to hers.

She lost herself in his taste. An echo of peppermint flavored his kiss, her favorite treat. Fury penetrated her mouth with his tongue, taking charge and not apologizing for it. He yanked her against his chest between one heartbeat and the next.

"Touch me," he ordered through gritted teeth.

The sane part of her struggled to emerge, to

protest. But the touch of the outlaw roused in her a combination of rage and desire.

She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his muscular arms. So strong, so powerful. He caged her, his fingers tightening over her hips while she dragged her hands down his broad chest to his firm belly.

“Lower. Do it.” His low drawl excited her, demanding obeisance. Then he was kissing her again, mastering her responses, and she followed his direction without a second thought. She pressed her palms against the flat of his trousers, measuring the thick length of his erection through the material. So big, and all hers for the night.

“Sugar, I’m right here,” she purred. “Waitin’ for it.” So wicked, taking this outlaw for her own. Oh, Fury liked to play it rough, but he was clay in her hands when she molded him just so.

She tightened her fingers over him, and he groaned. His lips trailed from her mouth to her neck, where he sucked hard. His hands rose to cup her breasts, pinching her nipples through the thin silk of her clothing. She was aching. Throbbing.

The resultant desire traveled like lightning to her clit, and she had to have more.

She unbuttoned his trousers. He rocked back on his heels, and she shifted his cock so that it lay flush against his body. The tip of his cockhead poked past the gap in his pants, wet with arousal. With need for her.

Wiping her thumb through his slit, she made him groan. And then she edged under his clothes to the heat of him and gripped him hard.

"Fuck." He ripped down the front of her dress and exposed her breasts. "Gimme."

Fury bent to suck her, nipping and tugging at her tits, and the moisture between her legs grew. He laved her breasts with attention, making her squirm while she played with his thick cock. Then he returned his mouth to her lips, kissing her with raw desire. He held nothing back, and his honest need took her breath away.

She pushed his trousers apart and pumped his shaft. The delicious things he did to her with his mouth deserved a reward. With her other hand, she cupped his balls, rubbing the firm sac with a

sensual touch. Her fingers grazed his ass, teasing but not quite penetrating his anus. And all the while she stroked him, prodding him closer and closer to orgasm.

Fury pulled away from her mouth and stared down at her with a fire in his eyes. "Darlin', yes. Oh fuck. Here I come." He pulsed in her hand, a wash of warm seed covering her fingers as he shuddered in an intense orgasm.

"So pretty in your pleasure, aren't you?" Her husky laugh sounded rusty, raw.

Unfamiliar...

Lara's eyes widened, and she blinked—right into Noah's astonished stare. His cheeks looked flushed. He was breathing hard.

"Holy shit. I wasn't alone in that. I mean, with what I saw. You were there. You saw it too."

Lara wondered what the hell had just happened. When she'd been young, before she'd learned to ignore the ghostly whispers, she'd heard voices. But never had she been so involved with a scene like *that*, where she'd seen it as if through her

own eyes. Where she felt like she'd actually been there. She couldn't help looking down at Noah's crotch, expecting to see him naked and covered in cum. Instead she saw a prominent bulge between his legs.

"Lara, we need to talk." He took a deep breath and shifted his stance.

"No kidding." She tried to calm her breathing. That scene had felt so *real*. As if she'd held Noah—no, Finn—in her hands. She could smell his musk, could feel the rigidity of his arousal under her fingers. His heat, thick and hard and ready. For her.

Lara sat down at her desk and clasped her head in her hands. "Oh my God. What is happening to me?" She wanted nothing more than to feel Noah deep inside her. Stroking in and out, taking her to climax as he exploded within her. She looked up at him, determined to ignore the heat rushing to her cheeks. "How did you see all that? Because you did see them touching. Together. Right?"

He sat on the bench across from the desk and grimaced before subtly spreading his legs. "Oh yeah. I saw it *all*."

He kept his gaze away from her, and for that she was grateful. She feared if he gave her the slightest encouragement, she'd be all over him. Lara didn't do casual sex, but she was all for making an exception in Noah's case. Though she didn't know him, they had an indefinable chemistry. Good Lord, did they ever.

"You okay?" His gruff voice caused her to tremble, and he wasn't even *trying* to be sexy.

"I think so. I'm not sure what happened there, but I'm me. Not her. Not that I was before, but it felt —"

"Real."

She nodded, wishing her nipples weren't so hard. If he'd only touch them, squeeze them, order her to her knees... She squirmed in her seat and folded her arms across her chest. *Stop thinking about sex, Lara. Right now!*

Noah closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Then he opened them and looked at her as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred. Calm, in control, as if what he'd seen hadn't affected him in

the slightest.

“Lara, before that...distraction...I wanted to talk to you. You’re tied to the reason I’m here, even though I wish to hell you weren’t.”

That stung, especially after what they’d just shared. Not shared, *seen*, she told herself.

He continued. “This whole town is full of the past.”

Lara didn’t understand Noah at all. How could he go from sexually aroused to stoic so fast? Because despite evidence of his erection, he didn’t display one iota of passion on his face. “Please, explain. I’m all ears.”

He ran a hand through hair that needed a cut. A disheveled jerk with a body like a god, wrapped up in a button-down shirt that needed to see the underside of an iron.

“This is going to sound totally unbelievable, but considering what just happened, you might want to keep an open mind.”

And open legs. My, sugar, you sure are handsome.

By the look on Noah's face, he'd heard the voice too. She blinked. "Y-you heard that?"

"I hear all sorts of things. I see them too. Especially in places like this. But I don't understand how you heard it."

"What do you mean, 'places like this'?"

"This is going to sound strange, but then, none of this is normal." He sighed. "Have you ever heard of retrocognition? It's the opposite of precognition, and it's something I'm really good at—the ability to read the past. Some places are full of stories. History that's so rich and real, it feels like it's happening right now."

His face relaxed, and his eyes took on a dreamy, faraway look.

"The minute I stepped foot in town, I felt the miners toiling, saw the merchants haggling over a fair price while the proper ladies yelled at the whores near the saloon." He focused on her again. "The Lady Fine Saloon."

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

“But that’s—”

“About as impossible as watching a woman give the sexiest handjob I’ve ever seen? Or hearing the woman talk directly to me?”

He had a point.

“So am I haunted? Is that it? Do you think I’m possessed by this woman?”

“Who the hell knows?” His gaze fell to her lips, and he hurriedly glanced away. “I’m pretty sure she’s Lady Fine. I saw her in you when we first met. You look alike, and a few times, I’ve seen a ghostly overlay, as if her spirit is over you. Like a vision of the past. She’s there, but she’s not. And now she’s talking to me.”

He seemed fascinated and watched Lara like a curiosity he’d just found under his microscope.

“I am so confused, my brain hurts.”

“I see visions of the past. When I first arrived on Friday, upstairs in my room—you know this used to also be a brothel, right?”

She nodded, wondering what he’d seen. His cheeks flushed, and his eyes darkened. The blazing

look of hunger in his eyes returned. His gaze traveled from her eyes to her breasts and settled; then he glanced away again.

He took even breaths, as if fighting for control. "Friday night, not two seconds after being in my room, I saw all kinds of things. Men and women in bed, on the floor, you name it."

"On the floor?" Her voice rose embarrassingly high.

"Fucking like rabbits. It's a lot to take in, let me tell you."

"Good Lord. What about now? Are you seeing them now?" If he'd seen before what she'd just been treated to, it made sense he'd been gone for three days. Probably gorging himself on the many available women in town. They'd line up for a bite of Noah. Though he didn't seem socially polished, he exuded raw sex appeal. A rough-and-tumble man, if a woman was brave enough to take him on. The surge of jealousy accompanying the realization disturbed her more than the thought itself.

"I've been concentrating to shield myself so I won't be bombarded by images anymore. What we

just saw—I have no idea what that was.” He rubbed his jaw. “It’s not easy, not in a place like this, where yesterday is so mixed in with the present. What just happened surprised me.”

“Me too.”

He blew out a breath. “Watching her... I was watching you.”

She took a moment to absorb that. “It was her. Not me.” *Even though I wanted it to be.*

He looked as if he wanted to refute that but didn’t. “None of that is why I needed to talk to you. I’ve been looking all over town the past three days for that painting. I catch glimpses of it in my visions. I know it’s here, that the person who stole it is here with it, but I can’t get a fix on it. Then, earlier today, I ran across some disturbing news.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the library looking into Cecilia Fine’s history. Like you said, there’s not one damn picture of her but loads of descriptions. And after what we just saw, I don’t think there’s any question that the woman in the picture is her.”

“Yeah. Makes sense.” Like why the woman’s ghost haunted Lara in the inn.

“Your resemblance has got to be something more than coincidence.”

Go figure. “I have a hunch you’re going to need me to find your painting.”

Noah smiled, a slight curve of his lips that lit his face up with more than sex appeal but an emotional attainability she hadn’t sensed until now.

“Yeah, I need you, all right.”

She swallowed, not comfortable with how her body responded to him. “I have a feeling this might be dangerous.”

“Don’t discount instinct. It’s saved me once or twice before.”

“I guess you’ve been in similar situations investigating, hmm?”

He nodded. “The bad news I mentioned? While I was researching, I overheard the librarian gossiping with a few members of a book club.”

“They meet for lunch and discuss their books at the library.”

“One of them was talking about a body found outside of town.”

“*What?*”

“Apparently one of the ladies is married to your county doctor, who I imagine got tapped to play coroner.”

“Doc Jeffries.” A body?

“According to Mrs. Jeffries, they found a woman naked and bound. She’d been beaten severely and died of what looks like blood loss from several stab wounds. Mrs. Jeffries also said the victim looked surprisingly like you. So I went out to where they found the body and opened my senses.”

“Your retrocognition.”

He nodded. “I saw her. The woman’s hair had been styled and her makeup painted to resemble the woman in the painting—to a tee.”

“This is too bizarre.”

“In the shadows, the dead girl looked enough like you to be your twin.”

How could her day go from bad to worse this

quickly?

Noah didn't look happy either. "Before I arrived in town, I'd tracked down the painting to Superior, just a half hour away. The art dealer who'd owned it recently died, victim of a hit-and-run. The painting disappeared."

"Good Lord."

"A theft was bad enough. Then the art dealer's death? Two strikes. But if whoever killed for the painting is killing again, we have a problem."

"Hell, yeah, we have a problem." She stood, too nervous to sit. "You're sure the gallery guy was murdered? It wasn't some accident?"

He grimaced. "No. I saw it, a version of it, I mean. He was deliberately run over. At the gallery, the echo of violence was strong. I could see the same dark energy of the thief and the person involved in the hit-and-run. There was a brutality to it not found in an accident. No question it was deliberate." He stood and ran a hand through his hair. "But I didn't see his face. The killer was shadowed, but I knew his destination. Then I come here, see you, and find out there's been another

murder? This is all tied together; I just wish I knew how."

"It could all be coincidence this dead woman looks like me. A lot of people have dark hair and dark eyes."

"I don't think so." Noah crossed to her.

He grabbed her arms, and the heat of contact between them felt better than good; it felt *right*.

"You need to see her. Tell me I'm wrong. That I'm imagining this."

"This is crazy."

"I wish it were." He brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead.

How the hell was Noah mixed up in this? He'd not only heard the ghost, but could supposedly see the past. Should she trust him? Hell, she didn't know much more about Noah than that she liked the look of him, and he wasn't a hardened criminal. Not even so much as a speeding ticket. But that didn't mean he couldn't also be a crazed killer.

One who sent her libido into overdrive. What a crazy time for her body to wake up and want sex. But

her desire didn't seem to be one-sided; he desired her too. Or did he want the image he'd envisioned superimposed over her? And why couldn't she stop thinking about Noah and sex?

"Right. So we have a murder, a theft, and weird ghost sex." She blew out a breath. "Tell me I'm not alone in all this."

"*Hot* ghost sex," he corrected, "that gave me the hard-on from hell."

She didn't know how to answer that, especially since it now looked like Noah would like nothing better than to return to what Cecilia Fine had been doing. How the hell did the man blow so hot and cold? "So what now?"

He met her gaze again, his eyes intense. "Now we wait until dark, then break into the morgue and check out a dead woman."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Dead serious." At her wince, he shrugged. "Sorry, bad pun. But yeah. I want another opinion. And it seems to me you're a part of this. You're hearing and now seeing Cecilia Fine. You're more

than qualified to help. Besides, I don't want you alone."

"Great. And here I thought I'd get a chance to relax with business getting into the slow season." Lara hardened her resolve. "Okay, Noah. Let's do this before I lose my nerve." Another thought struck, and before Lara lost her courage, she forged ahead. "One more thing. You seem to know a lot about this psychic stuff."

He watched her, saying nothing.

"Maybe you could answer a few questions for me later. Because God knows, there are some things I'd love to understand."

"Let's get through tonight. Then I'll answer any questions you have. I know a lot of people who deal with the extraordinary on a daily basis. So if I don't know something, one of them might."

Imagine understanding the impossible. "Okay, then. Let's figure out how we're going to break into the morgue." Saying it out loud made it worse. She tried to pretend this whole thing wasn't freaking her the hell out. But like it or not, she couldn't ignore all the links connecting her to Noah's painting. And to

Noah. "I need to find out what all this has to do with me."

He nodded. "Yeah, you do. But don't worry, Lara. I'll be right there with you."

Chapter Four

Noah wanted nothing more than to leave this entire case behind and return to Bend. The monotonous routine of repetitions and sets, weights, crunches, and push-ups didn't tax him, leaving his mind free to float with the historic simplicity of the area. No emotional entanglements, no need for social niceties...no dates over a dead body.

It's not a date. Christ, this is an investigation.

So why did being with Lara feel so good? Spending time with her appealed to him, a loner who had little use for people in general, though he admitted he needed some socializing, which the PowerUp! gym provided. People kept him grounded in the present. But Lara awoke a part of him he hadn't realized had been asleep.

And should be sleeping now, he thought as he illuminated the time on his watch. Twelve thirty in the morning. Shit. Would he ever stop working nights?

“What now?” Lara whispered as they stood inside the doctor’s office. She held a flashlight aimed at the floor.

“It’s back there.” He grabbed her hand, ignoring the spark of heat that jolted his cock whenever he touched her, and pulled her with him out of the office and down the hall. He’d already scouted the place earlier, using his retrocognition to view where they’d taken the body.

When they arrived at another room, he unlocked the door using a key he’d filched off the front desk. They entered quietly. Doc Jeffries had a makeshift morgue. Two refrigerated drawers and a medical table for operating on the dead. Noah pulled out a drawer and unzipped the bag.

Lara caught her breath when he parted the plastic.

“Oh wow. She really does look like me. And she’s so beat up. The poor girl.”

Noah studied the dead woman’s coiled hair, sprayed stiff with some sort of hairspray. The rouge on her lips and blush on her cheeks looked obscene against the pallor of her skin. So pale and lifeless,

painted to be someone else.

"I see it, Noah. The hair, the makeup. Even the small earrings are identical to the picture you showed me." Lara swallowed, the sound easily heard in the stillness of the room. She leaned closer, pointing the flashlight at the woman's ears. "The silver rosebuds are sprinkled with a glittery coating. Not all that common."

"No, it's not." What the hell did this mean? Someone had killed a likeness of Cecilia Fine. Not Lara. The killer hadn't staged this woman to look like Lara, but like Cecilia. But Lara resembled Cecilia. Doing the math didn't make him happy. He focused, and to his surprise, he caught a faint whiff of the same energy he'd felt in Superior. The same person had killed twice now. But worse, the energy was somehow tied to Lara. He could see it lingering over her, as if waiting for something. Then he blinked and severed the connection.

She shivered and nodded at the body. "Could you zip her up and put her back, please?"

He did, wishing he hadn't brought Lara, but he'd needed to be sure. Now that he was, he didn't

know what to do. "Shit."

"What?"

Noah stared at the bag concealing the body.
"Nothing. Sorry."

They made their escape as easily as they'd entered. Brownville didn't rely too heavily on state-of-the-art locks. A good thing, or Noah would have had more difficulty breaking in.

"Now what?" he asked as they sat in his rental car.

"Now we go back to the inn, and you try to explain what I'm not involved in." Lara didn't sound afraid. She sounded angry and a touch mean.

Noah grew hard, as if he hadn't just spent the night looking at a dead girl. *God, I must be sick. Because Lara's really turning me on. There's nothing I want more than to show this strong, capable woman where she really belongs.* Under him, serving him in any and every way he deemed fit. *Not good. Put those feelings away, asshole. They're not right. Not normal.*

"Noah?"

He cleared his throat, glad for the darkness that obscured his arousal. "Let's get back." He didn't say more. They drove in silence the few minutes it took them to get to the inn. He parked out back, then they exited the car and entered the inn through the back door using her key. His opened only the front door.

Once inside, she motioned him to follow her through the private corridor on the first floor, away from the common area. She unlocked a thick door and pushed it open. After he entered, she joined him and shut and locked it behind them. The click sounded loud in the overwhelming silence.

She lived in a large suite with a bedroom on one side and a small living area on the other, done up in antique cherrywood and soothing blue walls. Homey yet attractive, and very much like Lara.

"This is what I call home, for the moment." Lara sighed and slipped off her shoes.

He chafed at the intimacy of the motion, not needing to see more of her when it was all he could do to stop remembering how her hand had looked around Finnegan Fury's cock. *Not her hands.*

Cecilia's. Fuck. Cut it out.

She sat on her bed, not paying attention to him, for which he was grateful.

"Don't get me wrong. I love the Lady Fine Inn. It would be a terrific place to call my own. Rich in history, aesthetic, and charm. But it doesn't feel like forever. An investment, sure. And a profitable one, if I have anything to say about it."

He had no idea what she was talking about, but he nodded to keep her speaking. Anything to occupy his thoughts that continued to drift to her bed and the spindles of the head- and footboard. Where a man might tie up a sexy woman and do whatever he pleased with her...

"Noah." She snapped her fingers. "You're zoning out on me. You okay?" Lara's eyes widened. "Are you seeing things in here? You know, history replaying itself?" She lowered her voice. "Are people having sex in here?"

He allowed himself a peek at the past and saw the same bed decorated with a cornflower blue quilt and pillows. A dresser, washstand, and vanity

littered with bottles of perfume, tins of cosmetics, a brush, and a comb occupied the space. There, in the armoire, the hint of a scarlet dress amidst other silken confections poked through an open door.

Then Cecilia Fine entered the scene with a wicked smile on her face, and he immediately shut down his retro-sense. "This was Cecilia's bedroom."

"Oh."

"I get the feeling she wasn't just the boss but a prostitute as well."

"I read that she liked men, but once she met Finn, she was his and his alone."

The way Lara's gaze locked on his warmed him from the inside out. It was as if she wanted him to make the first move. Did she?

"What about you?"

She blinked. "Me?"

"You involved with anyone right now?" He knew it wasn't smart, but he ached. Noah needed nothing more than to close the distance between them and do what he'd wanted to since he'd first seen that damn picture. But he didn't desire the woman in the

painting. He wanted the flesh-and-blood female in front of him.

She laughed, but he saw the hint of nerves she tried to hide.

"I'm too busy with my career." She paused. "What about you?"

"Me too. Career, I mean." He walked the few steps to the bed and looked down at her, consumed by a growing lust. The effort to keep his dominance under wraps chafed, but he tried. "You like sex, Lara?"

"S-sex? Sure."

She licked her lips, and he held back a groan. Barely. He didn't know where the words came from, but he couldn't stop himself. "Like to be held down? Told what to do? Like to please your lover?" He watched her swallow, saw the rapid pounding of the pulse at her neck, how her pupils dilated with lust.

"I don't know. I've never been that adventurous."

She tilted her head back to maintain eye contact. A challenge, and one that made him itch to dominate.

Yeah, cowboy. Take me. Make me yours. Brand me with that big cock, if you dare. Lara didn't react, so he didn't know if she'd heard. But the titter of laughter accompanying the ghostly female whisper prodded his ego, pushing him to demand what he knew to be his.

"Never met a man who could handle me," Lara prodded.

"Is that right?"

She stared at him for a good long moment, then shook her head. She took a deep breath and let it out. "I think we should call it a night."

"Why?"

She blinked. "Well, ah, you're a little, um, close."

But I want it. I want you. Show me what I've been missing my whole life. Please.

He didn't know who was talking anymore. Cecilia? Lara? His own subconscious, telling him he'd finally found a woman who could handle his wants and needs? Fuck it. He was going for it. All or nothing. "You're wet right now, aren't you? You like

the thought of me taking charge.”

She scurried back on the bed and rushed to her feet. “Noah. Really.”

“You’re suck a freak. What’s wrong with you? Pervert.” Deirdre’s words faded into memory, locked behind a heavy door with no key in sight. She no longer existed. Just Lara and Noah, right here, right now.

She wanted him. He could feel it. But did she want him enough? Could she give him what he needed? Only one way to find out.

He let her cross to the door.

“I guess I’ll say good night.” As she reached to unlock it, he made his move.

Noah pinned her to the door, his front flush against her back. “Don’t move.” He took her hand from the doorknob and put it above her head against the door. He did the same with her other hand, then held both her wrists with one fist. “I think it’s time we had some honesty between us, don’t you?”

He waited for her to protest, part of him hoping she’d deny him and put an end to his hopes for

something more. That way he wouldn't need to face his dark side, could bury it once again. But she didn't cry out, didn't demand to be let go or reject him outright. Instead, Lara quivered under him.

"Noah, please. I want...more."

Her response aroused him to no end, and he had to work to remind himself to take his time. Noah ground his cock against her backside, giving her no question about what he wanted.

"Now see, this is a problem." He nuzzled her ear and bit gently down on the lobe. "You're not being honest with me, or with yourself. Uh-uh. Keep your hands where they are."

"Noah."

She gasped as he circled a hand around her ribs. He pushed under her shirt, gliding up her smooth, toned stomach. So fucking sexy, so warm. He found one breast and cupped it, then toyed with her nipple through what felt like lace.

"You see, Lara, I want to give you what you need. What I need. But I can't take it. I need you to surrender to me. Do you think you can do that?" he

whispered as he teased her other breast, gratified when she pushed back against him, rubbing her ass against his cock.

The urge to come rode him hard. Foreign, thrilling, and dangerous. But he couldn't stop himself. He felt like something had taken him over, forcing him to face his needs and deal with them. With Lara.

"That's it, baby. Rub me with that tight little ass. Get yourself nice and excited. Let me feel your cream on my fingers."

Her breath came in fast pants, the whispery mewls of arousal going straight to his head. He detoured from her breasts to her jeans. After unsnapping them, he pulled down her zipper, enough so that he could shove his hand beneath her panties and down to the heat of her.

"So wet." He groaned and played with her sex, taken with the denuded lips. He could only imagine what they looked like, so slick and plump, her clit rosy and beaded with moisture. All because she wanted him.

She tried to turn around, but he tightened his grip on her wrists and forced her to continue to face

the door. "No. You keep still. *I'm touching you.*" He slid a blunt finger inside her, swearing at her heat. "Fuck, baby. You're dripping for me, aren't you?"

He kissed her neck, nuzzling her ear as he played with her pussy.

"Please, Noah. Oh God. That's so good." She sounded surprised.

"Feel that?" He shoved against her jeans-covered ass. "You've got me hard enough to blow. So sexy, so slick. You gonna come for me?" he growled, needing to feel her around the head of his cock. He wanted so much to fuck her, but he needed a condom. And he didn't want to let go of her yet to put it on.

"Oh yes," she moaned as she rocked back against him, letting his finger command her responses.

"Keep your hands there. Don't fucking move." He let her wrists go and continued to finger-fuck her with one hand, while he played with her breasts with the other. He pushed the lace down and tortured her nipples. With every push of his finger inside her, he

widened her channel. Then he added another finger, stretching her while he flicked his thumb against her ripe clit.

"I'm going to come," she said on a breath, no longer still but pushing with every pull of his hands. "Noah, yes. Yes." She cried out as she drenched his fingers, shuddering all the while.

He couldn't wait any longer and withdrew his fingers. "Turn around. On your knees."

She obeyed without question, her gaze clouded with lust.

He hurried to open his jeans and pulled out his cock. "Suck it."

She put her lips over him, and he nearly came.

"Fuck. Slowly, Lara. Shit. That's it. Oh God."

As she took him inside her hot mouth, he grabbed a condom from his back pocket that he'd stowed just in case. With unsteady hands, he ripped open the packet.

"Now put it on me."

He handed it to her and watched her roll it over him with tortured slowness.

The moment she finished, he yanked her to her feet, turned her to the door, and bent her over. Then, after shoving her pants and underwear down, he widened her stance as best he could, angled himself, and shoved hard up inside her.

She gasped as he slid through her pussy, and then he was thrusting, pumping with a need bordering on obsession. He didn't want the condom. Didn't want to feel anything but her cunt gloving him. But he'd said he'd protect her, and he would.

It didn't take him more than a few thrusts before he came, groaning her name, his release one that soothed not only his body but strengthened an emotional bond that had grown for the courageous woman in his arms.

As he held her hips and finished his climax, he felt her stroking his hand with her own. He clenched her fingers with his, intertwining them so that they held hands. When he withdrew and hugged her to him, he was awash in a peace that stunned him.

"Fuck, Lara. That was so good." He moaned and inhaled the sweet scent of woman—*his* woman. The insane, territorial notion refused to go away.

She clutched his arms gathered around her waist, not saying anything as she held him tight.

Eventually the moment ended, and Noah left for her adjoining bathroom to take care of the condom and clean up. He returned to see she'd cleaned up as well.

He wanted to know how she felt but was almost afraid to ask. For the life of him, he didn't know what had possessed him to be so freaky with her. That domination bullshit had turned off more women than he wanted to think about. She'd seemed into it, but he'd lost his head. Christ, if he'd hurt her... He still couldn't read her expression. "You okay?"

She stared at him. "I don't know."

His heat raced. "I'm sorry, I just... I wanted you. So much." *God, please don't let her cry.*

"I know." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I've never been like that before. So, um—"

"Submissive?" he said quietly.

She nodded, her cheeks pink. "It felt right. I don't know why I let you do those things to me. I never have before with anyone else. But I knew you'd

never hurt me.” She gave him a baffled look. “It felt so right, Noah. But it also felt...familiar.”

He was so relieved she hadn't been hurt, he felt light-headed. “I can't say why I was like that with you either. I, uh, I like being in charge. But I never meant to force you or anything. Lara, I lost my head with you. It was like I knew you'd be okay with it. That you wanted me...that way. What we did requires trust.” He paused. “I trust you, Lara. Don't ask me why. I just do.”

They didn't speak for several moments, just stared at each other.

Then Lara slowly smiled. “I didn't know you had it in you.”

He grinned back at her, his heart full of feelings he couldn't—and didn't want to—identify. “Well, whatever was in me, you brought it out. Shit, Lara. You're fucking amazing.”

Her cheeks turned pink, but she didn't look away. “So are you.”

“So we going to go two out of three? That might have been a fluke.”

“You want to do it again?”

He grunted. “That’s a stupid question.”

“But, well, can you?”

“Lara, trust me. That was just the beginning.”

She bit her lower lip, and the endearing gesture socked him hard in the gut. What the hell?

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“Let me get a change of clothes, and I’ll be right back. I’ll show you *sure*.” He needed more condoms. *A lot* more.

Lara watched him leave and closed the door behind him. She took a few steps to her bed and flopped down onto it. Holy crap, but she’d never felt that before. Sure, she’d had her share of orgasms, mostly by her own hand. A few of her ex-boyfriends had tried to please her, but the lackluster climaxes had convinced her she’d always done something wrong. Now she wondered if it had been them and not her.

Letting Noah take charge had been a little

scary, but she'd been so hungry for him, she would have accepted just about anything he wanted to do. But that... He'd been so demanding, so forceful. She should have been frightened, at the least pleaded with him to slow down. But she'd known, deep down, they belonged together. She froze. *Belonged together?* How could she think that? She'd just met Noah, knew little about him, and hadn't been with anyone else in years. Yet she'd allowed him to order her around. She'd put her mouth around his penis—*hello, unprotected sex*—and still didn't care. How stupid could she be? Yet she instinctively knew he'd take care of her.

He always has and always will, sugar.

Oh hell, not the voice again. But for once, Lara didn't mind the words. She wanted to believe them.

She tingled all over just thinking about what she and Noah had done. And he was coming back.

For two years, she'd gone without. She knew she had nothing to worry about sexually. No diseases and a habit of taking the pill she'd never given up, hopeful she might need the protection again. But she didn't know enough about Noah to go

skin to skin, as much as she wanted to. In hindsight, sucking him off hadn't been too smart, but God, he was so sexy.

He returned sooner than she'd expected. Or maybe she'd been so lost in fantasies of him that she'd lost track of time. Ghosts, stolen paintings, and dead bodies paled next to Noah First in the flesh. His eyes flashed, more green than brown, and she could do nothing more than lean up on her elbows and watch him, knowing him for the large predator he truly was.

After once more locking the door behind him, he tossed a small bag on the floor. "I've been thinking about it. You're not safe alone."

Disappointment speared her. Was that why he intended to spend the night? Though he'd said he'd be roaring to go again, in her experience, once the guy got his, he normally petered off to sleep.

"I'll watch over you, Lara. Close. Real close." He shrugged out of his shirt, shoes, socks, and pants and stood in nothing more than white boxer briefs that left little to the imagination. Noah had muscles on top of muscles, and the long, thick shaft

that had felt so big in her mouth looked huge and hard between his legs, encased by white cotton.

“Now strip down, and then you and I have a few things to talk about.”

“Like?” She couldn’t stop staring at him. A hunk, truly. All hers, and he wanted to talk?

“Like the fact that I’m clean. I haven’t been with a woman in nearly six months. I only have one more condom, and no way in hell is it going to be enough. So unless we do some sucking or ass fucking, we’re going to need to get creative.”

She blew out a long breath, hoping she didn’t look too excited at his words. They’d only just met, after all, and she didn’t want to come across as a total slut. *No, just a freak who has secret fantasies of being ordered around.* Ghostly laughter filled her mind. “Um, I don’t know about the ass thing.”

His sly smile had her heart racing. “Oh, Lara, I can guaran-damn-tee we’ll see to that. But I only have one more condom. Now, let’s talk about you. You’re tight. I’m betting it’s been awhile for you.”

She flushed. Had she been so obvious?

“Yeah.”

“So you probably aren’t on any birth control.” He sighed.

She’d never had such an upfront conversation about sex before, but Noah didn’t seem to see it as anything but a formality before they did it again. That he wanted her, had decided they would be together again, soothed her worries that he was a one-shot wonder.

“Actually, I am on birth control. And I’m clean.”

He froze and just looked at her. “So you’re telling me I could come inside you, and we’d be safe?” At her nod, he took a step closer to her. “You okay with that? Because you need to be up front about it. Once I get inside you, you’re mine, Lara.”

“Arrogant much?” They’d spend some fun time together before he left for Oregon in a few days. Thoughts of his leaving depressed her, though she couldn’t understand why. She didn’t really know him, and it wasn’t as if there was a shortage of men around here. Bill, Mike—if she grew too desperate—and a few others had expressed interest. But none of them held a candle to Noah.

He grinned, and the joyful expression floored her. In the short time since she'd known him, Noah had seemed anything but happy. Now he glowed with satisfaction.

"Oh baby. You have no idea what I plan to do with you. So what's it going to be? You in, or am I sleeping on the couch?"

She glanced at the settee against the far wall. "You're a bit big for my little sofa." He took a step closer. All that huge, imposing muscle intimidated and aroused in the extreme. But what made her say yes was the look in his eyes. Possessive, hungry, yet somehow tender as well. He confused her, and she wanted to know the real Noah. "I'm in."

"Be sure. I'll be in control. Of all of it. No safe words, no playing around. You'll be mine. All of you, Lara. Can you handle that?"

The implications of what he said took her aback...and made her wet. She bit her lip, nervous, but couldn't stop herself from rising to her feet to meet him halfway when his gaze locked in on her mouth.

"I'd have to trust you not to hurt me." She considered him, her instincts, and the strange, ghostly voice that moaned with approval at the idea. She'd be a fool to accept the word of a man she'd just met. And to give him control of everything? But these circumstances—and she herself—were anything but normal.

"You have to trust me, or none of this is worth anything." Noah waited. Not demanding, not coercing her, but leaving the decision in her hands.

"I do. Trust you, that is." To her surprise, she did.

"I'll never hurt you," Noah promised. "I'm going to make you come so hard and so much, you'll be begging me to never leave."

That was what she was afraid of.

* * *

He didn't like the fact that Noah First's room remained empty. Or that he and Lara had played detective at the morgue. The idiots in law enforcement around here had no idea who their

murderer was, nor would they unless he announced it. Dropping the girl where she could be found had been a calculated risk. The tradeoff would result in an investigation turning the town into a mass of chaos and confusion—confusion that would do him a world of good.

While everyone turned their attention to the deceased, he'd continue on the next stage in his plan. His first girlfriend had been a true disappointment. But this new one, the nurse, might fare better if she learned how to use her mouth. Parts of him rose in anticipation of teaching her, and then of finally getting Cecilia, his prize, and he had to force himself to adhere to his carefully woven strategy. Smaller steps would take him closer to his goal. To move too fast might lose him any opportunity to achieve fulfillment, and that he couldn't stomach.

She belonged to him and him alone; he'd bide his time.

He'd never been closer to the end-state than he was recently. After too many years to count, he could see the finish line so close. He could almost

reach out and touch it.

And touch *her*, finally. His Cecilia. His Lara. One and the same.

He erased the foolish grin curling his mouth and finished what he'd come for. The search turned up nothing more interesting than the man's shoe size. A big man with a steely gaze and a firm grip on what it took to hunt. He'd seen it when he'd looked into Noah First's eyes. A minor obstacle, nonetheless.

Figuring and readjusting his plan, he decided to get rid of the man sooner than he'd intended. If Lara was lucky, she'd have a new best friend to comfort her through her loss. Time enough for his future bride to learn what he liked and didn't like, and to ready herself for their honeymoon.

Pleased with his reasoning, he drew out a small box and opened the lid.

Chapter Five

She lay naked on her bed, her wrists and ankles splayed and tied to the bedposts. Noah still wore his underwear, but the small bit of clothing only made him look that much more impressive.

“Noah, what—”

“Quiet.”

It was that voice, the commanding, sexy, deep tone of a man in charge, that had her wet and staying that way. Despite her orgasm, her entire body revved for more. She'd once had a lover try the dominant role, but he'd been ill-suited for it and killed the mood between them. Noah was the real deal. He turned her inside out. For the first time in forever, nothing but a man filled her world. No voices, no worries, no demands that she be anything but herself. Right now, with him, she could submit and wait for orders. Noah knew exactly how to handle her. She shivered, wanting to feel him inside her, flesh to flesh.

“You okay?”

She would be, once he lost the underwear and showed her that thick cock again. She needed to make every moment with him last. “When are you going to get naked too?”

He smiled, but the expression didn't relieve her. The rational part of her mind told her to be wary, but instinct commanded her to wait, to trust. That if she gave in to his demands, she'd find more than sexual fulfillment—something deeper, something more.

Filled with menace, Noah's smile threatened as much as it aroused. “When I feel like taking my briefs off, I will. I thought I'd made it clear that I'm in charge.”

Her heart raced. Would he punish her? Oh God, *would he?*

“Naughty girl.” As if reading her mind, he leaned closer to her breasts and closed his mouth over one nipple. And bit.

She would have yelled out, but he muffled her with his hand. He treated her other nipple to a bite,

then sucked the sting away. The sweet contrast set her entire body aflame.

The hot suction of his mouth pulled at her womb. Sensations streaked from her breast to the rest of her body, need and anticipation coiled to take flight without much more provocation.

“That’s it. Beautiful. It doesn’t hurt, does it, baby?”

She loved him calling her that. *Baby*. His to cherish, to protect. A girly nickname that made her feel feminine and sexy surrounded by his much larger, imposing frame.

“No. Feels so good.” She arched up into his mouth.

Noah left her breast and kissed his way back to her other nipple, licking a trail of heat in his wake. He tongued her areola and sucked the taut bud between his lips, worrying the flesh with a gentler bite that made her clit throb.

She couldn’t help pleading with him for more. To her surprise, he gave it to her.

Noah straddled her neck and leaned closer,

shoving his cotton-covered cock and balls into her face. "Suck me through the material. Get it nice and wet. Let me feel your mouth."

She traced his size with her tongue and sucked his balls, wanting to feel him and not his clothing. Nuzzling his sac, she urged a groan out of him and continued to kiss and caress him until she felt him humping her face.

"Lick it." He leaned back to better angle his groin toward her and exposed his flushed cockhead, his slit beaded with moisture. "I want to watch you tongue me."

The little bits he uncovered were mouthwateringly close, and Lara leaned up to suck his crown, laving the spot under his head with her tongue.

He cradled her head and sighed her name, moving in a rhythm signaling his desire. "So good, baby. Your mouth is so hot." He pushed down his underwear, freeing more of his cock. "Take me inside. Fuck, yeah."

He pushed more of himself between her lips, and she gladly took him. Her pussy, slick with her

body's reaction to Noah, felt empty. Tied up, ordered to pleasure her man, Lara was beside herself in a fantasy made real.

Every time Noah thrust into her mouth—his pushes getting faster, deeper—she felt like a real woman. She made him hard; she aroused him. And all because she'd done what he ordered.

“Not yet, not yet,” Noah whispered and suddenly pulled away.

Before she could protest, he scooted down her body and settled between her legs. He latched on to her clit and sucked her into a near orgasm. Then he worked her with his tongue, licking and stroking until she grew mindless with desire.

She couldn't handle so much stimulation. She needed to feel him inside her when she came. “Noah, please. In me.”

He groaned and lost his underwear. Then he shifted around and positioned his now naked cock at her mouth. So thick and hard, his shaft kissed his belly as his plump balls hung low. She sucked on his sac, loving him with her tongue, and felt his entire

body jolt.

“Oh fuck.” He sucked her clit once more and inserted a finger, then two, into her pussy. He thrust them in and out as he sucked, and he spurred her to take more. “Now suck my cock. Suck the cum right out of it.” His rough voice and jerky motions enthralled her as he positioned his cock between her lips and surged.

She gagged once, and he eased up, but he didn't stop fucking her mouth.

The closer she drew toward orgasm, the harder she sucked. Their race to the finish grew frenzied. Touches and moans, kisses and sighs. And then Lara couldn't think as she came hard around his fingers and swallowed his answering rush of seed.

The salty essence gave her a heady sense of power. Knowing she'd pleased him, that she'd brought him to bliss, enhanced her own pleasure. Especially when he pulled out of her and turned around to hug her, showering her with praise.

“Damn, Lara. That was perfect. Those lips were made for sucking cock.” He planted kisses

along her cheeks, her eyelashes, her nose. "My cock."

The connection between them overwhelmed her. Noah was no stranger when they touched, when they kissed. A part of her, and not just physically, but in that mystical part of her where she heard voices, she could hear a whisper of truth. One she wasn't ready to hear. Half of Lara wanted to respond to his claim. *I'm all yours. Only yours.* But she didn't want to let something said in the heat of passion turn to regret later on. Instead she reveled in his possessiveness and nodded.

He kept his weight off her by leaning on his elbows, but they touched body to body all the same. Noah rubbed against her, kissing and caressing, until he was hard again. Insatiable, but then a man of his size surely had large appetites.

"Again?" she asked weakly.

"Baby, now that I don't have to hold back, we can go all night long." His wicked grin aroused her anew, though her body needed more time to recover. She tugged at her wrists and ankles. He tsked. "Now, now. We're nowhere near ready to let

you go.”

“We?”

“Me and my friend.” He nudged her with his semihard erection.

She couldn't help but laugh.

Noah's lighthearted teasing disappeared under an intense regard. “You are so pretty. Really, really beautiful.” He kissed her with a tenderness that scared her.

It was just sex. So she kept trying to convince herself.

“You're strong, sexy, and not one to panic. I like that in a girl.”

“You're not so bad yourself in a morgue,” she teased, trying to keep things light between them. Noah shouldn't look at her like that. Like he could see to the very core of who she was inside. “But I'm not calling you master.”

He chuckled. “You're no slave. Submissive, yeah. But just in bed, unfortunately.” He sighed. “It was too much to hope that you'd be this way all the time.”

“Ass.”

His grin widened. “Oh, you’re going to be punished for that. I can’t wait.”

Neither can I. And then she yawned.

Much as he wanted to continue where they’d left off, Noah decided to give them a break. After all, they did have a thief and murderer to catch. He meant it about keeping her safe. But after a taste of her, he knew he couldn’t go back to a platonic relationship. Not until he’d played this out. He’d never met a more fascinating woman in his life.

She had a psychic sense of the past, like him. She didn’t freak about him being psychic. And her body, that face—he didn’t think he’d ever tire of looking at her. The painting had intrigued him. But seeing her in the flesh, smelling the warm woman, tasting those ripe lips, watching her react in a crisis and respond to people with genuine warmth—he had a bad feeling he was falling for this woman he’d just met. He hugged her close and let the contentment wash over him.

Hours later, he awakened, aware something was different. A woman lay in his arms. Noah hadn't slept with a woman in a very long time, not since Deirdre had kicked him out of her bed and out of her life. Since then, he hadn't felt drawn enough to a woman to bother. The past normally intruded when his guard went down, and he had a hard enough time focusing on pleasure when his mind would drift to past decades during orgasmic bliss. And if the past didn't distract him, those dark desires would find a way to intrude into his relationships. The need to control, to own and command with no room for argument.

With Lara, he'd been with her every step of the way. No odd visions, no sidelines into western expansion or Brownville's sordid history. Even better, she'd responded to his need to dominate with a desire to submit. As if she'd been made for him. Hours later, his need for her had yet to abate. He cupped her breasts and rolled her nipples with a gentle touch. That sixty-nine had been fucking fantastic. Coming in her mouth was a dream come true, but he wanted to fill her up with his cum. To feel

her pussy milking him of every drop while she cried out and tightened around him.

Just feeling her with his hands, he'd taken note of how tight and hot she'd been. He rubbed his thickening shaft against her smooth ass and wondered how'd she'd react to some anal. He had every intention of claiming her everywhere. But if she really hadn't been into anal play before, he'd need to help her through it slowly. Maybe a few days of teasing, some plugs, lots of lube, and some...

Noah shook his head. He had a job to do. A painting to find, and now a killer to catch. He should have been catching up on sleep and focusing on his plan to recover Vala's portrait. Instead he wanted nothing more than to sink inside Lara. He needed to figure out a way to extend his stay in Brownville until he could get her out of his system.

She murmured his name and sighed into her pillow, and he said to hell with everything but feeling her around him.

He continued to plump her breasts, pleased at how she sighed and trembled, slowly waking. He rubbed against her ass, not penetrating, just loving

the friction against his cock. But he wanted more, so he angled his shaft down and pushed between her slick thighs, wet with arousal.

“I’m hard for you, baby. Aching to fuck you again.”

She moaned and laid her head back, giving him room to leave more love bites over her neck. She liked it, his roughness. His dominance. Just one more way they fit. Too easily, he could imagine her in Bend with him, sharing a house filled with antiques and stories of their own unique pasts.

The idea of permanence and tomorrows with Lara unnerved him. Even with Deirdre, he’d taken it slow and easy, dating for a good year before opening up to make a permanent commitment. And look at how that had turned out.

Best to confine his focus to the here and now, to fucking Lara’s pussy and filling her with white-hot cum. “That’s it. Spread your thighs.” He reached around to flick her clit, gratified to find the bud hard and moist. He glided his thumb over her, nearly ready to thrust inside when she begged.

“Please.”

She shifted her hips, and the next thrust between her thighs ended up with his tip at the entrance to her pussy. Lara's hips rocked over him, and Noah swore when she gloved him in one hot, hard motion.

"Noah, yes. You feel so good inside me."

Hearing her moans and pleas as she flexed her hips and rode him, Noah let her have her way. *This* time. "You sexy little witch." He gritted his teeth. The ecstatic pressure built in his balls and settled at the base of his spine. His orgasm readied to explode. "Shit, Lara. Baby, here it comes. All up in you."

He pinched her clit and came, dimly aware that she whispered her pleasure as a blast of his cum jetted into her. The shocking rush sucked him dry, taking not only his sperm but his thoughts and sensations until he floated in a cloud of bliss.

She continued to ripple around him, the jerks of her body bringing him back to the present with a mind-tingling welcome.

"Noah. What a nice way to wake up."

He laughed, his voice hoarse. "I'd say good morning, but it's more like three or four." He flexed when he started to slide out of her. But, softened and replete, Noah accepted the withdrawal.

"Oh, I like you in me," she protested.

"Me too. But I need a short break." More like a long nap. The woman had sucked the life out of him. Literally. The thought that he could have gotten her pregnant if she hadn't been on birth control struck him as absurdly appealing. Lara round with child. A Madonna with mischievous eyes, a generous heart, and a mind that never stopped working. The image of that pioneer mother suckling her infant son came to mind. Lara would be like that. Loving. Accepting of any child with differences. So unlike his own mother...

"What are you thinking about?" she whispered and rolled on top of him.

Normally Noah would have been ultra-aware of cleaning up the mess, of extricating himself from a clingy female with haste. But he felt too drained to care. He liked that he'd messed her. His seed marked her, a reminder of their close tie.

“Not thinking about much of anything. You wore me out. I don’t think I can move.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Good. Then you’ll be too tired to give me any more orders.”

He blinked up at her. “You don’t like it?”

Her smile faded, and if he could see better, he’d have sworn she blushed. As it was, the dim glow of her alarm clock pasted a blue shine across her eyes.

“I like the way you touched me.”

“But did you like me in charge? Tell me.”

“Yes.” The soft sigh relieved him. “Now I know what’s been missing in all my relationships.” She huffed. “Though the one time I tried to get an old boyfriend to be a little bossier, it came across as fake. I had a hard time not laughing him out of my bed.”

“Nice.”

She cleared her throat. “It’s totally tacky to talk about other guys when I’m with you, huh? Not that there have been that many. Though I’m sure you’ve had a lot of past girlfriends. I don’t like to think of you

with... I mean, sure, you have a past. But now you're with me. Not with anyone else. Right?" She tapered off with a muffled groan. "I suck at post-sex talk."

Once again, Noah felt himself smiling. A shift from his normal composure—stern, serious, and trapped in whatever past neared. "I told you before. I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I don't do relationships well. Always end up pissing off my partners without meaning to."

"Oh?"

"I was in a long-term thing with a woman. But I couldn't be me."

"You?"

He felt uncomfortable explaining but felt like he owed it to her. "I was with a woman a long time ago, one who liked it rough, liked me to boss her around. It's something that gets me off in a big way."

"I noticed."

"Yeah, well, things went south with her. Then I met Deirdre. I liked her a lot. She was different. We seemed to get along, but I could never be free with her. I worried she'd leave me if I freaked her out with

my ‘perverted tendencies.’”

Lara stroked his arm. “I like your perverted tendencies.”

He smiled. “Good. Deirdre couldn’t have handled them. And when she found out about my other big secret, seeing the past, she threw me out before I knew what had hit me. And that was three years ago.”

“You haven’t dated since?” She looked at him in wide-eyed disbelief.

“There were women but nothing lasting.” Noah sighed. “I’m not the most charming guy.”

She coughed. “Gee, I hadn’t noticed.”

He smacked her on the butt. “Smart-ass. I don’t seem to do well with women. I’m too rough, too demanding. Or I’m afraid of hurting them. Either with my needs or words.”

They lay together quietly, and Noah hoped his touchy-feely commentary had put her to sleep. How embarrassing to blather about feelings he didn’t have.

“You weren’t too rough with me. Or too

demanding. I liked it.”

Warmth unfurled in his breast. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” A soft kiss pressed his throat, and Noah suppressed an odd welling of emotion he didn’t know what to do with. “I think you were pretty perfect, Noah.”

Afraid she’d start to cling, he readied himself to tell her it was just sex when she laughed at him. “But don’t get a big head or anything. I was going through a dry spell.” She poked him in the ribs, startling a gasp that she’d hit him right where it tickled, before she darted away from the bed for the bathroom.

The door closed behind her, and he heard the sink running.

Noah clasped his hands behind his head and wondered if he’d dreamed the whole thing. A woman he’d met just a few days ago. The epitome of sexy, smart, and beautiful. A natural submissive who didn’t take their relationship too seriously and had given him the best sex he’d ever had.

Why didn’t she take the thought of them seriously?

Minutes later, she reemerged and crawled back into bed with him. After a quick kiss, she rolled on her side away from him. "Night, Noah. Hey, if you want to wake me up like that again in an hour or so, go for it. I have to be up at the crack of dawn, though. We offer breakfast at the inn. You don't know heaven until you've tried my Belgian waffles."

"Fine, but don't leave the building without me."

"Mmm hmm." To his astonishment, the woman fell asleep in seconds.

What to make of that?

Hours later, the sun hit him right between the eyes, lighting up the back of his lids. Noah reached for Lara, only to find the bed empty. "Shit." He opened his eyes and stretched.

The clock showed nine a.m. Later than he'd planned to sleep, but the little woman had worn him out. *Little woman*. He laughed at himself. Too much time spent in the past tended to wear on him, and he often found himself caught in the colloquialisms of yesteryear.

He ambled into the bathroom to take care of

his needs. A half hour later, showered, shaved, and brushed, he dressed in fresh clothes from his duffel and made a circumspect exit from her room. He didn't want to embarrass her, but he had no problem letting everyone and their mother know he'd staked a claim.

For now, he reminded himself. Only until this job is done. But for the life of him, he didn't feel an urge to return to Bend by himself. He also felt no hurry to find the painting, despite the fact he'd probably annoy Jack. He'd never understood why his peers took such pride in aggravating their boss. He found Jack to be surly but pleasant. The man didn't talk much, and when he did, he had a reason. For the most part, he left Noah alone, and Noah liked it that way.

Solitude comforted him, which didn't explain why he now sought Lara's company. Not to protect her, but to talk to her, to see her smile.

Confusing sex with dumb-ass affection equaled stupid. He cautioned himself to remember the job and intentionally let his shields slip to see the most recent past. There, on the steps, a shadowed

figure. He knew that vibe. Death and destruction seemed to follow in its wake.

Psychically stimulated despite his reticence, Noah followed the figure, ignoring Frank's greeting as well as another guest he nearly ran over in his haste to watch something unpleasant unfold.

He entered his unlocked room, which he'd left locked, and found nothing out of place. Except for a pair of rose-shaped silver earrings lying on his pillow along with a warning to leave Lara and Brownville before *the angel of death came callin'*. Noah took a deep breath, exhaled, and tunneled further into the psychic miasma of yesterday, closer to the intruder. He followed the hatred back, into a dark room with a sloped ceiling. In the center of what looked like an attic, the portrait of Cecilia Fine sat on an easel, illuminated by candlelight and surrounded by roses, their thorns covered in something dark. Covered *in blood*.

And then the woman he'd visited in the morgue just last night came into view. She lay tied, bleeding and bruised and crying, upon an antique poster bed as the shadow alternately whipped then cut her. The

man's flank turned from shadow to the pink tones of flesh, and he started to mount her...

Noah pulled away and threw up his shields. He quelled the urge to panic. He wasn't scared for himself, but of what the bastard might have in mind for Lara. Time to call in the big guns. He took his cell phone from his pocket and punched in a number.

"Jack? I've got a major problem."

After several minutes spent explaining himself and arguing with Jack's choice of backup, Noah finally gave in. It wasn't whom he would have chosen, but according to Jack, Avery had already seen this particular person in Brownville, at Noah's side. Avery, their friggin' clairvoyant. What could Noah do but accept Jack's choice? Then a thought struck him, and he realized the benefits of having a psychic with those particular skills at his disposal. Time to get back to work.

Lara frowned. "He didn't even say hello?"

"Nope." Frank ran a hand through his hair. "That is one sullen heartthrob you have there. So tell

me, how was he?"

Lara swallowed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Frank tittered. "Please. I know you like the sister I never had. You, girlfriend, had sex. You're never this chipper in the morning, especially not after the breakfast rush."

"Frank, keep your voice down." She flushed when Mike Buckman raised a brow in her direction. Trust the good deputy to show up this morning, of all mornings, on the pretext of visiting with Shelly—who should have been working but was instead flirting.

Bill Knowles stood with his aunt, concerned about something Ida had mentioned about the inn that he needed to check up on. And two of their guests had complaints about the plumbing. Everyone wanted a piece of her this morning, and Lara wanted nothing more than to rejoin Noah in bed.

After a rousing night of sex, Lara should have been in a better mood. But in addition to the sudden demands on her time, Cecilia's ghost continued to

whisper with agitation, warnings that made no sense. Lara couldn't shake the feeling of doom that seemed to blanket the inn.

"Lara, this won't take long, but I really need to talk some business with you. It's official, I promise." Bill nodded to her office.

"Sure. I'll meet you two in there." She turned to Frank. "Call Harold about the plumbing in 2B, and see if you can't get Shelly moving. We have two rooms empty this morning with guests due this afternoon. And as slow as she moves, it might just take her a few hours to restore the rooms to rights."

Frank nodded. Since check-in was after three, they had time to get all in order...if Shelly would move her lazy ass.

"Don't worry. I'll get our local strumpet moving." He rubbed his chin. "You know, if you think about it, Shelly fits with the inn. This was a brothel at one time, you know."

She crossed her eyes at him, making him laugh louder, and left to find out what Ida and Bill wanted. Joining them in her office, she nearly tripped over Bill's legs.

He flushed and pulled his feet in close, sitting uncomfortably next to his aunt on the bench. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. This office is perfect for me, but it doesn't afford much space with guests."

Ida tsked. "I told you we should have made this bigger."

Actually, Ida had balked at changing a thing in the inn. Then Lara had talked her into it, as well as into expanding their service to nightly coffee and treats. "But that would have taken away from the kitchen, and without that extra counter space, our nightly snack service might have been compromised. Just think, Ida. No more scones or sticky buns."

"Oh, the horror." Bill stifled his grin when his aunt glared at him.

"Boy would eat all day long if you'd let him. Now, Lara, the reason I'm here today. Bill's been holding off on renewing our inspection."

"I know."

"But I can't any longer. I'm sorry," he apologized. "The town council is conducting their

annual assessment. They're demanding records and paperwork out the yin-yang. I need to show them official documentation on everything, including this place, but I can't until I visibly check over the paneling code Isaac told me he fixed. You know, the one in your bedroom. It's not that I don't think he fixed it," he said to forestall Lara's objection. "I trust him. But I can't just put a check in the block. It's protocol I see it for myself."

Ida patted his knee. "Just doing your job, dear. We don't think any less of you for being so careful."

Lara steeped her fingers on the desk. "I have no problem at all with you checking the box. But I have some stuff in front of it I need to move. Could you come back to see it later today?" That would give her time to straighten up and make sure Noah wasn't lying naked in bed when Bill went through. She hoped she didn't look as red as she felt. "I have a few proverbial fires here to put out, and I need to clean up my room before anyone looks in it."

Ida stood with Bill's help. "Oh honey, dust and dirty socks won't put Bill off."

No, but a naked man might. "Still—"

“Hey, it might not be just socks, Aunt Ida.” Bill raised a brow at Lara. “She might have pantyhose or slinky nighties on the floor.”

“William Knowles.” Ida blushed.

Bill laughed. “Just kidding. Lara, I’ll see you later tonight, okay? I’m filling in for one of our night-shift guys, but I can squeeze you in on my dinner break.”

Since he was doing her a favor, she wanted to offer the same. “Be here at six, and I’ll take you to dinner right after. No sense in the fire chief going hungry.”

Satisfaction blazed in his eyes. “Perfect. I’ll see you then.”

She followed them, wondering if Bill viewed their dinner as more than a thank-you for the inconvenience. How awkward. Would she need to explain to Bill she just wanted to remain friends? Or was she imagining more interest than he felt? Though he’d been after her for a date, lately he’d backed off. Rumor had it he had an on-again, off-again relationship with a woman who worked just

outside of town.

And what the heck was she thinking to imagine she and Noah had a relationship? Please. She'd known the guy for all of a few days. Sure, according to Noah, she now *belonged* to him in the bedroom. She knew he'd be leaving in a few days at most, and once again, she told herself to accept their fling as casual and not get too attached. How long would it take to find that painting? How long to find the killer?

She shivered and forced a smile when Frank joined her to tell her about their plumbing issues. Whispers of warning feathered over her spine, and she glanced up to see Noah staring down at her from the upper balcony of the inn.

Beware the jealous lover.

She blinked, stunned to hear Cecilia so clearly in her mind. A vision in scarlet flickered to life by the front door. She glanced up and saw Noah's eyes fixed on Cecilia as well.

Then Bill, chatting with his aunt and Mike Buckman, walked together out the door, right through her, and Cecilia disappeared on a shriek.

Chapter Six

After a full day's work, Lara wanted nothing more than to drag herself to bed and sleep until tomorrow. Unfortunately, she'd promised Bill dinner after he finished checking the wiring.

"Good as new." Bill wiped his hands on his pants and withdrew a notebook from his back pocket. He wrote a few things down, then put it back. "Now, about that dinner you promised me."

She rolled her eyes. "Men. Always thinking with your stomachs."

"Not always," she swore she heard him mutter, but when she turned around to confront him, he raised his brows.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let me get my purse, and we'll go." She found it sitting on her favorite comfy chair. "I thought a sandwich at the Corner Shop would be just the thing."

“I’m game.” Bill waited for her to precede him and closed the door behind him.

She left with him, her cell phone on hand for emergencies. She stopped by the front desk and put out a note with her number, just in case. Frank and Shelly both had the night off, and with the guests taken care of, Lara didn’t exactly need to be on hand. An answering machine would catch anyone trying to book a room. Nothing stood in the way of her dinner with Bill.

Not even Noah.

She clenched her jaw, then forced herself to relax and smile at Bill. While they made their way to the restaurant, she half listened to him talk about his day. She couldn’t get that stubborn Noah out of her mind. Earlier, she’d mentioned her dinner plans, hoping he wouldn’t make a big deal about it. After all that nonsense about “you’re mine” and then Cecilia’s warning about a jealous lover, Lara had been prepared for the worst. Noah hadn’t done much more than shrug before leaving the inn on some errand or other.

She hadn’t seen him since, and she wanted to

beat herself over the head for caring that Noah apparently *didn't* care. Great sex did not a relationship make. She should have known that, except she'd never had such incredible, mind-blowing sex before. Being with Noah last night, she'd transcended physical pleasure into something else entirely. Though she didn't want to make more of their coupling than there was, she couldn't deny the fierce attraction she felt for him. Or how much his dismissal of her dinner with Bill hurt.

Granted, she didn't want him throwing a fit about it, but some concern should have been warranted. If he'd had a date with some woman, she'd have been annoyed. And frankly, jealous.

"Hello, Lara? You're in your own little world tonight, aren't you?"

She flushed. "Sorry, Bill. That plumbing situation fried my brain today." Not entirely untrue. She walked with him into the cute restaurant and grabbed a corner booth. "Not only did Harold take forever to come fix the problem, but the stoppage somehow migrated from two of my rooms to four of them. We had a lot to clean up before our new

guests came. And don't get me started on Shelly and her excuses for being late."

He chuckled. "Hate to say it, but her latest excuse just walked in the door."

A glance to her right showed Mike Buckman nodding at a few folks. Mike aimed a glare at Bill, a speculative look at her, then took a seat on the other side of the room from them.

"Oh yeah. Not a lot of love lost there."

Lara blinked. "I hadn't realized you two weren't friends."

"Why? Just because we're both civil servants in a town the size of a quarter doesn't mean we're tight."

"But I saw you two chatting yesterday at the inn." And she'd never heard of the two of them not getting along. She could understand him not liking Mike, but everyone seemed to like Bill.

"He was letting me know to move my truck. The asshole—I mean, the good deputy—didn't want to ticket me for being too close to the yellow curb."

"No one pays any attention to the faded

markings in front of the inn anymore.” She frowned and accepted one of the menus the waitress brought them. “Why was he bothering you about it?”

Bill lifted a brow.

“What?”

“Come on, Lara. You can’t tell me you don’t know Mike has a thing for you.”

“He does? But he’s always hanging around with Shelly. I thought they were dating.”

Bill studied the menu, and the sudden silence that settled over them made her uncomfortable. She had an odd feeling she was missing something important.

The waitress came to take their orders, then left.

“Bill?” Lara prodded.

“Look, I’m not one to gossip. I hate busybodies. But everyone knows Mike is with Shelly to make you jealous.”

“Everyone knows but me.”

“Apparently.” He sighed. “I hate to break it to you, but you’re one hot topic of speculation, honey.”

“I am?”

The waitress brought them waters and left again.

“A single, beautiful woman with brains shows up in this artsy town full of eclectic people. You stand out, if only because you’re so normal.”

“Gee, thanks.” *If he only knew.*

He chuckled. “You have to know you’re gorgeous. Now, now, don’t blush. It’s true.” The assessing look he gave her made her uncomfortable. “I’m a man. I know what men like. Mike wants a chance with you. I want a chance with you.” He paused. “And if I’m not mistaken, that guest of yours, Noah’s what’s-his-name, he wants a chance with you too.”

In an effort not to disclose her personal business, she focused on Mike. “Tell me again why I should think Mike Buckman wants a date with me. He’s got Shelly at his beck and call, because God knows the woman is never working when Mike crooks his little finger. He’s never given me anything but dirty looks.”

“Nah. That’s his way of showing his interest.” Bill took a sip of water. “I’ve lived in plenty of places before Brownville, and I’ve come across my share of cops and firemen. We’re all pretty much the same. We like control because we work hard to dictate the actions of others. I want to prevent fires and promote safety. Mike, for all his hostility, wants the same. So when it comes to women, a guy like Mike will try to bully you into a date instead of asking you, because he doesn’t want to chance a rejection.”

“Whereas you...”

He grinned. “I’ll charm you out of your socks. And if I’m lucky, out of the rest of your clothes, while I’m at it.”

She choked on the water she’d started to swallow. “I’m flattered, I think. But from what I’ve heard, you have women dropping at your feet whenever you flash those bright blue eyes.”

He fluttered his lashes at her, and she laughed.

Their sandwiches arrived, and they continued to talk about the town and the current goings-on of several shops expanding business. To Lara’s relief,

they steered clear of more personal conversation.

After dinner, Bill walked her back to the inn. "Thanks for the meal, Lara. But it was the company that made it great."

"What a nice thing to say." She smiled as she turned to face him, but the odd expression on his face worried her. "Bill?"

One minute he was staring at her, the next he was kissing her, where anyone and everyone could see them. His lips were warm but firm, his breath sweet and minty, thanks to the candy mint he'd eaten after dinner. But the sexual heat she might have expected didn't appear. No belly flutters, no hard nipples, not even a whisper of arousal at being so close to a handsome man. His kiss was nice but blah. Then he tightened his grip on her arms.

She tried to pull back and worried he wouldn't let her, when he suddenly released her and stepped back.

"Christ. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rough." The chagrin on his face more than made up for his heavy-handed manner.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” He swore and ran a hand through his hair. “Damn. I’m sorry. I really like you. And you look so pretty in the twilight like that. Your eyes are so dark, so mysterious. I’ve had a thing for you for months, Lara. I thought, maybe, with you taking me to dinner, you were—”

“Lara, there you are.” Noah walked down the walkway of the inn and joined them. “I was going to ask you to dinner, but I figured you already went out. I had a few things to go over with you about the inn. You know, those art pieces you were inquiring about?”

Bill frowned at him. “We’re kind of in the middle of something.”

“Oh? Sorry.” Noah didn’t sound sorry. But he didn’t sound jealous either.

At least she wouldn’t be the cause of a scene. The thought depressed her. “Bill, I’d better go in. I have a few more things to do before I can call it a night.”

Bill shot Noah another dirty look before

shrugging at Lara. "Well, I have to get back to work anyway. Think about what I said, okay? You have my number if you need me." Ignoring Noah, he bent to give her a peck on the cheek. Then he left for his truck.

She and Noah watched him drive away in silence.

"What about this art piece?" she asked, still watching Bill's truck until it turned the corner. How odd that for years she'd had nothing special going on in her private life. Now, in the span of a few short days, she had a lover *and* an admirer—one who *wouldn't* be leaving in a few days. Though Bill didn't spark fireworks like Noah did, that didn't mean he was a total write-off. Maybe after she got Noah out of her system, she could settle with a nice, handsome, respectable man. He had a steady job, after all. A pillar of the community. And she genuinely liked him.

When Noah had yet to answer her, she turned to see him scowling down at her. Finally, a show of emotion. "What?"

He watched her and nodded, seeming to come to some conclusion. "I figure it's best if I show you.

Come on."

"Okay. But first..."

"Now. It's important."

Knowing that murder, theft, and serious money hinged on Noah's current case, she didn't argue. "I have my cell phone if there are problems, I guess."

He nudged her to move faster. They took his vehicle and drove out of town.

"Noah?"

"I'll explain once we're there."

They arrived at a motel just outside the city limits, one that catered to visitors not familiar with Brownville. The bland building didn't hold a candle to the Lady Fine Inn or any of the other hotels and B and B's in town. People came to Brownville for the atmosphere. The best that could be said of this place was that the parking lot looked clean.

"This is a little weird." She saw one blue compact car at the end of the row, in the opposite direction of where Noah parked. He had a smaller bag in hand as he pulled her from the SUV.

He glanced around, then walked quickly to a

door a few down from where he'd parked, nearly dragging Lara in the process. To her consternation, he refused to let go. Nor did he explain anything. Starting to worry, she tried again. "Noah, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you inside."

He hadn't smiled at her once all day. And the look in his eyes now... To her surprise, her pulse raced. There was a hint of meanness in his gaze, and it turned her on. *God, what is wrong with me? Bill, Mr. Nice, leaves me feeling nothing. But one glare from Mr. Bossy and I'm sexually excited?*

He knocked once, and a woman opened the door. One of those pretty little things that set Lara's teeth on edge. Petite, feminine, and with a face so arresting, one had to take a second look. Lara couldn't determine the woman's background. Carmel-colored skin, long black hair, and light blue-gray eyes. She seemed like a mix of several races rolled into one sexy female. One who knew and liked Noah, by the smile in her eyes.

"About time. I'm starved." She gave Lara a curious once-over and said to her, "Good luck."

You're gonna need it."

Before Lara could ask what that meant, the woman shot out the door. Noah shoved Lara inside, shut and locked the door behind him, then propped his back against it and tossed the bag to the floor. He crossed his arms over his chest, no longer the impassive man who'd strong-armed her into accompanying him.

"What the hell is your problem?" Damn. Her nipples throbbed, and her panties grew wetter by the second. Noah's arms bunched, and the fury darkening his eyes only seemed to grow.

"I told you just last night you were mine. What the fuck did you think that meant?"

Where had the calm, controlled man from this morning gone? "This is about Bill, right?"

"What do you think?"

She couldn't help glancing down his body, centering on the prominent bulge between his legs. The fact that he was aroused skyrocketed her own desire.

"I think you should have said something before.

You didn't tell me *not* to have dinner with him." Which she would have laughed at. Commanding her in the bedroom, she liked, but in real life? Not so much.

"I shouldn't have to tell you shit." He took a few steps closer. "I didn't like you going out with him, but I trusted you. Stupid, since what do we really know about each other?"

Pleased that he felt the same connection she did despite his reservations, she tried to explain. "Noah, I didn't—"

"Then I saw his hands on you. His tongue down your throat, and you standing there, taking it."

"Now hold on." She scrambled back when he stalked over to her, and fell back onto the bed. A normal woman would have felt fear. Lara wanted him to screw her like there was no tomorrow.

He loomed over her. "Take off your fucking clothes."

She shivered. "Noah, I didn't kiss him. If you saw us, you know he took me by surprise."

"The shirt first. I want to watch your nipples perk up for my clamps."

Lara froze. "What?"

"Do it, or I'll do it for you."

Nervous, aroused, and confused all at once, Lara didn't know what to do.

Then Noah took the choice from her.

He couldn't believe how angry he was that Bill Knowles, that fuckwad, had dared to touch her. Lara belonged to *him*. He'd seen that kiss, the way the bastard groped her, holding her too tight. Though Lara hadn't instigated the embrace, she hadn't seemed too bothered by it. Clearly she needed to learn a lesson about what it meant to be his.

Noah hadn't been so excited by a woman since... Well, since this morning, when he'd fucked Lara nice and hard. But apparently, not hard enough.

She looked up at him with those big brown eyes, appearing so vulnerable, despite her arousal. Noah had the simultaneous urge to protect and fuck the shit out of her. Two things he planned on doing right now.

He didn't like her refusal to obey, though. That he'd have to correct. "I know I told you to take off your clothes." With one hand, he ripped her shirt down the middle, and buttons went flying. Her nipples stabbed against her bra, the hard nubs begging for his touch. After pushing the material of her shirt from her arms, he ordered her to sit up.

Satisfied that though she quivered, she obeyed him without question, he unlatched her bra and tossed it to the floor. He pushed her back until she lay flat against the bed again. Then he did what he'd been dying to do since he'd woken that morning.

He took one perfect nipple between his teeth and sucked while he played with the full globe next to it. Her tits were perfect. They fit his hands. And God, he loved touching them.

"Oh yes." She grabbed his head and held him there, undulating beneath him. He knew if he touched her pussy, he'd find her wet. So true in her response, so needy. Their obvious chemistry made it hard to think of anyone but Lara in his bed. And damn if he'd give her up to some dickhead fire chief.

He shifted his attention to her other breast,

sucking and nipping until she begged him not to stop.

He ceased and straddled her. "You wouldn't do this for Bill, would you, Lara?"

"No."

"You wouldn't whore yourself to another man, would you?"

She gaped at him, and the lust started to fade from her expression. "I wouldn't whore myself for *any* man." She scowled at him. "I changed my mind. Get off me, Noah."

Loving her fire, he gave her a mean smile. He saw her swallow hard. "What's wrong, baby? Afraid of me now?"

"Fuck you."

"I intend to. Just as soon as you're naked and all tied up."

At that, the fight went out of her. "Tied up?" she whispered and bit her lower lip.

"Oh yeah. So you can't move while I'm fucking you so hard, you're screaming. I'm gonna come in that mouth, that cunt, that ass. Over and over. Till

you're begging me to forgive you."

So lost in his fantasies, he barely noticed her nod as he removed her shoes, socks, pants, and panties. He buried his face in her pussy and sucked her clit hard. Then he pulled away before he forgot himself.

"Don't stop," she pleaded. "I want you so much."

"I can tell." He smirked and stripped out of his clothes. "Almost as much as I want you." He held his cock and stroked it a few times. He wanted to come inside her, to watch her swallow him down, then take him in her virgin hole. To know he'd be the first, the only one to claim her ass, had him near to climaxing.

Needing to regain some control, Noah joined her on the bed. "You were a bad girl, Lara. Now it's time to pay the price. You want to be punished?"

He could see that she did, the way she stared at his cock, played with her breasts, and ran her greedy hands over her belly, angling to touch herself *there*. Daring him to stop her.

"No." Her defiance made her sparkle. Such

vitality in her face. It was like finding the past and living in it, as if she could cage that eternal need he had for something more than the present.

“Oh, you’re asking for it, aren’t you?” He yanked her head back by her hair, making her arch her neck uncomfortably, but he didn’t pull hard enough to seriously hurt her.

“God, Noah. You’re turning me on like I can’t believe.” Her hushed confession made it hard to hang on to his desire not to ram up into her. “I am such a freak.”

“My freak,” he growled. “Now you’re going to do what I tell you, and you’re going to obey, because I’m in charge.” He tugged her hair again, gratified when she gasped and moaned. He slapped her breast, and she cried out. “Right, Lara?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Now open that mouth. I want you to suck my balls until I come on your belly. Then you’re going to lie there and do whatever the fuck I want, you hear me?”

“Yes, please,” she said on a breath. “Whatever

you want, Noah.”

Noah, not Bill. Not anyone else’s name but his.

Only yours, sugar. Always yours. The odd voice struck him because Lara didn’t seem to hear it. Or else she didn’t care. And then she ran her hands up his inner thighs.

He slapped her breast again and squeezed her nipple. “Be good.” He sounded hoarse, but he couldn’t help it. The woman was going to make him come too soon.

“Yes, Noah.”

He turned around to face her feet and straddled her mouth. She’d have to raise her head off the bed to suck him. “Now open those pretty lips. Suck my sac, baby. Show me how sorry you are for being so bad.”

He gripped his cock hard and began stroking off as she took one of his balls into her mouth. *Fuck me, but she’s good.* “Good little cocksucker, aren’t you?” he rasped, his hand moving faster and faster of its own volition. The need to mark her with himself almost primitive.

She licked his perineum and sucked his sac, lightly grazing his balls with her teeth in a move that made him jolt.

“Oh fuck. Fuck, I’m gonna come hard.” He lowered himself into her mouth more and felt the first explosion of climax hit as she drew his balls deeper into her mouth. “All over you.” He groaned as he jetted on her belly in a white-hot mess.

His orgasm consumed him. The sight of her hairless pussy, those long, slender legs, and that quivering belly now covered in his cum satisfied him in the extreme. When she released him, he rose and turned around, moving back to straddle her thighs.

“You made a mess.” She licked her lips. “But your cock is still hard.”

“Semihard. I’m ready for another go.” If he moved fast enough, he could get his hard-on right back. “But I can wait. You need to come, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes.”

“With Bill?” he asked lazily, still not entirely happy that she would even conceive of going out

with another man while he was there.

She groaned. "Noah, I'm sorry, okay? Dinner was repayment for a favor. He passed our inspection on his dinner break. So I felt the need to thank him. That's all it was. The kiss surprised me."

"Did it make you wet?" He rubbed his cum in circles over her belly, getting closer and closer to her slick folds.

"No."

"You sure?" He trailed a finger over her pussy lips, just light enough to drive her insane.

"I'm sure. Dammit, please. Noah, come inside me." She reached for him, and he levered himself from the bed.

"Not yet." After grabbing what he needed from his bag, he returned to tie her up nice and proper. Her wrists to the headboard, her ankles to the footboard. Thank God for spindle beds. "I didn't like you going out with Bill. You got that?"

"Yes."

"And I don't like the thought of you in danger. You have to be careful."

“I thought you were going to hang around to protect me until we found the painting. What happened? Did your little *friend* put a kink in your plans?”

Cheered that she showed every bit of the jealousy he'd been feeling, he relented enough to fill her in on the new plan. After he put the clamps on.

Digging into his bag, he removed a thin chain that held two adjustable gold clamps on each end. He altered the tightness to go easy on her, but he couldn't wait any longer to use them. His hard-on returned with a vengeance. He'd done this before only with women he paid, years ago. Professional courtesans who knew what to expect. A shameful period of release during his younger years, when he could no longer hold his sexual demons at bay. But now, to have this woman accept him like this, it meant all the difference.

“First, we'll put these on you, to teach you lessons about obedience. And loyalty.”

“Noah—” His name ended in a gasp as he applied the clamps.

“God, your tits are perfect.” He couldn’t tear his gaze from the sight of her plump breasts connected by that thin chain. Her nipples were red, taut, and thick beneath the clamps. “You have no idea how sexy you are.”

“They hurt.” But she didn’t moan as she squirmed under the foreign feel.

“Good hurt or bad hurt?”

“Good,” she admitted after a moment. “I feel so sexy in them. With you.”

Their gazes met, and Noah felt another tie to this fascinating woman. “You are sexy. Hot, and incredibly responsive.” He grazed her right nipple with his finger, and her entire body clenched. “I can’t wait to fuck you again.”

“Please. I want you.”

“Not enough.”

“Yes, I do. Please.”

He shook his head, knowing he had to get her there. He moved back to his bag and pulled out a small, slender plug. He applied a healthy bit of lube to it, then returned to the bed. “Not enough, Lara. But

soon. Soon you won't be able to think of anything but me inside you. Anywhere I fucking want to be."

Chapter Seven

Lara couldn't breathe as she watched Noah get closer and closer with that tiny dildo. No, not a dildo. A butt plug. She'd always been curious about anal sex but had never engaged, not trusting her partners enough to do it without hurting her. She didn't know why she trusted Noah, but she did.

With him, everything he wanted to do to her seemed right. It was natural for her to submit to him, and she trusted her instincts. They'd never led her wrong before.

Who knew she had such a thing for kink? She'd never before even been tempted to try clamps or rougher sex. Noah worked her like he knew her, like he *owned* her.

She trembled, perilously close to coming. "Noah, please."

The loving look on his face took her aback. Lust and excitement, yes, but affection as well. He

might not know it, but the big guy was softening toward her. Not physically, she amended as she stared at his thick erection. So big, and just as aroused as before. But emotionally, he'd started to tear down those walls keeping his feelings at bay.

"With your legs spread, I can see how wet you are." His raspy voice did strange things to her insides. "That clit is full, baby. You need to come. And those tits. You have no idea how hard they make me. I love your breasts, Lara. You have to be the prettiest woman I've ever seen."

"Prettier than her?" she had to ask. She still had a hard time believing she'd allowed him to tie her up and give *him* an orgasm after another woman had walked out of his hotel room.

"Who?" he asked, distracted as he leaned closer to her groin.

Do it, please. She forgot what she'd been saying when he sucked her clit into his mouth.

Primed to explode, she came hard, all over his mouth. And then she felt it, an intrusion into her anus that pinched.

“Hmm. So good.” He licked her and toyed with her clit some more, amping her climax. “Relax and push out while I slide it in.”

Her orgasm ended just as all four inches of the plug seated inside her. She felt full yet empty. Her orgasm had satisfied, but not the way it did with Noah filling her.

“Don’t move. Fuck. I wish I had a camera.”

That startled a laugh out of her, which dislodged some of the plug. It burned a little as it slid out, but when he pushed it back in, it wasn’t so bad.

“Let’s get you used to it, hmm? And while it’s in there, I’m going to eat. I haven’t had dinner yet.”

“What—Oh, not again. It’s too soon.”

But Noah didn’t seem to care. He sucked her clit and tongued her pussy while tugging at the chain holding the clamps. The contrast of pain and pleasure pushed Lara into a strange, sensual world. Her body became one giant pleasure center. Sensation tingled in places leading directly to her core, and as Noah’s demands grew rougher and more intense, she found herself once again on the

edge of orgasm.

“Yeah, that’s it. For me. Good girl.” He finally released the chain tugging her nipples only to find the plug. As he ate her, he toyed with it, giving her little thrusts that soon turned into plunging strokes. “Fuck. I need more.”

In seconds he shoved the plug back into her ass and mounted her. He pushed into her pussy one inch at time. She felt so full, so incredibly tight as he wedged himself inside her, that thick cock clenched inside her channel.

“Lara, you feel so fucking good.” He groaned and started thrusting, taking care as he moved with deliberate slowness.

“Noah. Yes, yes.” She couldn’t stop her mewls of pleasure as he took her to a new high. Her entire world was different, saturated with Noah and his wicked, arousing touch. She wanted him, all of him, and she gripped with her inner walls and heard him curse again.

She hadn’t realized she’d closed her eyes until she opened them to see him staring down at her with a look of pain. “I’m trying to be gentle, but fuck it all.

Baby, I need to move.” He kissed her and thrust deeply. No longer easy, he took her with a rough desperation as he licked and sucked the breath from her.

He broke away from her mouth just as she came hard, shouting out her pleasure. Then he tensed above her and shuddered, coming as well.

They remained joined several moments after, their heartbeats racing. She felt his hot breath on her neck when he tucked his head against her own. Panting and sweating, they were a matched set of satisfied lovers.

“Fuck me. I didn’t think you could be any more perfect. I was wrong.” Noah leaned up on his elbows and kissed her, his touch so light, she barely felt it.

“You’re so sexy.” She sighed and kissed him back. “So big.”

“Not so big now. I filled you up, baby. And I’m all over you. You’re a mess.” He sounded smug and not at all displeased.

“I am. I need a shower.” But she didn’t want to get up. She wanted to look up into his hazel eyes, to

watch as they shimmered from brown to green in the light. To watch his lips curl as he looked down at her, sated with pleasure.

“You’re okay?” he asked, his voice gruff, and kissed her again. “I didn’t hurt you, right?”

“Other than the fact my bones melted, I’m good.”

He chuckled and eased up off her, and she felt a sting far from pleasant.

“Shit. I forgot about the clamps.”

To her surprise, so had she.

“This won’t feel good. Sorry.” He removed a clamp and sucked the sting out of her nipple before she could protest. The sensation would have revved her engines again if she hadn’t been so exhausted from their lovemaking. He did the same to the other until she felt like herself again.

“I can’t believe I let you put those on me.” She clenched her ass and grimaced. “Or that in me.”

His grin stirred her affection into something deeper. Something stronger. To her surprise, she saw a dimple she hadn’t seen before on his face.

“Noah First. You have a dimple.”

He laughed. “No one but my family has ever seen that dimple, and not for ten years or more. And Lara, if you think the plug is uncomfortable, wait until I’m in there. If I wasn’t so tired from your hot little body, I’d show you right now.”

She blushed. An idiotic reaction, considering what he’d already seen and done to her, but she couldn’t help it. “I’m not sure it’ll fit.”

“Oh, it’ll fit. I’ll lube up real nice for you.” His grin did that thing to her insides again. Butterflies everywhere. “But we need to clean up, and I know you have questions. I sure as hell do.”

With care, he withdrew from her and removed the plug. Then he untied her.

She groaned and moved to rise when he lifted her in his arms as if she weighed nothing. “Noah.”

“Relax, baby. I’ll take care of you.” He carried her to the hotel bathroom, then preceded to clean her in the shower with gentle hands. To feel his strength, to know he could overtake her yet touch her with such reverence, tipped the scales even further.

Her mind screamed at her to listen. *Not love. Just sex! Physical attraction, nothing more here.* But her heart refused to listen.

Noah liked the way Lara continued to blush as she stared at him. The woman had a heart of gold; he could see it. She touched him, she really did. Hell, she'd spotted his dimple. When was the last time he'd smiled that wide? Even his own mother hadn't seen such happiness the last time he'd seen her, over a decade ago. Had Noah ever felt so close to anyone before? He didn't think so. And what made this entire emotional quagmire even worse was that he felt as if he had an end date stamped to his forehead.

He'd been sent here—and technically, he hadn't even been sent here, he'd been sent to Superior—to retrieve a rare painting. He had a job and a life in Oregon. Lara had a life and a job in Arizona. But what would he be rushing back to? A life spent watching the past? His present filled with free weights and the new fitness crazes?

“That feels so good,” Lara crooned as he massaged her scalp.

He worked the shampoo in and stood back to let the water rinse it away. Then he let her wash him with the soap, since she kept batting his hands away from it when he tried to clean himself.

“Your body is just beautiful.” She sighed, and he felt himself blush. “Noah, how are you still single? I mean, you’re handsome, built, and smart.” A small pause. “Who was that woman earlier?”

The smile he’d been fighting returned full force. Lara was jealous. He’d bet a lot of money she would see that dimple if she glanced up past his abs. “That was Chloe, a friend of mine.”

Lara whipped her gaze to his. “A friend? What does that mean?”

He coughed to conceal a laugh. He didn’t laugh or smile. Noah did pensive, not cheer and that happy bullshit. But hell, after sex like they’d had, he’d give himself a break. The woman had rocked his world. “Chloe King. She’s a clairaudient and the night manager where I work.”

Lara blinked. "A clair-what?"

"She hears voices. Not like a schizophrenic does, but like a psychic does. Kind of like you do," he mused. "And she's my backup."

"Oh. Your backup." Lara rubbed soapy hands over his chest and arms. Hell, the woman was making him hard again. It was almost spooky how much he continued to want her. He should have been too tired to get it up.

Her hands moved down, lower, to encircle his stiffening shaft. "Just a work friend?"

He groaned. "Baby, I'm too tired to come again." Or so he kept telling himself.

"So she's *not* just a work-friend?" Lara's strokes grew more demanding.

His cock thickened, his arousal painfully obvious. "Fuck. No, she's just a friend. I don't know her that well, only from working together. Lara, oh shit. I'm going to come if you keep doing that."

"So she doesn't touch you like this?" Lara teased her fingers under him, fondling his sac. She turned him, and the water rinsed off most of the

soap, but slick from the water, her hands slid over his flesh like silk. "She doesn't make you hard?"

"You're the only one who does that. It's been so long since I've had this much sex. Must be the reason I can't stop coming around you." He tried to hold on, but then she grazed the crack of his ass and teased him. She rimmed his ass, then penetrated him with a sharp push. "Oh Lara. Fuck, yes. Yes," he yelled as he came, his cum landing on the tile before sliding away with the water.

She removed her finger, cleaned up, and reached around him to turn off the water.

Still panting, he needed a minute to recover. A towel brushed against his chest. "No. I wanted to take care of you."

She ignored his halfhearted attempt to grab the towel. "I think I just took care of you." She grinned at him. "Now who's in charge?"

Noah turned and leaned his head back against the shower wall. He groaned as the realization dawned. He was well and truly fucked, because he knew. And now she knew as well. "Oh Christ. You are."

He wasn't pleased. Not at all. When would the bitch learn? *He* made the rules. *He* decided how fast and how far they'd go when they finally got around to fucking. The woman he'd treasured for so long, his ideal wife and future mother of his children, was nothing more than a dirty whore. He'd prayed against the idea, not wanting to face the probable truth. She was just like his mother, may the bitch rot in hell.

Enraged, Michael drove back to his house, then walked up the porch steps, ready to kill, when he remembered his current girlfriend lived in an apartment. The old one, the one he'd had so much fun with, lay bagged in the local morgue. He needed to do something. The urge to destroy overwhelmed him. Killing Cecilia's lover would help, but the timing wasn't right. He needed to teach the whore a lesson. He'd wait until she started showing the lovesick signs women always wore when they met a man who pretended to love them back. Then he'd make her watch him kill Finn again. She'd learn a vital lesson.

He knew more than most that pain was a great teacher. She would hurt, and she'd learn.

He pushed past the front door and stomped upstairs, all the way to the attic. There he sat and stared at the painting, studying the cruel smile and lying eyes that mocked him even as she dared him to man up and take what he wanted. She was a bitch, yet she listened. He loved for her that, but he hated the way she'd made him fall for her.

"Mama shoved me in that closet for days, listening to me say I was sorry. Her belt hurt, but the knife became my friend." He absently stroked the scars on his chest through his shirt. "She taught me good, Cecilia. She did. Just the way I'll teach you, you filthy whore," he whispered, desperate to show her how much he loved her. His mother had loved him somethin' fierce until the day she'd died. The day he'd shoved her off the roof and watched her neck snap like a twig when it hit the hard earth below. She'd danced in the fires of hell, like Cecilia would once again.

Finn couldn't have her. Not this time. No sir. He'd have to die again. And maybe Michael would

find out just who that pretty newcomer was. She'd thought no one had paid much attention to her at the cantina. But he knew everything that happened in this shitty little town. Time to investigate. And to have some fun.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed a familiar number. "Hey, Shelly, honey. Let's get together tonight. I've been missing you." His hand tightened around the switchblade in his pocket. "A lot."

* * *

Chloe couldn't have said why, but when a shiver crept over her spine, she felt as if someone had walked right over her grave. *Shee-it*. No wonder Noah had wanted backup. The bad vibes in this town were enough to send her packing like yesterday. The plane trip from hell, followed by a beer can on wheels, then that crappy little motel Noah had so "thoughtfully" booked for her, added up to a major downer of a vacation.

She'd been jealous when Keegan and James left a few months ago to do a PWP job that Jack

insisted wasn't PWP. Keegan had been bitching about working at the gym since day one, so it made sense to send him. Plus, she knew Keegan irritated Jack more than anyone else at the gym did. James tagged along to keep Keegan out of trouble. Too bad it hadn't worked.

She snorted with laughter, remembering how annoyed Jack had been when the guys returned not only with the locket they'd been sent to retrieve, but with some woman who claimed the locket belonged to her. Apparently their client had settled things with Rory, and now she and the guys had some happy little threesome going on. That kinky, crazy Keegan.

Chloe grinned, thinking she wouldn't mind being Rory in a James-Keegan sandwich. Oddly enough, all the guys from the PWP were hot. Handsome or intriguing and now totally buff, muscular because they had to exercise—physically and mentally—to keep the psychic demons away.

She strolled near another art store and decided to go in. As she perused the pottery and glass sculptures, she wondered about Lara Graham, Noah's lady friend. The woman was tall, pretty, and

intense, just like Noah. No wonder they fit. She didn't need voices to tell her what her intuition clearly noted.

To be honest, she was glad Noah had found someone to bring him back to life. Unlike the rest of them, he didn't get crazy from lack of psychic or physical stimuli. Instead he retreated into the past. She'd be talking to him at the gym, and his eyes would lose focus. He'd just drift away, and she worried one day he might not come back. That's why she'd ratted him out to Jack. Not that she'd needed to. Their enigmatic boss saw everything. But she was in charge of the night shift, and she didn't like the way Noah had been ghosting through life lately.

No longer a problem, she thought as she remembered what the voices had told her. Noah and that chick had a future together. But depending upon what Chloe did here, that future might be no more than a few days at best. Time to figure out who was who and what was what before it was too late.

So thinking, she smiled at the shopkeeper and edged her way out of the store. Then she followed the voices to a charming little apartment. The name

on the mailbox said Frank Hanover. She climbed the outer staircase to a second-floor landing and knocked.

A handsome man opened the door. His eyes widened when he saw her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She should have been more surprised, but she wasn't. She sighed, and to the voices in her mind, sent the thought, "*Sometimes I wonder if you're trying to make me crazy.*" As usual, she got no response. She faced the man calling himself Frank. "Trust me. If I'd known you were on the other side of this door, I would have run the other way." She pushed her way past him, not surprised to see that after he shut the door, locked it, and turned back to her, he had a gun in his hand. "So when did you get paroled?"

* * *

Noah lay back on the bed with Lara, wondering where to go from here. "Chloe is going to scout out the town and see what she can pick up. You know, since you and she have a similar vibe going on, you

might learn some things about your abilities from her I can't help you with."

It didn't surprise him when she tugged her hair out from under his arm and scooted away. Lara didn't like to talk about being psychic. He could relate.

She sat on the edge of the bed, looking so damn beautiful he couldn't look away. That long dark hair, those soulful eyes, that soft mouth that would curl into a smile with the slightest provocation... Sexually sated, his mind didn't jump to carnal analogies as swiftly as it had before, but he couldn't help remembering just how good her lips had felt, snug around his cock.

"Good Lord, Noah. Does that thing ever go down?"

He cleared his throat and tried to act like he had a shred of discipline in his body. "Just ignore it."

"I'm trying to." But she didn't look away from his erection, now encased in jeans. "Oh man, you're smiling again. When you do that, I just want to give you whatever you want so you don't stop."

He chuckled. "Good to know." He sobered as he decided how to say what needed to be said. "As much as I would like to shut the world out, we have some serious problems to deal with."

"I know." She sighed and leaned down to kiss him. So tactile, his woman.

His woman.

She cleared her throat and glanced from his face to his crotch again.

His cheeks heated. "It's not my fault. It's you. Before I came here, I used to get lost in history and the past. Now I'm lost in you," he grumbled.

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me yet." Lara grinned. "Now finish telling me all the bad stuff so we can go get something to eat. I barely touched my sandwich with Bill because I was worried about you. I'm starving."

Male satisfaction threatened his attempt at staying on track. "Okay, then. This is what we know. Someone killed to steal the painting. They brought it here and killed again, but this time it's less about a theft and more about connecting the victim to the

subject of the painting—who looks like you.”

“Good summation. Now what?”

“I spent the day waiting for Chloe to show up. While waiting, I did some digging into the town’s history. Did you know that Mike Buckman and Bill Knowles are cousins?”

“Really?” Bill had never mentioned that. Nor had Mike, but then, she and Mike rarely conversed. He leered; she avoided.

“Yeah. Did you also know their mothers died in a fire some twenty years ago?”

“That’s horrible.”

“And I think one of them is the killer.”

“*What?*”

“I told you before, I see the past. Snippets of it. But I’m much better now at directing my focus than I used to be. I saw the art dealer who owned the painting die. I also saw the painting disappear from his gallery. In both instances, there was a greasy energy, a darkness to the person committing the crimes. I felt it here too. In my room.”

“What? When?”

He told her about the earrings he'd found earlier that morning. "The energy in the room was the same. Our guy is here in town. He knows I'm here, and he doesn't like me with you."

"I don't like this, Noah. Maybe you should leave town."

Her concern surprised him. When was the last time anyone had worried about him? His mother never had. Deirdre didn't even merit a thought. Kitty, maybe, or Chloe. But they hadn't connected to him like Lara did. "If I'm leaving, you're coming with me."

She didn't look happy about it. "But my job is here."

"Are you that attached to it that it might mean your life?"

Lara sighed. "No. In fact, even before you got here, I've been questioning whether or not I've done the right thing by coming here."

"Why did you?"

"Because I needed to prove myself. I'm not that freak the neighborhood kids teased me about being. I had to work for twelve years to put that behind me

and move on. To show my folks I'm not a nutcase, that I can and will amount to something, I moved far away to live on my own."

"Why do you need to prove anything to anyone?" But he knew. Hadn't he done the same until he'd found the PWP? "You're smart, Lara. I just met you, and I know that."

She stroked his jaw. "Thanks, but you have to admit, we know each other better than makes sense. I feel like I've always known you. And that freaks me out."

He tensed. "Yeah?"

"For years, I've struggled to not hear the voices. I put them out of my life. Then I moved here because I was guided. I have no other explanation for it. I'm not from here. I went to college in Charleston, for God's sake. Across the country. But something drew me here, and I'm afraid it's Cecilia." She took a deep breath, then explained, "In some way, I'm Cecilia, Noah. And I think you're Finnegan Fury, her one true love."

Chapter Eight

Noah balked, but Lara doggedly continued. "Just hear me out. I feel like her; I look like her. That dream I had before, when we were in my office? It wasn't just a scene for me. Not like I was watching her and you."

"Finn," he corrected.

"I was her with Finn." She paused. "With you."

He sat up, clad in jeans and nothing else. So virile, so handsome, and she loved him because he was the ghost of the man she used to love? Lara believed it to be true. It made a heck of a lot more sense than that she'd fallen for a man she knew little about. How she could trust him so implicitly, let him do things to her she'd never even tried, let alone done?

"So you're telling me you don't want me; it's Cecilia wanting Finn, that it?"

He sounded less than pleased, and she half

wished she hadn't opened her mouth. She liked the smiling, happy Noah much better. Yet, like this, she could see the predator that called out to Cecilia. And to you too, her conscious tried to get her to admit.

"No, not exactly." She frowned. "I'm trying to be honest with you, Noah. I've dealt with disbelief my whole life. I would have thought you, of all people, would understand this." Angry, she also felt on the verge of tears and didn't know why.

All of a sudden, Noah sat by her side and took her into his lap. He hugged her tight. "I'm sorry, baby, okay? Lara, I grew up a lot like you did. Except my father took off when I was two, and my mother hated me. She never believed me, had me committed more times than I can count, and finally just sent me to live with relatives, who at least tried to raise me right. My uncle had similar abilities, so I found a haven of sorts. But by then I was eighteen, and the damage had been done.

"So don't think I don't believe you, because I do. But only to an extent." He tightened his arms when she would have spoken. He'd apparently said all he planned to say about his past. "There's an

obvious connection with Cecilia. But remember, I heard her too. Not just once, but a few times. Lara, I hear and see the past. No way I should have been able to hear Cecilia speaking directly to me. I know enough about history to know when I'm reliving it. I don't know about you and Cecilia, but I can sure as hell tell you I'm not Finnegan Fury."

She pulled back to look up at him, relieved to see the hint of a smile on his face.

"Not that I wouldn't mind the comparison," he continued. "From what I've gathered and seen from this town, he was a man to have by your side in a fight. I highly doubt he killed his lover, his only friend."

"I don't think so either."

"Honey, I'm not possessed or a reincarnation. And before you get all offended, I'm not saying that because I don't believe in the hereafter. Trust me. I've seen things that would make your hair stand on end. The impossible is not as impossible as you might think."

"I don't know what to say." She blinked and felt a tear trail down her face. He wiped it away with his thumb and stroked her lips. "No one has ever

listened to me, really listened. I know you don't agree with me, but thanks for at least hearing me out." Finn or not, Noah meant something to her. Not to Cecilia, to Lara. "You have a point about hearing Cecilia. But she and I are tied in some way. Wouldn't that make sense if we're the same person? I mean, I was drawn to this place."

He shrugged. "Maybe. But the past has an energy. All living things do. Maybe her energy called out to a powerful psychic, and you answered. Maybe her blood does run in your veins, and that's why you, of all people, heard her so clearly."

"I just know that right now, this is where I belong." *And I wish you belonged here too.* Maybe that was why she wanted him to be Finn. That way, when his case ended, he wouldn't leave her.

"Well, it's where I belong right now too." He stood and crossed to find his shirt on the floor. "We're going to go back to the inn and pretend everything is nice and normal. But you go nowhere without me. I'm your new best friend. We're lovers, friends, whatever you want to tell people we are so they'll buy me staying by your side until this is over."

Because we have a killer to catch.”

“You’re sure it’s Bill or Mike?”

“Almost positive.”

“But you’ve met them. You couldn’t track their energy or something?”

He shook his head and put on his shoes. “I felt the bad energy in scenes of the past, but I never looked at either of their energy signatures in the present. Even if I had, it wouldn’t necessarily have given me the same read. I’ve dealt with this before. If the killer isn’t in the same furious state of mind as he was when he killed, his energy will look different to me.”

“So even if you try to look at Bill’s or Mike’s past history, you won’t know which one of them is the killer?” Disappointment warred with joy. If he identified the murderer, they’d all be safe, but then he’d leave. If he didn’t spot him, they’d be in danger, but Noah had promised to stick to her like glue. Which meant he’d be sticking around.

“Exactly. I need to find our guy when he has death on the brain, which is not a good scenario for

anyone.” Noah straightened and groaned. “I hope to God Jack was right to send Chloe to help us. I can’t be with you and her twenty-four seven. If she sticks her nose in this thing, she’ll attract our killer’s attention.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I have a feeling he gets off on being in charge of things. And Chloe has this habit of stepping into trouble and stirring up a shit storm like you wouldn’t believe. If anyone can get our guy mad, it’s her.”

They returned to the inn to find everything quiet. Thankfully, no one had seen Lara wearing his coat to cover her torn shirt and wrinkled jeans. After moving the rest of his things into Lara’s room, he settled into bed with her. Noah held her for a good hour before he fell asleep. He didn’t remember his dreams, but he felt uneasy the next morning.

He woke with her at six, showered and dressed and met her at the door. “You’re fast.”

She smiled. “You get used to early mornings

around here. Well, my shadow, I think we'll introduce you as the new help. I could use a strong man around here."

He slapped her ass. "Damn skippy."

Quietly laughing together, they moved into the kitchen. Noah helped Lara prepare breakfast for over a dozen guests, to include him, God bless her. As she fixed coffee, muffins, eggs, and more, he heard someone moving out front.

"That would be Frank readying the buffet." The swinging door burst open, and Frank breezed through. "Morning, Frank."

Frank's hair looked mussed. He had dark circles under his eyes and wore a wrinkled shirt and jeans with tennis shoes. Not his usual dress, from what Noah had seen of him. He bit out a terse good morning to Lara, grabbed a mug, and poured himself some coffee from one of the carafes, and scowled at Noah until he and his coffee left through the same swinging door.

Lara stared. "Wonder what crawled up his butt and died?"

"That would be me," Chloe said as she pushed past the door.

Noah groaned. "Lara Graham, meet Chloe King, my manager at the PowerUp! gym."

"Wow. You really take your responsibility as his employer seriously. Following him all the way out to Brownville." Lara grinned.

"What can you do? Good help is hard to find."

"Tell me about it."

"I heard that!" Frank breezed back into the kitchen to deposit his mug on the counter, grabbed a clean stack of plates, and left just as quickly.

"Well, Chloe, I'd say nice to meet you, but I want to know what you did to Frank."

Chloe cocked her head, the way she did when she listened to her voices. "Okay, we're good to talk in here. It's safe enough for now. If anyone asks, Frank and I are cousins. Believe it or not, Frank and I are old friends. I was part of the team that busted him a few years ago on forgery and grand larceny charges, but somehow he weaseled out of them."

Lara dropped the mixing bowl she'd been

holding, and it landed on the counter, nearly dislodging the contents. She cringed. "Forgery? What?"

Chloe turned to him. "Frank Hanover was one of our own. Noah, meet Ian Ryder."

"No kidding?" Noah glanced from Chloe to the swinging door through which Frank passed again. Ian Ryder was infamous. A gifted psychic gone rogue who'd nearly stolen his way to millions. Rumors about foreign governments, spies, and scandal had circulated about Ryder, who'd vanished years ago. But somehow, Frank didn't have that whole air of intrigue around him.

Frank sneered. "You telling him the whole truth, or your version?"

"Frank, what's going on?" Lara rounded to him and put a protective arm over his shoulder.

Regardless of Frank's sexual orientation, Noah didn't like them standing so close.

"I used to work for the government a long, long time ago." Frank glared at Chloe. "Before the PWP became so widely known, it was just a beta project."

“What did he do?” Noah asked her.

“Master forger. A chameleon of sorts. He could imitate anything on paper.”

“He’s an artist here. Makes sense.” Noah nodded.

Lara frowned. “PWP?”

“Psychic Warfare Project,” Noah explained, ignoring Chloe’s dark look. “I’m not going to lie to her, Chloe. Lara, the PWP is what we called our organization with the government. It was an experimental unit made up of psychics of different specialties and degrees of skill. We took on various missions to help our country and did what was asked of us.”

Lara dropped her arm from around Frank and moved back to the batter in her bowl. “I’m impressed. I know you said you did investigations, but I didn’t think it was all official-like.”

He flinched. “Ah, it’s not. I said we *used to* belong. The PWP closed up eight months ago.”

Chloe swore under her breath. “Why don’t you just tell her every classified mission we went on too?”

Heck, Noah, give her the codes to the boss's safe while you're at it."

"She knows enough about me to believe," he explained.

"Fine." Chloe faced Lara. "Noah's a very valuable member of the team. He can jack into the past, seeing and hearing secrets when he pushes hard enough. But sometimes he can't let go."

Noah shook his head. "The problem with my skill is I can't see everything. The more intense emotion or energy associated with the past, the easier I'm able to pick it up. I have no problem seeing when it comes to psychics."

"Or murder scenes, battlefields, war zones," Chloe added.

"Bordellos." Noah chuckled when Lara blushed. "Love is a powerful emotion too. New beginnings, hope. It's not all negative, which is something I've come to learn since leaving the PWP."

Chloe's face softened. "That's good. You were getting burned out. Then the PWP disbanded, and you started losing it even more. This break has been

good for you.” To Lara she said, “Now we work for Jack, and he wants that painting back. This thief and murderer is putting a kink in things.”

Her openness about the case told him a lot. Noah glanced at Frank. “Obviously you and Frank hashed things out.”

“He’s not our guy.”

“I know,” Noah and Lara said at the same time.

“Glad you have faith in me.” Frank beamed at Lara.

Noah hated to burst his bubble. “Thanks to a few pieces I’ve put together, I narrowed our list of suspects down to two. But Chloe, can I ask what drew you to Frank?”

“The voices told me he can help. He has information we need.”

Noises outside in the living area startled Lara into moving back to the stove. “That’s going to have to wait. Now I’m behind. Frank, you’re on bacon and sausage. Noah, tea and coffee. Chloe, get those hands over here.”

Noah followed her orders. And Lara did like to

give orders. The dichotomy of his submissive lover in bed, wanting to please, and this stern taskmaster bandying demands left and right, intrigued him to no end. Every minute spent with her made him want to move even closer.

Surprised at himself, Noah realized he didn't want to leave her. Not ever. Talk about irrational decisions based on...what? Lust? Lara's idea of reincarnation? Then an even more insane thought struck him. Was this love?

"Come on, Noah. It's getting later. People want their coffee. Did you make the hazelnut blend yet?"

He met Chloe's gaze, bright with amusement, and sighed at Lara. "Not yet, *mein Führer*."

"Ha ha. Very funny." Lara shooed him toward the coffeemaker. "Now move. People pay to stay here as much for my food as for the atmosphere."

Frank muttered under his breath each time he moved in and out of the kitchen, but Noah saw how well he and Lara worked together. Not sure how to figure Frank Hanover into the scheme of things, he wondered what the odds were that two psychics happened to work together in a supposedly haunted

house. Add him and Chloe, and there were now four of them. Despite the normalcy of a bustling kitchen, he couldn't ignore the sense that something wrong hung just out of reach. Too many psychics in one place stirring the energy, maybe? But he didn't get this feeling at home in Bend.

No, it felt more like history repeating itself. The strange idea took hold and wouldn't let go.

After another half hour spent busting his ass in the kitchen while Chloe and Frank worked the dining room, he put a plate of biscuits down and gave Lara a quick kiss.

She smiled. "That was nice. Hey, where are you going?"

"Something I need to do. I'll be back later. Promise me you won't leave unless Chloe or Frank is by your side."

She frowned. "If I have to."

"You have to." He left the kitchen and caught Chloe chatting with an old man and his daughter while she cleared a few plates off their table. "Chloe, I need a word."

She took the plates and set them on a tray near the wall. "I feel like I'm back in college again, waiting tables for extra cash." She grinned, clearly enjoying her pretend job, and joined him by the staircase.

"I have a lead I need to follow. Research I need to do. I'm heading to the—"

"Library. Yeah, that's where you need to be." She nodded. "Don't worry. I'll be Lara's shadow until you get back."

"Thanks. Interesting those voices of yours are so taken with this case."

"More like worrisome." Her smile faded. "They normally don't get this involved unless I'm in danger, or someone I care about is about to die. Something's up, Noah. Watch your back. Seriously."

"Gotcha. You too." He nodded and left just as Mike Buckman strolled into the dining room asking for Lara. Knowing it wouldn't help but trying anyway, he focused on Mike and thought about the past.

An impression of heated words, a fight with Shelly that ended in tears. Then some paperwork at the station. A boring day for the deputy, no doubt. A

guy like Buckman probably needed to knock heads together to get his rocks off. Noah was tempted to stay.

Chloe poked him in the chest. "Uh-uh. Get out of here. I'll watch him around Lara, don't worry."

He huffed. "Fine. But don't forget, he might be our guy."

"You're sure it's a man, right? People are always underestimating women."

"No, the flavor of violence was too masculine. And the woman they found... It was a man. A large man." Mike Buckman and Bill Knowles unfortunately had the same build. "Just keep an eye on him."

"Will do. But it's not like he's going to hurt her in plain view of the guests, is he?" At Noah's look, she rolled her eyes. "Fine, yes, I'll practically sit on Lara while you're gone. Happy? Jesus. Just go and be careful. Hell, I'm sorry I ever mentioned you to Jack."

"Huh?"

She flushed. "Never mind." She shoved him toward the door. "Now go."

Lara tried to let her morning routine wash away her unease. Knowing Mike or Bill might be the one who'd killed and tortured that poor girl made her ill. She felt as if she knew both men. She'd lived around them for six months. She'd eaten dinner with Bill just last night. Hell, she'd even invited him into her bedroom, her most private, intimate space. Yes, their interaction had been businesslike, but only until the man had kissed her.

The door to the kitchen swung open. "You going to burn those eggs or what?" Chloe spurred Lara into finishing the current pan she'd started.

She put them into the serving tray and carried it out to the buffet table. When she turned around to head back into the kitchen, she ran into Mike Buckman. Talk about unlucky. A quick glance around her showed that at least Bill remained absent.

"Easy, honey. Where's the fire?" Mike's smile did nothing to reassure her, and she knew he could see the strain on her face, because his amusement vanished. "We need to talk."

Just what she didn't need. "I'm really busy right

now, Mike—”

He grabbed her arm and all but dragged her with him into the kitchen. Frank and Chloe followed on their heels, but Mike barked at them to leave.

When neither moved an inch, he swore. “Goddamn it. I’m not kidding. This is official business. Just wait outside. I’ll only be a minute.”

Knowing he couldn’t possibly hurt her and get away with it, not with so many witnesses outside, Lara nodded at the others to leave. Maybe she could get him to give her a clue of some sort. Confess his guilt? A long shot, but it couldn’t hurt to try.

“I’ll be okay. Go check on the guests, please.”

Chloe frowned and moved only when Frank whispered something in her ear and dragged her out.

“Mike, what can I do for you?” She forced herself to smile.

“Who’s the new girl? She’s cute.”

“She’s gorgeous, and she’s Frank’s cousin. Now why did you drag me in here?”

He mumbled an apology, which surprised her.

His gaze narrowed, and he seemed to come to a decision of some sort. "You don't have to pretend with me."

"I don't know what you mean." Her heart raced. How could he know she suspected him?

Mike sighed. "Lara, I know the word's out. Everyone in town knows about the dead girl."

"The, uh—"

"She looks just like you. I'd be scared too if I were you. But I promise, we've stepped up patrols. No one is going to hurt you. You have my word."

Not what she'd been expecting to hear.

"I'm personally spending my shifts and my off-time watching the inn. Have you seen anyone or anything to make you nervous?"

"No."

"What about that guy, Noah First? Why'd you ask me to look him up?"

Crap. How much to say without giving away information Noah would want kept quiet?

"Something going on with him? I've seen the way he looks at you. Heard about Bill pawing at you

too.” Mike sneered. “Fucking playboy. He’s no good for you.”

“Oh?”

“I know what I’m talking about. You know he and I are related?”

“I’d heard. But why is he no good for me?” *Because you’re related?* She wanted to ask but didn’t think Mike would appreciate her lame stab at humor.

“He has a different flavor every week. Last I heard, he was fu—ah, dating some girl from Superior while seeing Shelly on the side.”

“Shelly? But I thought you and she were a couple.”

His snorted. “Shelly? Hell, no. Girl is too young for me. Sure, we had fun, but we were just passing the time. She’s trying to make Bill jealous. Me...” His gaze trailed from her face to her breasts and back up.

“What? What does that look mean?”

“What do you think?” He glanced at the kitchen door, hearing the same garbled whispers she did—

subtlety was not in Frank's vocabulary. "Now I could be like Bill and just grab you, but I've got too much class to do that."

He had to be kidding.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm out here looking after you, Lara." His voice lowered, and a creeping wariness made her shiver. "You might not see me, but I'll be watching."

He left, pushing past Frank and giving Chloe a good once-over.

"What did he say?" Frank was at her side in seconds.

"Just letting me know he's watching me." She made a face. "Just what I needed to help me sleep through the night."

"We heard it all through the door." Chloe frowned at Frank.

He frowned back. "Hey, I wanted her to have the illusion of privacy."

Chloe brushed her hair out of her face. "I think it's interesting he owned up about his connection to Bill. Noah filled me in about the pair yesterday."

“It’s got to be Mike.” Frank shot a dark look at the swinging kitchen door where Mike had exited.

“Not necessarily.”

Lara still couldn’t see Mike or Bill as the culprit. “What if Noah’s wrong? He said he couldn’t be sure. What if it’s someone else?”

Chloe grimaced. “Then we’re in serious trouble, because I can feel the danger crawling up my spine. My voices don’t lie. Before this thing ends, someone else is going to die.”

Chapter Nine

On the computer, Noah scrolled through another edition of the *Brownville Voice* from twenty years ago. To his relief, the library seemed deserted. This early in the day, none but the most avid readers were looking for material. He had the computer section all to himself.

For the next few hours, he read through the histories of Brownville that related to Cecilia Fine or Finn Fury. Nothing stood out from his research, so he moved on to more current history. No time like delving into the seedy underbelly of Brownville's fire chief and deputy extraordinaire.

Something about Mike's and Bill's connection nagged at him. History repeating itself... He glanced at the table, where he'd piled the books detailing the relationship between Cecilia Fine and Finn Fury. What was it that connected Cecilia and Finn to Mike Buckman and Bill Knowles? What had he missed?

A whisper of sound drifted over him in a cold

breath. The cloying pressure of psychic phenomena settled over him like a suffocating blanket. *Shit*. He'd never liked these rare occasions when the past reached out and smothered him. Knowing what he did about the violence and negative energy in town made his unease worse.

Then a woman's hand stroked his shoulder. "Beware the jealous lover."

He tensed and turned, expecting to see Cecilia Fine. To his astonishment, a giant of a man wearing a gun belt, two pistols, and the look of a killer stared at him from a few feet away. He looked familiar. "I ain't gonna let you hurt her again."

Noah wondered if he'd fallen into the past or was seeing what he and Lara had witnessed earlier at the inn. A ghost.

"She's mine." The bandanna around the man's neck shifted, revealing a scar, and detail poured into him. It was as if watching an artist fill out his creation. Finnegan Fury.

Noah studied the outlaw. Like Noah, he possessed a large frame. His arms were corded

with muscle, his legs firm on the ground, his stance ready, eager. Finn looked poised to take on any comers. His ghostly face might have been called handsome, but to Noah the scar on his chin and the one that slashed through his left brow gave him a demonic appearance. He had short black hair, a square jaw, and ice blue eyes that didn't blink. A stone-cold killer.

"I'm talking to you, asshole."

Noah blinked. "Hell, you're here with me, aren't you? You're not the past."

Finn drew his gun and shot through Noah's chest. Then Noah heard a body thud to the ground behind him.

His heart beat so hard, he was surprised it hadn't leaped from his flesh. Christ, the man was fast. If he'd shot real bullets, Noah would be dead.

"The next one will be in your gut. Blood or not, I'm done with you. And so is she. That's the last warning you'll ever get." Finn kept his weapon trained on the body behind Noah and backed from the room before he vanished.

Eager to see who'd been shot, Noah turned. On the ground lay the body of a man, and blood stained his light-colored trousers. To his immense frustration, Noah couldn't see any more than that bloodied leg through the fog of the past. He could almost feel Cecilia pushing at him to look closer, to use his abilities and see the truth in front of his face. But something blocked him from doing so.

"Fucker. I'll get you. Cecilia is mine. That whore is *mine*," the downed man screamed. He stumbled to his feet, and Noah took a hard look at the man he suspected had shot and killed Finn and Cecilia. He concentrated until his head hurt and wiped at a bloody nose. Damn if he hadn't pushed himself to the extreme to penetrate the curious vision before him.

Tan trousers, a dark vest over a black work shirt, and scuffed brown boots appeared like magic. Standard western apparel, with the exception of the gun belt slung over slim hips. Noah concentrated and noted the man's dark hair reached his shoulders. His face remained a blank canvas, which was odd. Noah had never before witnessed a partial scene of the

past.

Cecilia appeared and prodded him. She wore the same scarlet dress, the same earrings and bound hair, but her eyes held a worry that reminded him so much of Lara. "Hurry, before it's too late. Catch him." Not a vision of the past, her ghost.

She reached out and grazed his cheek. He shivered at the touch and studied the cursing man as he limped from the room and dragged himself down the stairs.

The stairs?

Noah looked around him, stunned to suddenly see the Lady Fine Saloon in all its antiquated glory. Light spilled in from the outside, brightening the scarred and stained tables, over which a few drunken patrons still gathered. Dust floated in the sunbeams, landing on the gnarled hands of miners and men who'd been alone for too long. Men who'd rather drink than find a warm woman to curl up next to.

A woman like Lara. Conscious of the thought that didn't belong in the past, Noah trailed the bleeding man out the door. He couldn't manage a

glimpse of his face, for all that he tried. But he swore he knew the man, the way he moved, the way he spoke. He'd seen this guy before. Going on the premise that the murders were cyclic, if this was the same man who'd killed Finn and Cecilia, his present incarnation had to be Mike or Bill. Or was it someone else?

"Mr. Fury?"

Expecting to see Finn again, Noah watched the injured man spin around with his gun in hand. Fury? But this wasn't Finn. Finn's brother, maybe?

Fury swore and clamped down on his thigh with his free hand. "What the fuck are you followin' me for?"

The slight woman shivered and held out his hat. "Sorry, Michael. You dropped this."

Michael? Michael Fury? Or Mike Buckman? The past and the present felt all jumbled up. Noah tried to break free from his vision, concerned because he'd left Lara just as Mike had entered the inn. To his alarm, he couldn't stop watching history unfold. Stuck with whatever he needed to see, he

mentally followed Michael Fury down the street and onto his horse. They rode for what felt like several hours, though he knew only seconds had passed. And all the while, Noah fretted about Lara.

Michael found a drunken doctor on the outskirts of a mining shanty who happily removed the bullet and sewed him up for a few coins. As a reward, Michael shot him between the eyes and took back his money and everything else of the doctor's he wanted. The few miners yelling for help scattered when Michael put a few bullets in their asses.

He grunted and stared down at his leg. "Fuckin'." He took a swig of what the doctor had been drinking. "Little brother thinks he owns her. That he can tell *me* what to do. Like I'd let that sniveling little pissant run me around the way he does Mama."

Noah frowned. A family connection between Michael and Finn, and a family tie between Mike and Bill. First brothers, then cousins. Blood. He could feel the answer within reach, but something was still missing. He wanted to see Michael Fury's face. That he couldn't bothered him.

"Little brother, I'm comin' to git ya. You and that

whore o' mine." Michael took another drink and slumped to the ground, passed out. The bottle emptied into the sandy ground, its contents absorbed in seconds. The sun shone on the glass, and a ray of light lit Michael's face. In that moment, it wasn't Mike Buckman Noah saw...but himself.

He blinked and stared once more at the computer monitor. It was all he could do not to throw up. The nausea gripped him and wouldn't let go. This wasn't a past like any he'd ever seen. Spurred by a ghost to see the truth, he'd seen something that made no sense. Noah was the danger to Lara? He would rather shoot himself than ever harm her, but what if Lara had been closer to being right than she'd thought?

What if Noah wasn't possessed by Finnegan Fury, but by Michael Fury, Finn's brother? That scene in her office might not have been Finn, but Michael whom Cecilia had pleased. In hindsight, he realized she'd called him Fury, but never by his first name.

Jesus, what a nightmare. Not sure what to do, he stared without seeing at the computer monitor

before a name popped out at him from the screen.
Knowles Tragedy Kills Two.

Ida Knowles owned the Lady Fine Inn; her nephew Bill remained a top suspect. Or did he?

Stop and focus. Panic later. Follow your gut.
He refused to let the vision throw him and read the old news report. Twenty odd years ago, Nancy and Brenda Knowles had perished in a fire. Nancy had died from a fall when she'd jumped to escape the flames. They'd found Brenda's charred bones days later in her bedroom. Faulty wiring had been the suspected cause, though no one had ever concretely proven what had started the fire.

Noah's gut churned, his confusion about the past mired with this information. Cecilia flashed in and out of his vision behind the computer, nodding like crazy. He could no longer hear the words coming out of her mouth.

A gasp behind him told him he wasn't the only one to see her. At least he hadn't completely lost his mind.

The librarian stuttered and pointed to where Cecilia had been standing. "My God, I saw her. I did!

You saw her too, didn't you? Oh my God!"

The raised voice roused the handful of people in the library, and Noah hurried to close the file he'd been looking at. No need to arouse suspicion about Mike and Bill, not when he had no fucking clue what to do with what he'd just learned.

He darted around the librarian and left the library in a hurry. Needing a shortcut, he used the alley behind the building to return to the inn as fast as he could. Cecilia Fine. Finn Fury. Michael Fury. Lara. What the hell did all of it have to do with him? Noah knew in his bones his history had nothing to do with the Fury brothers. He could trace his lineage back to his Scottish ancestors all the way to the early 1500s, so why the hell had he seen his face where Michael Fury's had been? Unless Cecilia and Finn weren't the only ones haunting this town.

He stopped in the middle of the street, shocked at the thought. If Cecilia could overtake Lara the way she had in Lara's office, might a determined ghost do the same to him? Which would mean that vision of the past could have been manipulated. He'd never run into this before, but that

didn't mean it couldn't happen. He needed to talk to Chloe again. Maybe her voices could help.

A sound penetrated, but by then, it was too late. In his haste to return to the inn, he hadn't paid attention to his surroundings. So it was no one's fault but his own when the truck knocked him from his feet.

* * *

Hours later, Chloe sat with Lara by the register. Frank had gone to find Noah, and worry continued to grow as Noah remained absent. Her lover wasn't the only one not present. At the thought, Lara stilled.

"What's wrong?" Chloe had kept up a steady stream of chatter that amused and relieved Lara at the same time. A pleasant woman with a keen intelligence, Chloe had shared more than a few humorous stories about Noah and his tendency to zone off into space.

"I just realized I haven't heard Cecilia in a while." Ever since Noah had arrived, she'd heard Cecilia's voice several times a day.

With no one around at present, Lara and Chloe

had the downstairs of the inn to themselves. Only the occasional phone call from interested visitors interrupted them.

“How often do you hear her?”

Chloe put her at ease, especially because the woman took for granted that the voices she heard were real. She hadn't batted an eye about Lara seeing Cecilia.

“It started a month after I first arrived in town. Five months ago, I guess. I'd hear her whisper. Usually bawdy stuff. The woman has a sense of humor and a sex drive, I can tell you that.”

Chloe grinned. “Yeah? My voices aren't as fun. The stuff they tell me usually leads to a death or an arrest.” At Lara's look, she added, “I used to be a cop before I joined the PWP. Now I'm a manager for a gym. Very exciting stuff.”

Lara snorted. “Yeah. Your leap from exercise equipment to theft and murder wasn't as far as you'd imagine.”

“I like you, Lara. You roll with it pretty well.”

“I do?”

“Most people would be sincerely freaked out by all this. Ghosts, voices, Noah and his freaky ability to see the past. You’re taking it all in stride.”

“Not as well as I’d like.” *Noah, where are you?* “I’m not as comfortable with the voices as you seem to be.”

Chloe shrugged. “Why not? They’re a part of you.”

“A part that made my life hell when I was a kid.”

“Yeah, we all seem to go through that. Me, I didn’t hear them until I was six or seven. They warned me to keep quiet. I tested them by sharing with my brothers, who didn’t believe me. Then I shut my mouth and kept their company a secret.”

“I wasn’t so smart.” It felt good to share with someone who understood. Noah could, to an extent. But Chloe had gone through something very similar. “My parents have always been really open with things. I shared everything with them. Unfortunately, they couldn’t get it. My voices never told me things I could prove. No secrets of lost treasures or the answers to whodunits. I’d simply provide them

company. Like an invisible friend only I knew was real.”

“So everyone thought you were a kook. Happens to all of us with skills.”

“You’re lucky to be with people who understand.”

“I am now, but I wasn’t always.” Chloe gave her an odd look. “Noah seems to get you.”

Lara blushed. He sure did *get* her. “I like him a lot. I feel like I’ve known him for more than—jeez, it hasn’t even been a week.”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes.” Chloe smiled, and then her pleasure dimmed. “I wish the big ox would hurry his ass back. He’s starting to get on my nerves with this research nonsense.” Chloe sighed. “I hate worrying. So you heard these voices all your life?”

Glad to change the subject from her anxiety about Noah, Lara answered, “No, only until I graduated high school. I’d been ignoring them for a long time; I was sick of always being the school freak.”

“How did other people know? Did you or your family tell them?”

“It was a friend who did it. Before I’d realized sharing everything with family wasn’t helping, I’d extended that trust to my friends. My family tried to understand me. They chalked up my voices to an odd quirk and let it go. My friends turned out to be not so friendly. Before I’d entered middle school, I was the town freak show. So I kept to myself and left town as soon as I could. I went to college far away, got my degree in hotel management, and here I am.”

“But how did you get here?” Chloe frowned. “All this coincidence, you looking like Cecilia, hearing her, working at her old place. It’s tied together. It fits.”

“I don’t know. I was moving from internship to internship and furthering my education when I was drawn to this place. Maybe an article I saw in a magazine or a news piece on TV. Remember a few years back, how anything Western was really big? They did some stories about outlaws. I must have heard about Finn and Cecilia’s doomed love affair.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

Chloe cocked her head, and Lara swore she felt another presence with them. An odd sense, to be sure, but not a scary one.

“I think you were called. She needed you here. To break the cycle.”

“What cycle?”

“The past sometimes repeats itself if you don’t break the cycle. Someone killed Cecilia and Finn a long time ago, right?”

Lara nodded. “Yeah. No one ever found their killer, and they died in each other’s arms. It was tragic. A lot of historians think Finn killed her, then killed himself.”

“And here we are,” Chloe said as she threw up her arms. “The painting of Cecilia Fine has been stolen. Two people are dead because of it, and one of them looks just like you and Cecilia. Now Noah’s here, and you’re thinking he’s Finn. Why?”

“Why do I think he’s Finn?”

“Yeah.”

Lara swallowed hard, allowing herself to admit

what she didn't want to. "Because he and I share a connection, one that shouldn't be so strong after just getting to know each other. It kind of makes sense if it's because of the past."

"Yeah. Because how much of a slut would you be if you're balling my buddy days after meeting him?"

Lara gaped, not sure how to react, when Chloe burst into laughter.

"Sorry, you had that one coming. Seriously, Lara. It's obvious you two gel. He talks about you like you walk on water. Noah barely speaks, but I couldn't shut him up yesterday. He went on and on about you, which was weird enough. Noah is usually so oblivious to women, I used to think he was gay."

"He's not gay."

"I have a feeling you'd know." Chloe grinned. "Noah's a great guy, but I worry about him. He spends so much time in the past, he loses himself in the present."

"Not with me."

"And that's why you two belong together. He

looks at you like he's never looked at anything or anyone. And I've seen you checking him out too. All morning you kept sneaking him glances. Those moon-eyed, I'm-in-love looks."

How embarrassing.

"It's okay to like the guy. He's hot. No, nothing ever happened between us, and nothing will. But damn girl, I have eyes. He's got the dark, brooding thing down to a science."

Lara chuckled. "He does, doesn't he?"

"So are you going to come back with us to Oregon when this is done?"

"What?"

"You know. Come back with us. Bend has some terrific Craftsman architecture. It's a real tourist town with all the ski slopes so close. You could easily run a B and B there."

"I'd run an inn," she said automatically, trying to process the thought of setting up in Bend, finding a new place to explore and reinvent.

"Whatever. People always need a place to stay and a qualified person to manage it. Point is, you

can work anywhere, right? But there's only one Noah."

"He hasn't asked me to come with him."

"So who says he has to ask? Though I have a feeling he will. Think about what you'll say when he does." Chloe nodded to herself. "Sorry I got distracted. So about Cecilia..."

She continued to talk, but Lara didn't hear her. She had a hard time thinking about anything but Noah. What if he did ask her to come with him? Would she? How tied to the inn did she feel? And what would it be like to be around people like Chloe, others who accepted people with odd *skills*—as Chloe called them—without blinking an eye?

"Lara? Cecilia. Why do you think you can't hear her now?"

"I don't know. But it bothers me." To her surprise, it did. Before, hearing Cecilia reminded her she'd never be normal. But not hearing her now hinted at something not right with their town. "And I don't like not knowing where Noah is either. I have a bad feeling about him."

“Me too.”

Frank entered the inn, breaking the somber mood. He wore his customary dress slacks and a button-down shirt. He had his hair tied back, a diamond stud in his ear, and his handsome face was wreathed in smiles as he entered with the Littleton couple. Lara appreciated the normalcy of the moment, grateful for the distraction. Imagine Frank—*Ian Ryder*—a master forger. Talk about weird with a capital W. No matter what the others said, Lara trusted him. She trusted *Frank*.

“Good luck with your gallery, Mrs. L. And I’m glad you like *Sunrise*. That piece was always one of my favorites.”

The older woman smiled, gave him a wink, and joined her husband up the stairs after a wave at Lara and Chloe.

“There you two are.”

He drew closer, and Lara noticed the strain on his face. “Frank?”

“Mrs. L. just bought one of my best pieces. One I did all by myself, not copied from anyone

whatsoever.” He glared at Chloe before looking around at the empty area. Then he centered on Lara. “Don’t freak out on me.”

Beside her, Chloe tensed.

Lara panicked. “Frank, what’s going on?”

“Noah’s at the hospital. He was leaving the library and got hit by a car.”

Chloe blinked. “Are you shitting me?”

“I wish.” He stepped back as Lara and Chloe rounded the front desk. “He’s okay, just bruised and banged up a bit. The doc was putting an ace bandage around his wrist before I left. I would have called with the news but my cell died. And Chloe, you can lose the suspicious look. I ran into the Liebermans carrying my painting on the way in. I swear; I came here straight from the hospital. No side trips. I wanted you to hear the news about Noah from me.”

Lara blinked away a rush of tears. Frank had said he was fine; she wouldn’t lose it now. “What happened?”

“I’ll drive.” Frank pointed to his car. They exited

the inn, entered, and sped off. "You're not going to believe this."

"Spill, string bean." Chloe crossed her arms over her chest.

Lara scooted to the edge of the backseat so she could share in the conversation.

Frank frowned. "I'm surprised the voices in your head didn't already tell you, Sybil." Chloe scowled, and he continued. "Mike Buckman hit him with his SUV."

"You're kidding me!" Lara gasped. "So Mike is the killer?"

Frank paused. "I don't think so. I followed Noah's ambulance to the hospital. Mike seemed genuinely upset when I saw him in the waiting room. Then again, a witness saw him hit Noah, so maybe he was putting on a good show of innocence. Hard to leave the scene of an accident anonymously when someone sees you and you're wearing a deputy's uniform."

"He tried to leave the accident?" Lara wanted to strangle the deputy.

“According to what I heard when I was eavesdropping, Mike tried to call for backup but had trouble with his car radio. He said he left Bill—yeah, Bill Knowles, your number two suspect—with Noah while he rushed into the library to call for help. But when he went back outside to wait, no one was there except for some old lady tending to Noah. And then he noticed his SUV had vanished.”

“No way.”

“Way.” Frank drove them to the small hospital and parked. They hurried inside, bypassing the receptionist, who waved at Frank. A few rooms down the hallway, they found Noah grumbling at Deputy Peters. Noah’s left eyebrow had a dressing over swollen skin. He wore a bandage around his wrist and upper forearm, and his chest had doctored scrapes along his left side. He still wore his jeans, now ripped in places. But the scowl on his face told Lara he couldn’t be too bad off.

“I told you already. I wasn’t watching where I was going. Next thing I know, I’m airborne. I landed hard on my arm and skated down the alley, giving me these.” Noah pointed to his ribs and upper chest.

"I'm fine to leave, I'm telling you." He opened his mouth to say more when he saw Lara and the others in the doorway.

Deputy Peters looked over his shoulder and sighed. "Hey, Lara, Frank. Come on in." He turned back to Noah. "Well, Mr. First. I guess that's all, then. If you think of anything else you might have seen, let me know. Here's my card." He left his card on the table. When he walked away, he tipped his hat at Lara and Chloe before leaving.

Lara didn't wait a moment more. She ran to Noah's side and ran her hands gently over his body. "Oh Noah. What happened? Are you okay?" She kissed his lips, his cheeks, and hugged him tight until he groaned. "Sorry."

"No, no. That's okay. You just keep doing what you're doing."

Chloe snorted. "Trust Noah to get himself all banged up to add to our drama."

"What happened?" Frank asked. "Did Mike Buckman really run you down, then try to leave your ass in the street?"

“No.” Noah scowled. “It was my fault, but these idiots are trying to blame Buckman for it.”

“But he hit you.” Lara didn’t know why Noah would defend a man who’d tried to kill him.

“I stepped in front of his truck. Yeah, it’s hazy, but I was seriously freaked by what happened in the library.”

“What happened?” Chloe stepped closer.

Frank snapped his fingers. “*That’s* what else I meant to tell you two. Seems the librarian and Noah saw Cecilia Fine. Her ghost materialized in the library by Noah. You should see the crowd over there right now.”

Noah sighed. “Look, let’s get me out of here. I don’t want to talk around other people. We’ll go to Chloe’s room, and I’ll fill you in on what I found out.”

Lara put her hand on his chest to stop him when Noah tried to rise. “Explain what the deputy wanted first. Noah, are you in trouble?”

“I’m not, but I think Buckman might be. After he hit me, someone stole his SUV. Made it look like he’d tried a hit-and-run. Only Buckman was in the

library calling for help.”

“So he said.” Frank shrugged. “According to the librarian, he never got through. Some other emergency had the crews tapped.”

Noah groaned. “I don’t know. I was laying there, trying to figure out what the hell happened, when I woke to see some old woman looming over me. I was a little disoriented.”

“But Mike said Bill was waiting with you.” Frank narrowed his eyes. “Was he?”

“I don’t know. But I do know that Buckman is now missing. No one can find him, and his SUV is gone as well. That’s what the deputy wanted to know, if I’d seen anyone else when Mike went into the library.”

Lara wished she understood what had happened, but the important part of it all lay in bed, still alive and kicking. “Come on, guys. Let’s get Noah out of here. We’ll talk at Chloe’s.”

Where she’d demand some answers out of this man, answers that had more to do with him and her than this case. She wouldn’t let confusion and

assumption stand between them, not when she'd almost lost him. Lara had no intention of letting anyone have Noah. Not Cecilia, Finn, Mike, or Bill.

No, this man belonged to her and her alone.

* * *

He watched the group leave through a narrow crack in the door, titillated at the thought of their plans to take him down. They had no idea what they were up against. He'd killed before, and he'd kill again. The run-in with First had been a test. So easy, so very simple to protest his innocence and then disappear. First looked little the worse for wear, which he'd soon amend. But not before he had a taste of Cecilia. He'd waited long enough.

He rubbed his aching cock. It had been too long since he'd had a woman. He needed Cecilia, and he needed her now. He turned from the stairwell door and had gone a few steps toward the basement when he heard the door open.

"Hey. What are you doing in here? I think Deputy Peters is looking for you." His girlfriend smiled at him. She had dark hair and blue eyes, but

when he closed his own, he could pretend well enough.

He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the switchblade. He'd intended to wait, but he needed a fix. Turning around, he walked back up the steps to meet her. He reached around her and closed the stairwell door. Tugging her with him down the steps, he didn't need to cover her lips. She knew well the value of discretion.

He whispered in her ear, "You won't believe this, but I found out who murdered that girl they found a few days ago, and it's someone no one would suspect."

Her eyes widened. "Really? Who?"

"One of our own. A civil servant. Ironical, huh?" He pulled her down the rest of the steps, and they stopped under the basement stairwell, where the dim light barely reached. A favorite trysting spot they'd used before.

"Is it Deputy Peters?" She tilted her neck to give him better access. He sucked hard and unbuttoned the front of her white shirt, exposing the swell of her breast confined by a plain bra. The white

bothered him. He wanted to see scarlet silk, not serviceable cotton.

“No. Not him.” Thoughts of what he intended to do excited him.

“You’re so hard.” Taken by his arousal, she rubbed against him, enflaming his desire. “But if it’s not Peters, who—”

“I said it’s someone no one would suspect.” Awash in his pending orgasm, he raised his hands to her neck and squeezed. Not playfully, the way they normally did, but with the intent to kill. He breathed in her terror and tightened the pressure, ensuring she didn’t have enough oxygen to cry out. “Our murderer? Sugar, it’s me.”

Chapter Ten

Noah felt like shit. He didn't want to admit it, but he felt a bit groggy from the painkiller they'd shot into him at the hospital. The drive to Chloe's hotel was little more than a blur, but at this point, he didn't care. He sat up in bed, his back against the headboard with Lara by his side. The woman got prettier every time he looked at her. It was all he could do to remember they had a crowd. The bed was so soft and Lara so close...

Chloe sighed. "Noah, pay attention."

Frank chuckled. "I'd say he is."

Noah flushed and shifted, wondering how the hell Frank could know he had a hard-on through the jeans covering his crotch. He couldn't help his constant need for Lara. But having Frank point it out to everyone in the fucking room didn't help. "Asshole."

Frank snickered, and Chloe laughed despite

the flush on her cheeks.

Lara didn't smile. "Talk, Noah. What happened in the library that led to that?" She pointed at his arm. At least she didn't frown at his bruised side any more, since one of the guys at the hospital had offered him a scrub top to wear.

Noah took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I keep thinking the past is repeating itself. Cecilia's been bugging me about it too."

Chloe tilted her head. "So you're hearing her now? Not like in a scene from the past?"

"No, it's definitely the present. Like what Lara hears, I think. Her voices aren't like yours, Chloe. Lara hears the dead."

"She hears dead people," Frank whispered in an overly dramatic voice before he laughed. "Come on, that movie has already been done."

"That was sees dead people, moron." Chloe shook her head. "So what's your take on all this?" she asked Noah.

"Wait, she hears them for real?"

Everyone ignored Frank.

Noah nodded. "I think it's happening again. Finn's brother killed Finn and Cecilia."

Frank recovered quickly. He looked at Chloe. "You know why I'm such a good forger? Because I identify and copy patterns. Ever since I arrived in this one-horse town, something's been bothering me about Finn's and Cecilia's deaths. They started a pattern that's ongoing. You know about Mike's and Bill's mothers dying, right?"

Noah started. "You know about that?"

"Hey, when I find a new town, I learn as much about that town's law enforcement as possible." He paused. "What? It makes sense. I'm a safety-conscious guy."

"Yeah, it makes sense if you're a criminal." Chloe ignored the finger he shot her. "So their mothers dying? What about it?" she prodded Frank.

"Finn and Cecilia died mysteriously. Hundreds of years later, the Knowles sisters died in a weird fire. And what do you know, they're the descendants of Cecilia Fine and Finnegan Fury, who, believe it or not, had a kid they kept a secret. That kid turned out

to be a girl, raised by Michael Fury. The girl then married Barnaby Knowles.”

Lara stared. “How do you know all that?”

“Ida Knowles and I became fast friends days after I started working for her. She tells me things. You wouldn’t believe all the info I have on the people in this town.” Frank preened. “After Noah arrived, I went back to her to ask about Cecilia and Finn.”

Noah swore. “Shit, Frank. That would have been nice to know before. What the fuck else haven’t you told us?”

Frank frowned. “Hey, I’ve been digging a lot of this up since you got here. The stuff about the fire I already knew, but when you added another layer to the pattern, I had to get more data to better understand what we’re dealing with.”

A reminder that he’d seen himself as Cecilia’s killer struck him. “Explain.”

“Well, back in 1856, stories say how a stranger rode into town, and the next day they found a girl dead. Then a few days later, Finn and Cecilia died. Before the Knowles sisters died, the authorities

found a dead girl in a culvert near the old industrial section. They blamed it on a stranger folks saw passing through. Now here we are. You ride into town, and we have a dead girl."

Chloe sat in a chair across from the bed. "Oh boy."

"Damn, Frank." Noah glanced around the room. "You're all going to love what I saw in the library." Resigned to telling the truth, even if he did alienate Lara, Noah had to put her safety before his feelings. "I saw Finn's brother and Finn in a fight. Michael Fury was shot. He vowed to have Cecilia, Finn's *whore*—his words, not mine. Then he shot the doctor who stitched him up." He studied Lara, seeing in her his future if they could make it out of this in one piece. "But at the end, I saw Michael's face, and he was me."

Lara blinked. "No way. You're Finn."

Frank shook his head. "Lara, I think it's time for you to go. Get away from all this. Let's get you out of town and keep you safe until we figure out what this means."

"I have to agree with Frank." Much as it killed

him to think of no longer spending time with her.

“No, no. We’ve got interference.” Chloe shushed them when they started asking questions. While they waited for her to explain, Noah reached for Lara’s hand, pleased when she gripped his tight.

Lara smiled at him. “I trust you, Noah.”

Despite everything, all the strange coincidences, Cecilia’s warnings, and his own revelations. The woman *trusted* him. The remaining wall shielding his heart crumbled and fell at her feet. “Baby, I wanted to tell you this last night. You don’t know how I—”

“It’s got to be Finnegan Fury’s brother,” Chloe interrupted. “He’s interfering in this because you’re close to breaking the pattern. He’s here, like Cecilia and Finn still are. Their energy won’t leave, not until we stop this from happening again.”

“So we’re dealing with not one, but three ghosts. Christ, I can’t believe I just said that.” Frank rubbed his forehead and started pacing. “Cecilia, Finn, and dear brother Michael. But which one of them wants Lara dead?”

Lara spoke. "Cecilia warned me earlier. *Beware the jealous lover.* Cecilia had a lot of men, but from what Noah said, it sounds like Michael Fury was the jealous lover."

Frank stopped in his tracks. "So Finn really didn't kill her after all. Mike did and got away with it."

"Perfect. Now what do we do with what we know?" Chloe asked.

"I don't know about you guys, but I need a rest." Noah sighed. "I'm finding it hard to concentrate." *On more than Lara's sexy body so close to mine.* "Lara, go with Frank and Chloe. Don't leave her alone for a minute," he warned them.

"No. I'm staying right here."

"No, you're not." Noah glared. Until he knew for certain he couldn't be the cause of her harm, he didn't want her around him.

"Yes, I am."

Chloe cleared her throat. "Need I remind you this is *my* room?"

Noah and Lara stared at one another, neither breaking eye contact.

Chloe muttered something under her breath.
“Fine. Come on, Ian.”

“It’s Frank now, dammit.”

“Frank. You and I have some work to do. Let’s leave the lovebirds while we find Mike Buckman and see what’s he’s really been up to.”

Frank scowled. “But Noah—”

“He won’t harm a hair on her head, trust me. Noah’s not built that way.” She dragged Frank out the door with her and slammed it behind them.

Leaving him and Lara all alone. *Finally.*

He couldn’t believe he’d almost blurted out loud that he loved her. Noah started to sweat, needing to tell her but feeling as if he’d just had a narrow escape. What if she didn’t feel the same way? The woman was no one’s fool. They’d hadn’t known each other very long. Embroiled in an unsolved murder and possibly targeted by a killer, Lara wouldn’t be receptive to hearing his emotional crap now, would she? For all she knew, he was behind everything. He’d arrived in her life, bringing her nothing but trouble.

Yet she'd said she trusted him.

He didn't know how to put into words how much her faith meant. His mother had never seen him as anything more than a burden and a freak. He didn't know his father. The one woman he'd tried to share his life with had freaked out when she'd learned of his ability. In hindsight, his method of proof had sucked. Reciting the list of other lovers Deirdre had fucked, and exactly what she'd done with them, hadn't been smart, but she'd refused to believe him. When the truth finally sank in, she'd broken a heavy-ass vase on his head and shoved him out the door. The scar remained, though the pain of her distrust had faded in time, if not the memory.

He touched the bandage over his left brow, conscious the wound lay right over his scar.

Lara scooted closer to him. Carefully easing herself over his middle, she straddled him and stared at his head. "Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore." He wondered at this chance he'd been given. Lara knew about him, and she didn't seem to mind about his ability. Like him, she had her own demons to bear. "Lara?"

“┐” She swallowed hard. “I... Do you like it here?”

He blinked. “In the hotel?”

“No, I mean Brownville.”

“I guess. It’s an okay town when the ghosts aren’t scaring people. The library is going to be one popular place for a while. And hey, the Lady Fine Inn has the best porn in town,” he joked, still a little loopy on the pain meds. If he let himself, he could see the outlines of some sexual escapades against the wall across the bed.

Lara didn’t seem amused.

He blinked away the vision. “I’m just kidding, honey. I really do like your place. ┐”

She cut him off by kissing him. The kiss started out soft, sweet. Her breath washed over him like a cottony dream. And then she pushed her tongue between his lips.

He groaned and tried to hold her when she gently pushed him back.

“No, let me.”

Giving in because he was too tired to argue, his body nevertheless responded to her touch.

“You just rest and let me help you feel better.” She lifted the scrub top from his torso, carefully pulling it over his injuries. Then she scooted down and removed his shoes and socks. When she leaned over him to unbutton his jeans, her fingers brushed over that insistent part of him wanting more.

She pulled his jeans over his hips and soon followed with his underwear. She managed to get him naked with little effort but didn't undress herself.

“Lara?” he sounded drowsy, but as much of his lassitude was from the pleasure leeching his will as from the drugs. “Baby, let me see you naked.”

She removed her top and jeans, leaving her in a lacy confection of silk barely covering her breasts and pussy.

“You're so fuckin' pretty.”

She flushed, and he loved this shyness so at odds with her aggressiveness. It took her way too long to remove her bra, and by the time it came off, he ached to thrust inside her.

“Now the panties.”

Toying with the silken waistband, she slowly rolled the garment down her hips to pool at the floor. Lara Graham, a wet dream come to life.

“Lara, please. Come over here and sit on me.”

“No more talking. Lay back and relax. Noah, let me help you.”

He nodded, then groaned when she swallowed his cock. Hot and wet, her mouth tightened around him, stroking up and down as her tongue danced along his shaft. She cupped his balls, rubbing them with tender hands while her lips worked their magic.

He had a hard time breathing when she firmed her grasp on his sac before gripping the base of his cock.

“Yeah, Lara. Damn, that’s good.”

She glanced up at him, bent low with her ass in the air, and sucked hard.

He caught his breath. “I’m going to come if you keep that up.” He groaned and stroked her soft hair, the ends curling around her shoulders and grazing his hips. “You’re so sweet. So fucking fine.”

She stroked his thighs, careful of the bruising along his left side that complemented his torso and arm. His entire body radiated a hungry tension, but one that felt surreal, too perfect to be true. The drugs couldn't make him feel this good. Only Lara. Pleasure built at the base of his spine, tingled in his balls, and radiated from the center of his body, obliterating the pain from his injuries as if they'd never happened.

"Please, baby. Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

She stroked him all over with her hands, giving him the tenderness he'd never had before. And all the while, she kissed, licked, and sucked him to heaven. When she concentrated the focus of her hands on his hips and ass, her wicked fingers danced closer and closer to his anus. A fingertip rimmed him, and she sucked even harder.

Then her tongue stroked the sweet spot just under his cockhead. He saw stars. The pressure to come flowed from his balls up his shaft. The little witch sucked harder and penetrated his ass with her finger, and he erupted, jetting inside her mouth.

"Yes, yes, baby. Fuck, yes." He couldn't help

holding her hair, petting her as she sucked what little of his sense remained. "I love you, Lara. God, you're perfect."

She didn't respond, but he didn't expect her to. Instead he drifted into a perfect place. Surrounded by warmth, comfort, and the woman he never wanted to leave his side.

Lara let him drop from her mouth, saturated with his taste and the feel of him under her palms. Noah had slurred something that sounded a lot like the word *love* before passing out. Between the drugs he'd been forced to take and that blowjob, the man looked like he'd been given the golden ring. He smiled as he slept.

Had he really said he loved her, or had he said he loved *it*, as in, her mouth? She wished she knew, but she admitted either way, it didn't change how she felt about him. She loved him. The large man with intense eyes who saw what others could not. He had a deepness to him, layers beneath layers. Rough, aggressive, tender, yet caring. He wanted to

protect her first and foremost. He believed her and believed *in* her, a rarity in her world.

She'd always been a planner but now had no idea what to do with tomorrow. Her job at the inn remained the same, but everything else in her life had changed. She wanted Noah, wanted to be with him and see where this relationship could take them. But leaving the home she'd made here... Could she do it? *Should* she?

A small part of her wondered why she had to be the one to change. If Noah really did love her, why couldn't he move to town to be with her here? She grimaced. Truth be told, Brownville was a perfect little tourist town, but aside from some clever galleries, restaurants, and quaint inns, the local job market wasn't exactly thriving. And for Noah, it was a town where he'd always be on his guard with the past. Lara had a feeling she'd never be able to look at anyone after this and not think of murder and death. That poor girl had been raped and stabbed repeatedly just days ago in a town Lara used to consider safe.

Noah had mentioned Bend, Oregon, as a

place where others like them lived. Psychics who understood what it meant to be different. Sure, Brownville had temperamental artists and the odd kook blending into the diverse environment. But even here, Lara had never felt as if she truly fit in. This wouldn't be her home; she knew that now. Not because Noah would soon leave, but because she finally realized she'd been looking in all the wrong places for what she wanted.

Acceptance, love, belonging.

A glance at Noah made her feel warm inside. Right now, at least for the foreseeable future, Noah was home. Maybe with his help, she could understand more about the world around her and come to accept her differences, not as a freakish mutation, but as something better.

She yawned, knowing she needed to get back to the inn but unable to muster the energy. After staying up so late last night, then getting up early, she'd just about exhausted her reserves. Frank and Chloe would have to take care of things. And Shelly too, if the blasted girl ever showed up for work again.

Lara visited the bathroom, then checked the

lock on the hotel door and secured the deadbolt. After making a quick call to Frank to let him know she had no intention of leaving Noah's side, she settled next to the big guy and snuggled close to him. In moments, she fell into a deep sleep.

She couldn't have said how much time had passed when warmth curled in her womb. Her breasts, her belly, her thighs. She blinked her eyes open. Noah lay between her legs and fondled her, his eyes intent on what he was doing.

He flashed her a sinful grin "Good. You're awake."

"What are you doing?" Darkness wreathed the room. "What time is it?"

"It's evening. Frank and Chloe brought us a change of clothes, and Frank's been working at the inn. No sigh of Buckman yet, but Chloe's still looking." He kissed her clit and licked it while keeping his gaze on her. "What you did for me before was incredible. Now it's my turn."

"Oh?" She gasped, finding it hard to keep still when he licked her again.

“Yeah. I need to remind you who’s in charge. With or without the busted arm, I’m still calling the shots, sweetheart.”

She tried to twist her hips but couldn’t with his weight pinning her down.

“No, no. You stay right here while I have dessert.”

His mouth took her, consumed her. His lips and tongue, a hint of his teeth, and she teetered on the edge of all-consuming pleasure. She couldn’t deny the connection between them, not even if she’d wanted to.

“Please, Noah.”

He groaned and sucked her harder before letting her go. He leaned up and straddled her waist, showing off his thick length. “This time you’re all mine. Remember the plug, Lara?” He gripped himself with his good hand. “I’m a little bigger than the plug. Time to show me how much you want it.”

Her mouth went dry, and she ached between her legs. Moisture pooled, a need for Noah and nothing else. The forbidden pleasure of the plug

would be nothing compared to the discomfort of Noah's thick cock up her ass. So why was she so excited for him to claim her there?

"You want it, don't you? Like Cecilia, you need a man deep inside you," he taunted, his eyes dark.

"Not any man. You." She ran a bold hand up his tightly corded stomach. "I want you to take me."

"To fuck you."

Wicked heat flushed her face, her breasts, and lower.

"Say it, Lara. You want me to fuck you."

"I want you to fuck me. Please."

"I don't have anything with me. I'm going to have to use you to lube me up. That wet pussy will make me nice and slick. We'll take it slow. I want to watch you while I fill your narrow little ass." He sounded so mean, so dominant.

She creamed even more.

Noah carefully lowered himself to rest on his elbows and winced.

"Your wrist—"

“Is fine. You think I’m too weak to handle you? Trying to goad me, beautiful? Trying to take charge again?” He lay flush against her.

Expecting him to prod her thighs apart, she started when he took her nipple in his mouth and bit down.

She cried out, and he sucked the sting away. Like before, the pain and pleasure mixed, heightening her responses. He groaned and did it again, nipping her with love bites across her chest.

“I love your tits. So full.” He sucked her other nipple hard, pulling and twisting until she couldn’t contain her gasp. “That’s it. Open for me.” He stuck his uninjured hand between their bodies and stroked her wet clit. “You’re soaked. That’s good, baby.”

His breath sounded as choppy and rough as hers. The hot length of him felt impossibly hard against her belly. In anticipation of him inside her once more, she spread her legs.

“That’s it. Wider. Yeah.” Noah shifted and pushed inside her pussy. All of him driving deep. He fucked her, pounding with heavier strokes until she forgot all about him taking her ass. He stretched her,

completed her, made her feel as though she'd finally found the man who could handle her desire.

Before she could climax, he withdrew.

"Dammit, Noah," she moaned.

"Prop that pillow under you." He panted. "Now."

She pulled it under her hips, giving him better access, and bent her knees. Then she waited while he took himself in hand and positioned himself at her hole. He sat there a moment, just looking into her eyes. Then he penetrated her slowly, not stopping as he conquered her inch by inch.

"Push out, that's it." He kept going. "I love you, Lara. All of you."

The emotion in his eyes as he took her promised what she'd been craving her whole life.

"I belong with you." She meant it, every word. "I love you, Noah."

He groaned and seated the entirety of himself inside her. His balls rested against her ass, the fullness so overwhelming, she could do nothing but feel.

"You're mine. Always." He pulled out with care,

then slid back inside her again. The agony on his face as he loved her shoved her need into overdrive. "Touch yourself while I fuck you. Do it. Come with me, and fast. I'm not going to last inside you. You're so incredibly tight."

Like a piston, his hips moved in and out, building greater speed. The slap of his balls against her added to the intensity. His gaze never left her face until she fingered herself, then his thrusts turned jerky.

"Oh fuck. I need to come. Come with me now, Lara. Baby, do it," he ordered through gritted teeth.

He didn't need to demand what her body intended all along. She spasmed and clenched hard, feeling empty yet full as he pounded into her ass. The climax eased her, tying her closer to the man she couldn't stop touching.

He tensed and shuddered, moaning her name. She held him around the waist, needing more time, more Noah, before the rest of the world intruded.

"Oh yeah." He sighed and gently withdrew.

She winced, suddenly feeling his girth, when

before she'd been too aroused to notice the pain. "That's going to burn."

He smiled, the dimple there in his cheek. "But in a good way, right?"

"Yeah." She groaned. "I don't want to move ever again." But she needed to, because he'd made a mess inside her. "I have to get to the bathroom."

"No problem." He rose and tugged her to her feet using his good arm. After walking her to the bathroom, he waited outside. "Hurry up, because I need you again."

She shut the door. When she'd finished, she let him back in and nudged him into the shower. She turned on the hot water and stepped inside with him. "I don't think you're supposed to take that bandage off for a while. You shouldn't get it wet either."

"Yes, ma'am."

She poked him in the stomach. "Smart-ass. I guess you'll just have to keep your arm out of the water and let me wash you."

His start of surprise turned into a devilish grin. Had she ever seen him smile so much? Her

heart lay completely at his feet. "I'd better be careful not to make you too happy. I don't want other women looking at you."

He gave her a mock frown. "So I'm not handsome when I'm frowning?"

"No, you're just mean. And hot. But when you smile, God, I can't look away." To her shock, he flushed, and she laughed. "Shy, Noah?"

"Cut it out." He tried to grab the soap, but she wouldn't let him.

"Uh-uh. Now hold still and let me clean you up." She paid careful attention to his injuries, not happy when he hissed under the hot water and soap. Wanting to give him time to recuperate, she massaged his muscles with her soapy hands, content when he sighed his pleasure. Finally, she shifted her attention to his mouthwatering cock. She needed him nice and clean for what she had in mind.

Her ministrations aroused in him in no time.

"Remember, I'm injured," he feebly protested when she dropped to her knees. A glance at him showed a sparkle in his eyes. "I can't use my hand."

“You don’t need to. And neither do I.” She opened her mouth and took him in. Absorbing the scent and taste of him while water sluiced down his solid frame.

“Oh yeah,” he rasped. “You’re definitely in charge.”

Chapter Eleven

They returned to the inn the next morning holding hands. Lara wanted everyone to see how she felt about Noah, and he apparently felt the same. He'd glared at no less than half a dozen men as they left a small cantina and walked to the inn.

It both embarrassed and pleased her. "Come on, Noah. They're guys I know from town. Friends, nothing more."

"I'm feeling a little possessive. And besides, that last guy couldn't seem to look anywhere but at your breasts."

"That would be Ned." She shrugged. "What can I say? He's just like you, only I don't love him."

Satisfaction filled his eyes. "Damn right you don't. You're—"

"Mine," she finished for him. "You've only said it every other minute. But don't forget, it goes both ways." She scowled at one of Shelly's friends

standing by the mailbox. "She seems to find you just a little too interesting."

Noah squeezed her fingers. "I like this side of you. Why don't you go on over there and tackle her, Lara. You think maybe you and she could wrestle for me? Add a little mud or some oil, and we'll have a real party."

"Jerk."

He laughed, and several people turned to look at them as they entered the inn.

"Seeing Shelly's friend reminds me... I think it's time I found the girl and had a heart-to-heart with her."

Frank walked up to her and pulled her free hand, tugging her, and by extension, Noah, back down the hall to her office. He looked harassed, and she felt awful. While she'd been having the time of her life with Noah, Frank had been back here holding down the fort. Alone, by the looks of him.

Lara apologized. "Frank, I'm sorry. I should have been here for breakfast, but..."

"I handed out complimentary passes to the

diner on the corner. Don't worry; no one went hungry this morning. Unfortunately, we have bigger problems to deal with than a missed meal." Frank didn't look as if he'd slept last night. His clothes appeared rumpled, his hair loose around his shoulders, and shadows dragged below his eyes.

"Frank?"

Noah tugged, forcing her and Frank to stop with him. "Where's Chloe?"

Frank let go of Lara and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know. She grabbed a set of sheets from me and locked herself in your room last night." Frank didn't tease or crack a smile, and Lara knew they had problems. "But I haven't seen her since eleven. And I'm worried." He glanced from Noah to Lara and back. "Noah, one of the nurses at the hospital where they stitched you up yesterday... She was found dead in the hospital stairwell. Raped and murdered like the other girl, except whoever killed her sliced her throat open this time as well."

"Dear God." Lara grabbed her own throat.

Frank blinked, and she swore she saw a sheen of tears in his eyes. "It gets worse. They also found

Shelly. Her body had been dumped in the same place they found the first victim a few days ago. She looked exactly the same. Now there's talk of a serial killer in Brownville."

"Shelly?" Lara whispered. The girl had been a nuisance, but also a fun-loving young woman who'd needed time to mature into a responsible adult. She couldn't help the tears that trickled down her cheeks. "Poor Shelly."

Noah dropped her hand and gave her a hug. "No sign of Buckman?"

Frank shook his head. "Funny thing, though. No one's seen Bill Knowles either. I checked around, discreetly. Even staked out both their places with some friends of mine in need of some cash. Mike's apartment is vacant, and no one's seen Bill or his truck around his place either. Both of them have disappeared."

Noah's lips thinned. "And so has Chloe. Shit." He dropped his arm from Lara's shoulders and nodded to her room.

They all entered and closed the door behind

them.

“There’s one more thing.” Frank put his hand in his pocket and retrieved something he dropped into Noah’s palm. “I found these on the bed in your room when I went looking for Chloe this morning.”

In the center of Noah’s large hand lay a pair of rose-shaped earrings.

Lara’s stomach rebelled. Fear became a huge knot inside her. “The killer has Chloe.”

“We’ll find her.” Noah let out a deep breath. “Just keep quiet a minute. I need to see something.”

He closed his eyes as if going to sleep. But Noah never looked so intense while resting, not that she’d seen. She felt a heavy sense of psychic energy, and then Cecilia appeared in the far corner of her room.

“Holy shit,” Frank whispered. “Him too?”

She noticed a man, Finnegan Fury, she assumed, standing close behind Cecilia. He had his hand on her shoulder, a look of possession and warning on his face.

“Beware the jealous lover,” Cecilia whispered.

Did the damn woman say nothing else? “Michael Fury. We know it’s him. What we don’t know is where to find him.”

Finn frowned. “The woman. She’s there.”

“Where?” Frank asked and took a step back when Finn drew his pistol, pointed it to the right of Frank’s head, and fired.

Not a sound could be heard, but as Lara followed the trajectory of the bullet, an image took shape where it hit the wall. An old house, whitewashed with age. The black dormers on the upper windows looked worn, but the grounds had been maintained. A line of rose bushes, no longer in bloom but prickled with thorns, surrounded the perimeter of the house.

“I think I know that place,” Frank said as he gaped at Finn and Cecilia, the pair fading once again.

“Hurry, before it’s too late,” Cecilia cried. Then nothing.

The house wouldn’t leave her mind. And something clicked. “This town isn’t that big. I know

every house around her, but not all the ones on the periphery of town. Except I know that one. I've only been there once, but those dormers and those roses—that's Ida Knowles's old place."

* * *

Noah saw clouds over a large white house brimming with a dark energy. The multitude of roses surrounding the home bespoke of an avid gardener. In full bloom, the bloodred petals were a sight to behold. But it was the pall of death over the house that warned him to be wary.

He glanced up, and in the distance, a boom of thunder and crackle of lightning blazed. Storm clouds brewed, and he hurried up a small flight of steps onto the covered porch. A low hum, a familiar tune he'd heard once before, filled his mind. The soft creaks of a bed squeaking were followed by overloud drips, as if somewhere inside, a faucet leaked.

A figure breezed by him, a large man moving too quickly to be identified. Noah followed him up the stairs, past the second floor to the attic. Through the doorway, up wooden stairs into a room filled with

candles. At least a hundred of them surrounded a dead woman draped in red satin. She had dark hair and earrings Noah would bet were shaped like roses.

In his hand, the man held a stained switchblade covered in blood.

“Useless whore. Not good enough for me. Never good enough. Not when you want *him* all the time.”

The woman stared sightlessly at the ceiling, her eyes missing from her head.

Not what he'd expected. That didn't fit the killer's current pattern.

“Time for you to go before Aunt Ida comes back. She doesn't understand what I need.” He ended on a bitter note, “She never did.”

Noah tried like hell to see the man's face. As much as he didn't want to see himself as a murderer again, he knew for a fact he'd never done this. No portent of doom, this scene had happened not too long ago.

Piercing the truth and drawing on his need to

protect Lara, he focused like his life depended on it. The fog slowly lifted...

And he stared into Lara's big brown eyes, wide with concern.

"Dammit." He fumed. He'd been so close. He knew that man, had talked with him once or twice before. He could feel it.

"You okay?" Frank frowned. "You were getting kind of pale there. And well, we need to go."

"Go where?" He shook his head to come fully back to the present.

Lara answered. "To Ida Knowles's house. Cecilia and Finn sent us a warning. Michael Fury has Chloe, and we think he has her there."

"Then let's go." Noah wished he had one of those more aggressive psychic skills. The ability to move things with his mind, to start fires, or to manipulate people would definitely come in handy right now. But barring that, he'd have to make do with himself and Frank. "Lara, you stay here."

"I'm not hearing you. Frank, let's go." She tried to shove Noah out the door, but he wouldn't budge.

“I’m not kidding.”

“Neither am I.” She sighed. “It’s not like I want to walk into danger, but Chloe came here to help. If this guy is fixated on me, we can use me as a distraction.”

He scowled. “Hell, no.”

“Noah, please. I need to do this. We have to break this cycle. I trust you to protect me.”

Of all the arguments she might have made, that one resonated with him. “If anything happens to you...”

Frank hissed out a breath. “Can you two argue about it in the car? We need to get moving. Not that Chloe’s my favorite person or anything, but I have a really bad feeling about her being gone this long, not to mention two fucking ghosts who told us to get a move on. Let’s go.”

Noah shared a glance with Lara. “Bossy, isn’t he?”

She gave him a weak grin. “That’s Frank. Normally easygoing, but once he sets his mind on something, he’s a real pain in the ass.”

"I heard that," Frank said from the hallway outside. He popped his head back in. "Come on, people. One short, mouthy ex-cop with attitude is in trouble. She told me if anything happens to her, my name goes to the top of her friends' hit list. So move it!"

* * *

Chloe groaned. Her head felt like it would split in two, and she couldn't wait to pay the bastard back for tricking her. How much of a sucker was she to get played by a phone call, of all things? It had led her here, to this rambling house and an old lady with a real mouth on her. "Lara needs my help, my ass. And by the way, your aunt is a bitch."

He chuckled, and she realized he'd been standing in the shadows all along. The room she sat in, tied to a chair, was dark, lit only by the candles surrounding her. Wax dripped everywhere, a fire hazard just begging to be set in motion. Chloe glanced to her left and saw Jack's damn painting—right next to more of those stupid candles—and realized she was Mr. Murderer's new toy.

“Come on, already. Step into the shadows so I can see your face. Is it Bill or Michael?”

“Very good. You’re as smart as you are pretty.” He stepped away from the wall, wearing a cowboy hat that hid his features. He wouldn’t get close enough for her to see him, and from the little she’d seen of Mike Buckman and Bill Knowles, they might as well have been twins except for the hair. Which of course, she couldn’t see, because of the hat.

“We going to sit here all day or what?”

“Now, now. I’ll get to you, but not until Cecilia returns. I’ve been waiting a long time to find her again.” His voice deepened as he spoke, the casual rhythm of his tone turning twangy, into a drawl that gave her the shivers. Christ, it was like someone else spoke using this guy’s mouth. Was he psychotic, or was he really possessed by Michael Fury?

“What’s your name?”

“In due time, sugar. Just hold that thought.”

She struggled to loosen the rope holding her to the chair when he neared. A pinch in her neck

distracted her, especially when she felt him depress the plunger. By the time he stepped away from her, she saw double. "Shit."

That's when he tipped back his hat, and she finally saw his face.

* * *

Noah didn't like this at all, but he knew Lara had to be with them. It had been about her from the start. Cecilia had dragged Lara's ass into this, and now he had to get her out. They parked a good quarter mile from Ida Knowles's house and walked the rest of the way. To their good fortune, she lived in an area boxed in by a row of pines tall enough to block most of their approach, but the fifty or so feet from the tree line to the house lay open.

As one, Noah, Lara, and Frank stopped and crouched, still hidden inside the surrounding copse, and studied the house. Frank dropped the backpack he'd been carrying and dug inside. He withdrew a gun and two large knives.

"Frank," Lara whispered, her eyes wide. "Where did you get a gun?"

“Standard issue,” Noah remarked, studying the Sig Sauer P220. “Interesting they let you keep it.”

“Yeah, real interesting. Here. You’ll probably get a lot more use out of this than I will.” Frank handed Noah one of the knives. “You’re big enough to take on Mike or Bill.”

Noah nodded. On the drive over, they’d agreed. Lara would stay with Frank, which made sense now that Frank had a gun. He’d been PWP, so he knew how to use one. Noah had never cared for the weapons, preferring a knife or blunt instrument over projectile weapons. He never trusted them not to go off, especially since he’d seen so many accidents with guns in the past.

Lara blinked. “Oh man. There’s Mike’s SUV.”

Noah and Frank moved closer to her, peering with her at the vehicle parked at the side of the house. What he hadn’t considered was that Mike might be in the woods and not in the house with Chloe.

“Hands up. Now.” The cock of a pistol behind him, in addition to the gravelly voice, froze all three of

them. Noah braced a hand on Lara's shoulder to keep her from rising too quickly. He didn't jerk but rose to his feet and turned around, keeping himself between Mike Buckman and Lara.

Buckman looked haggard, but his hand remained steady on the gun he aimed right at them. "Lara, come here. Step away from those two."

"Don't move," Noah countered. To Buckman, he held up his hands and asked, "Why? Why kill those girls? Why Shelly, of all people? I thought you liked her, at least."

Mike blinked, and Noah swore his eyes shone with tears. Then he scowled, his rage black enough to scorch the trees around them. "Motherfucker. What kind of game are you playing? You think you can come down here and start this kind of evil, and the law won't catch you? You might have pulled Frank into this—who doesn't exist, by the way. Your buddy there, Lara, isn't who he says he is."

"I paid a fortune for that identity," Frank muttered. "Crummy work these days. Knew I should have done it myself."

"Frank, shut up." Noah gritted his teeth.

Something wasn't right here. "I'm not playing any games, Mike. Michael Fury, right? Finn's brother? You're after Cecilia. But you're not going to get her."

Mike frowned. "What the hell are you talking about? You on drugs?" His eyes narrowed. "Makes sense. But don't think to use it at your defense. Nobody'll give a fuck what you're hopped up on. You killed Becky Sauder, you piece of shit. And Shelly... That girl never hurt a soul. You're going to jail, on your own two feet or in a body bag, I don't really care."

Lara darted out from under his hand and stepped in front of Noah.

"Lara, *don't*." He tried to pull her back, but Mike fired at his feet.

Frank jumped. "Shit."

"Toss the gun," Mike ordered, "before I shoot you."

"Gun?"

"I'm gonna count to three."

Frank held up his hands. "Okay, okay. Wait." He reached behind his back, where he'd stashed it,

apparently.

“Slow.” Mike nodded. “Now toss it over here.”

“Mike, wait. You’re making a mistake.” Lara took a step toward him, and to Noah’s vast relief, Mike didn’t threaten her.

Noah suddenly realized they’d been after the wrong Mike. “Uh-oh.”

“Yeah.” Lara swallowed loudly enough that he heard. “Mike, we’re not the bad guys. Bill is.”

Mike snorted. “Try pulling my other leg. I know you had a thing with First, honey, but he’s dangerous.”

“To anyone trying to hurt me, yes.” Lara squeezed his hand and took another step closer to Mike. “We narrowed down our suspects to two. You and Bill. Both of you are connected to death. Your mothers, those many years ago. And then the girl they found a few days ago. You said Bill was seeing someone a few towns over, right?”

Mike frowned. “Yeah.”

“And Shelly. Bill was seeing her too, you said. You know they found a nurse dead in the hospital this

morning. He's out of control, Mike. And he's coming after me."

Mike faltered. "I didn't know who he'd been dating, but yeah, it was someone outside of town. And Shelly."

"Where have you been?" Noah asked.

"The fucking department targeted me as the villain here. I thought you were setting me up, but come to think of it, Bill was the one who'd been nearby whenever something weird happened. Hitting you was a major accident. Seriously."

Mike started to lower the gun, but when Noah shifted his feet, the deputy brought it back up again. "Hold on. Let me think."

Frank said softly, "Mike, I overheard Peters say that Bill Knowles never offered to help watch over Noah while you went for help. He lied, Mike. And the reason you couldn't get anyone to help was that they were all on a call, a tip from an anonymous source. Someone had called in that they found Shelly's body."

Mike paused a moment, then finally lowered

his gun. He swore up and down, but Noah didn't have time to wait for him to catch up anymore.

"Look, Buckman, Chloe's missing, and Bill's got her somewhere. We think she's in that house. We have to get to her before he does to her what he did to the others."

Mike shook his head. "Just... Wait. The nurse, I hadn't heard about that. Was it Suzanne Bond?"

"Yeah," Frank answered. "Just like the others. He likes to take his time."

The wait was killing him. Noah turned back to face the house.

Mike cursed. "Fuck. I caught him and Suzanne making out the other night. Right at the same time Shelly saw them and made a big scene. Happened outside Shelly's apartment building. Oh man."

"We don't have time for this. Bill probably heard the shot. We have to move fast. But at least we can use you with us." Noah formed a plan. Buckman and he could lead the charge while Frank stayed tight with Lara.

Another shot rang out. Noah spun around. This

time Mike Buckman had been the target. He groaned and clutched his belly.

“Gut wound hurts like a bitch, don’t it?” Bill asked in a strange voice. The man’s glittering gaze met Noah’s, and he frowned. “You ain’t Finn.” He looked from Frank to Mike and then settled on Lara. “But Cecilia. I’d know you anywhere, darlin’.”

Lara trembled and took a step back.

“Uh-uh. You don’t want me to shoot all of ’em right now, do you?”

“N-no.” Lara glanced at Noah. “No, Michael. I don’t.”

Bill’s grin widened. “I said to myself, she’ll know me when the time is right. And hey, the time is right. You remember, huh?”

Lara lifted her head, and a calm seemed to overcome her. *Fuck. Please tell me she’s acting, and that’s not Cecilia possessing her.*

“Now Michael. I remember a lot of things. Remember how we used to play together in my room at the saloon? How I’d drop to my knees for you? How I’d touch you just right?”

Bill's joy was tangible. "Hot damn. I've been waiting years for you. Making do with the others until you'd come back to me." Tears filled his eyes. Until his gaze settled on Noah. "But I guess you wasn't waitin' on me, were you?" He raised the gun again, and Lara rushed to him.

Noah used the distraction to step away from Lara, not wanting her to be between him and Bill's aim. Frank must have thought the same, because he darted back and raced into the trees.

Bill swore and shot several rounds into the woods. Noah used the distraction to launch himself at Bill. But to his shock, a force prevented him from moving. Frozen in place, Noah fought against invisible hands while the ghostly essence of Michael Fury snarled with cruel laughter. Handling Bill was bad enough, but now they had two foes to conquer. One of which they couldn't fucking touch.

Whether Bill hit Frank or not, Noah couldn't say. The gun quickly trained on him once more.

"Get your fuckin' feet movin', asshole." Bill sounded like himself again as he grabbed Lara and plastered her to his side. He pointed to the house

with the pistol. Then his voice lowered, and Noah imagined the ghost linking with the man again. "Time's come for you to die, hero. You ain't Finn, but you'll do. Come on, Cecilia. Time to teach you a much-needed lesson."

Noah shifted on his feet, aware he'd fallen into a world of trouble. Frank might bring back help, but there was no guarantee he hadn't been shot or that he'd bring back help in time. Noah would do his best to protect Lara if she'd let him. A glance over his shoulder worried him. She looked too composed for his peace of mind. Though he didn't want her screaming in fear, that look on her face didn't belong. It was too...Cecilia. And that worried him more than anything.

"Let's go, hero. One foot in front of the other. Have I got something in store for you." Bill chuckled.

Not good. Not good at all.

Chapter Twelve

Lara had faith everything would work out. She crossed her fingers and wished like hell Frank had gotten away. She could only hope Mike wouldn't bleed to death before they had a chance to help him.

Walking up the steps to the house, she followed Noah, so incredibly in love with him that it took everything she had to keep her terror under wraps. If Bill shot him, she'd kill him. She really would. One way or another, Bill—Michael—whoever inhabited that body, would pay for this.

Noah looked over his shoulder at her again, his concern obvious.

"Up the steps. All the way up." Bill aimed the gun dead center on Noah's back. He sounded nothing like the Bill she knew, and everything like a vicious *dead* cowboy.

"Tell me something," Lara murmured as they walked up the steps behind Noah. "Are you Bill, or

are you Michael? Was Bill always Michael Fury, or is he possessed?"

Bill laughed. "Honey, we're the same. I seen the ghosts a few times, Cecilia makin' eyes at me like she was pissed, but I knew better." Then his voice changed. It smoothed out, more cultured, more in the *now*. "Lara, he and I are the same. I won't say he's haunting me, but I'm him. Just like you're her."

She didn't think so, the more she pondered the idea. Cecilia had called her here, had talked to her and laughed and teased and warned. But she didn't dwell in Lara's thoughts for more than the moments she tried to get Lara's attention.

"So you're Bill, with Michael Fury's memories?"

"Curious, aren't you?" That was Bill. They stopped at the second floor. "Okay, hero, go to the end of the hall and open the door. It leads to the attic. Your little friend can't wait to see you again. What a pretty gal." He sneered, then turned to Lara with a straight face. "Don't be jealous. The others have always been play while I waited for you. You see, Lara, you're the spitting image of Cecilia, Michael's true love. He lost her years ago to his faithless

younger brother. But he set that to rights. Now it's just you and me."

He hugged her, and she forced herself to ignore the spot of blood on his collar. Oh God, where had that come from?

"I still don't understand. You're Bill Knowles, with Bill's thoughts and feelings. So Bill wants this?" She spoke slowly, not wanting to rile him with her questions. But as long as he concentrated on her, Noah remained clear of his direct attention.

Bill ended the hug and shoved her toward the stairs. He waited for her and Noah to walk up in front of him; then he stopped them at the top, and they entered the attic in a small group.

Chloe drooped, unconscious, tied to a wooden chair. She looked a little bruised but still wore all her clothes, none of them bloodstained. Her chest rose and fell evenly.

"Sit there," Bill ordered Noah and waited until Noah sat on the ground next to Chloe.

There wasn't much space for him to move, trapped on one side by Chloe and surrounded by lit

candles all around. Everything centered around the portrait Noah had come to claim.

Bill suddenly slapped Lara across the face. The sting and unexpectedness of his action stunned her. Noah yelled out and rose but stopped when Bill aimed the gun at Chloe.

“One move and she dies.” He waited for Noah to resume his seat. “You sit there and wait for your turn.” An unnatural wind ruffled the thick drapes by the attic’s lone window. Bill slid the gun along Lara’s bruised cheek but didn’t take his gaze from Noah. “Don’t talk down to me, whore. I don’t like it. Now, to answer your questions. I’m fully in my right mind. I don’t need the ghost of Michael Fury to tell me what to do. I like women, Lara. Their smell, their taste, the way they moan when they’re riding a nice hard cock.” He fitted her hand around his erection.

She wanted to gag but stayed silent, letting him have his say. *Frank, where are you?*

“But the best is watching the life leave their eyes. For just a moment, you can see that spark, that part of the soul that makes us what we are. Of course, that’s before it leaves. A rush of blood, of

cum, maybe some other nastier body fluids. Whatever's there just pours out along with that spark of life." He sighed. "Yeah, that's what I love most about women. I've had my share, but you were my biggest challenge. Michael has been with me for a long time. He helped me overcome a lot in my life, but he's not always here. I let him in sometimes." He snickered. "Hell, when we're fucking, it'll actually be like a ménage. You, me, and Michael."

He glanced at the portrait, and his features slacked. Michael had returned. "I'm so happy you're here, Cecilia. I missed you, even though you are a two-timing slut. But Finn was like that, stealing whatever was mine. His fault Mama died, you know. I didn't mean to kill her, but she asked for it. She took his side over mine. And then..."

His voice changed; Bill was back. "It happened all over again. My mother loved me, I know, but sometimes love hurts. I had to kill her. Her and her younger sister. The fire wiped them clean. And then Aunt Ida came. She knew what I'd done, but she loves me." He frowned. "I thought she did. She knew what I was doing, the women I played with. The fun

we had. She and I were in it together, forever. And then she fussed at me because of my cousin, her dear little nephew, the Keystone Cop. He's not a problem any longer though, is he?"

"And Ida?"

"She's not either." Bill's smile gave her the shivers. Nothing sane lived in that gaze. "In fact, she's lying in bed, trying to hold her intestines in. Just like Aunt Brenda died. Waiting for the flames to lick her right up." He beamed. "Now we're going to play a game. You get to pick which one of them"—he looked at Noah and Chloe—"I cut first. In fact, we're going to cut them together, just like a real couple in love, Cecilia."

Bill Knowles or Michael Fury, the man standing so close to her was a danger to them all. She had no doubt he'd kill her once he finished with the others.

"No."

Bill tensed. He withdrew a blade from his pocket and shoved the tip of it under her chin. "Don't tell me *no*. I love you. You always hurt the one you love, Cecilia." He laughed, a maniacal chuckle that convinced her she was living a nightmare.

She smiled at him with all the warmth she could muster. It threw him off balance, enough for her to back toward the stairs. He followed her, as she'd meant.

His laughter ceased. "Get the fuck over here, now." A shadow of a man appeared next to him. An image of anger, brute strength, and a helpless devotion to a woman he could never have. Michael Fury.

"Lara, listen to him," Noah ordered.

Instead of answering, she threw Michael Fury and Bill Knowles a dare. "Come and get me, sugar."

He/they growled and took another step closer.

Everything happened then in slow motion, all at once. Noah launched himself from his spot on the floor but was too far away to reach her. In doing so, he knocked a few candles over, which lit the dry floorboards on fire. Something crashed through the large attic window and got caught in the drapes blocking out the light. Lara embraced Bill when he neared her and swung them around so that his back was to the stairs. Then a ghostly shove and an

inhuman shriek knocked them both down the stairs. They tumbled down head over heels, and the gun went off.

Pain flared in her leg. Bill gripped her shirt and refused to let go, sputtering and shouting before his head hit one of the steps a little too hard. They landed in a heap at the base of the stairs, neither of them able to move.

“Get Chloe,” she heard Noah shout. “Lara.” He raced down the stairs and leaped over them. Then he pulled her to her feet and took her in his arms. “Lara. Are you okay?” He paled. “Oh shit. You’re hurt. Baby, you’re bleeding.”

Frank appeared at the top of the steps holding Chloe in a fireman’s hold over his shoulder. Behind them, Mike Buckman stood glowering.

Then Bill laughed, still curled up in a ball on the floor. Lara swore she could see a faint glow over his body, as if he moved with Michael Fury working him like a puppet. She’d swear Bill’s neck looked bent at an odd angle, yet that didn’t deter the gun in his hand. Noah spun Lara around, his body between her and death readying to fire. “Fuck y—”

"You," Deputy Mike Buckman finished as he fired into Bill's body. Five shots in a row before he stopped. "That was for my mother, you piece of shit." He lowered the gun to his side and tapped the frame of the painting against his legs with his other hand. "Party's over, folks. The attic's on fire. We need to get out of here. Noah, get Lara out. Frank, take Chloe. I'll check on Ida."

Before any of them could move, a psychic blast knocked them all back a step. Then nothing but the crackling of flames could be heard.

Noah carried her outside, far from the house, and refused to put her down. "Don't ever do that again. Christ, you scared the life out of me."

"I'm okay. We're all good," she said to reassure herself as much as him. Michael Fury had finally gone. She could feel it. A sense of ease, finally.

He leaned his forehead against her own, and she started crying.

"Baby, don't. Please. You said it. We're good now."

“He was going to kill you, Noah. And Chloe, me...”

“Shh. It’s over now. It’s all over.”

Chloe, Frank, and soon Mike met them outside.

Mike wiped away soot from his cheek. “Frank said this belongs to you.” The portrait of Cecilia Fine didn’t have a smudge on it.

“How... Mike, we saw him shoot you.” Lara couldn’t help feeling caught in the aftermath of a huge storm. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Me too.” He gave her a small smile and tapped his chest. “When all this shit went down, I knew something wasn’t right. I had the vest and put it on, knowing I was coming out here to grab the killer, or who I thought was the killer. Ever since Noah left the hospital, I’ve been keeping an eye on him.”

“Thanks.” Noah exhaled a deep breath. “I mean that.”

“Yeah.” Frank sighed. “And for the record, because I know how Chloe will distort this story later, I wasn’t running from you guys. I was waiting for an

opportunity to take Bill down. I was going to follow you into the house when I saw Mike get up. He and I used the trellis on the side of the house to climb to the attic."

Mike shook his head. "I used to play here as a kid. With Bill, if you can believe that." His eyes took on a suspiciously glassy sheen. He cleared his throat. "Shit, Lara. What was all that talk about Michael and Bill and killing? Was he that Fury guy or not?"

"I don't know. I think maybe he was always kind of crazy, but I saw Michael Fury. I heard him. We all felt him there at the end. Maybe Fury's ghost made Bill into what he was, or maybe Bill was born a killer. We'll never know."

Frank shook his head. "And Ida. What the hell, Mike? Your aunt knew about Bill killing your mom and her sister?"

Mike sighed. "I don't know. I do remember my mom wasn't that close to Ida. Only to Nancy, Bill's mom. But he killed her and my mother." Mike grew quiet. "And Ida. Now they'll all burn."

"Like history repeating itself," Frank murmured.

Noah hugged Lara tight. "Not exactly, Frank. I think this is the start of a new beginning."

The fire burned bright under the light of day. The ugly reality of the past and the present right there for them all to see. And then something magical happened.

Cecilia Fine and Finnegan Fury appeared with smiles on their faces.

Mike stared. "Holy shit. I'm seeing this. You're seeing this too, right?" He turned to Frank, Lara, and Noah.

Chloe moaned. "It's done, finally. The cycle's broken, or so they say."

"Who? Them?" Mike asked, but Chloe passed out again.

Chloe leaned on Frank until he lowered her to the ground. He groaned under her weight. "I'm not—oh man, they're coming closer."

"It's done. Thank you." Cecilia smiled, and her beauty lit up an answering smile on Finn's face.

"We have things to do, but we'll be around." Finn considered the sheriff and his gun. "Need to be

faster on the draw, son. Work on it.”

They faded, holding one another, and Lara felt Cecilia’s relief like it was her own. And then she realized the pain in her leg had faded to a numbness. Happy, dizzy, and on the verge of passing out, she stroked Noah’s cheek.

“Lara.” He sighed her name.

“It’s over. Now you’re supposed to ask me...”
The world grew fuzzy.

“Dammit.” Noah sounded panicked. “We need to get her to a hospital.”

“I’ll get the car.” Mike’s voice.

Then Frank’s. “Just hold on. You’ll be okay, Lara. Jesus, Noah, she’s losing a lot of blood.”

“Ask me to go with you.” She blinked and felt the world focus again. But with it came the pain.

“To go with me? Anywhere, honey. I love you.”
Noah lowered her to the ground.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, baby. I have to keep pressure on it. But I’m not asking you a goddamn thing. I’m telling you.

Either you come with me back to Bend, or I'm staying here in Brownville with you. You're not getting rid of me, now that I've found you. Oh, and we're getting married too. I'll give you a couple months to get used to the idea, but if the answer isn't yes, I'm not proposing."

"How romantic. No wonder you don't rely on that charm to get laid." Frank made a retching sound.

Noah chuckled. "Hey, man, it works for me."

"That's what you think." Lara poked him in the chest. "I'll say yes when you're on one knee and begging me to marry you."

"Begging, hmm?"

She could read the interest on his face and knew he was thinking about how to make her beg in the bedroom. She wished she had the energy to indulge him right now.

He smiled at her blush. "Oh baby. You have a lot to learn about who's in charge."

Not willing to give him the *complete* upper hand, she raised a brow, trying like heck to ignore

the pain in her leg. "Remember the shower?"

Noah ignored Frank's apparent interest. He leaned down to whisper, "Look, just let me pretend for now. It's good for my ego."

Lara gave a weak laugh, then groaned. "I love you, Noah, but I'm going to have to take a stand on this. We're going to Bend. I want to get as far away from this place as possible. Besides, I can't stay in a town no longer haunted by ghosts. Who will talk to me when you're not around?"

"I'll always be around. I love you, Lara." Noah kissed her but didn't let up on the pressure he was applying to her leg.

Frank huffed. "Ech. The sweetness between you two is killing me. Oh good, Mike's back with the car. Let's get out of here."

"I second that." Chloe sat up, rubbing her head. "What did that bastard give me?"

Mike arrived and helped get Lara and Chloe into the SUV. He used his belt to slow the blood flow of her leg. "I already called the hospital on my cell. They're waiting on you." He waved Noah to the

driver's side.

Noah put his hand on the handle. "You're not coming?"

"Fuck, no. I'm not going through another hit-and-run, or shoot-and-run. Whatever. You can handle the injured. And Noah—" Mike paused. Lara couldn't see his expression, but he sounded more than sincere when he said, "Make sure you take care of her. Lara's a special woman."

"I know. Thanks." Noah shut the door and drove off. He didn't look at her as he sped away from the burning house. But he took Lara's hand in his own. "My special woman."

* * *

Three days later, Noah had never felt so unsure of himself. He stared at Lara's bandaged leg, still shaky at how close he'd come to losing her.

She patted the spot next to her in her bed. "Come over here, hero."

He checked to make sure her bedroom door was locked before joining her.

“Paranoid?” she teased.

“Hell, yeah.” Though all the reports had been made and the authorities called in to deal with Bill’s victims, he wouldn’t be satisfied until they left Brownville for good. “How are you feeling?”

He sat next to her, careful to keep himself from brushing against her injury.

“I’m a little sore, but the painkillers are doing their job. And really, the bullet passed right through me. So I should be up and running in a few weeks.”

He groaned. “Lara, no running. Not unless I’m right there next to you.” He sighed. “You’re sure this is what you want? Coming with me to Bend?”

She took his hand in hers and kissed it. “I’m sure.”

He cleared his throat. “I told you I love you. And I do. But Lara... I don’t want to wait.” He hadn’t meant to ask her now, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Wait for what?”

“I want all of you.”

“I’d say you’ve had all of me.” She winked at him. “I’m a little put out you haven’t had more lately.

I'm in bed, half-dressed, just you and me and no one else for a change, and you haven't made a move."

"Woman, I'm trying to ask you to marry me." There, he'd said it.

She blinked at him. "Huh?"

Not exactly the response a man wanted to hear after proposing. "Lara, I love you. I know I said I'd give you time. We haven't known each other very long. But I love you. All of you. You can handle me. You don't freak out just because I'm a little different. And you're so strong, so intelligent and funny. I want to live the rest of my life with you. You're the one for me, honey. I know it deep inside." He brought her hand to his chest.

"Oh Noah." Her eyes filled. "That was so romantic. I can't believe it came from you."

He grunted with laughter.

She continued. "I trusted you from the beginning. It wasn't even the voices, it was you. Something about you that called to me. You're the only man who's ever seen *me*. I won't lie and say I'm not a little scared by the idea of marriage, but yes, I'll

marry you. In eight or nine months.”

“Hell, Lara. You want a long engagement, you got it.” Noah wanted to burst with happiness. If only the woman would stop shifting on the bed. The T-shirt she wore kept riding up, exposing her smooth belly. And those damn shorts hinted at all kinds of things. Even with the bandage, her legs would look perfect spread wide while he licked and sucked her pretty pussy.

“Uh-oh. You have that look again.” The wicked grin she sent him made him groan and press down his hard-on. “Tell you what, handsome. You want me to say yes, then you have to show me what it’s worth to you.”

She spread her legs, slowly. “Man, my leg hurts, but not as much as my pussy.”

The sly woman knew he liked it when she talked dirty. Damn, he loved her.

“Fuck me with that huge cock, and we’ll see if I say yes.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He sounded like he’d swallowed a bag of gravel.

“Then don’t. You’ll have to be gentle. And we’ll fuck so slow, until I come all over you.”

He swore under his breath and stood. Stripping down to nothing, he did the same to her, being ultracareful of her leg. “I think I like you this way best. Naked.”

She laughed.

“Now don’t move. You’re only allowed to lay there and take what I give you.”

“I love when you get all bossy on me.” She moaned when he sucked her breast, biting gently on her nipple. “Oh God. Noah, I’m ready to say yes right now.”

He chuckled and turned his attention to her other breast. He had her begging in seconds, and he ached to fuck her. But he wanted to draw this out, to please his woman and himself by taking his time.

He drew down her body and knelt between her legs. Lowering his head to her pussy, he licked her with patient, deliberate strokes. She writhed and moaned, but he wouldn’t be rushed. When he sucked on her clit, her flavor exploding on his tongue,

she cried out for more.

"I said be still." He palmed her stomach, holding her in place while he ate her out.

He waited until she'd come before he eased himself next to her and turned them so that he spooned her. Then he eased her injured leg over his, taking care to move without jarring her. "Okay?" he asked on a breath, out of his mind with lust.

"Oh yeah. I want to feel you inside me, Noah. Come on, deep in me."

He found her entrance and slid inside her. "Oh fuck. You're hot."

"And wet. Very, very wet." She whispered his name as he continued to push.

He continued until he'd put the whole of himself inside her. Shaking at the effort to hold still, he kissed her neck and nibbled at her ear. "I love you so much, Lara." He pulled back, then thrust inside her again. "Always."

Their lovemaking was slow, tender, and so rich that it tied his every thought and breath to hers in a way that felt almost mystical. Not just sexual, this

loving wrapped emotion and psychic pathways together, until the two of them flowed together like one entity. Like Flynn and Cecilia must have been, came the unbidden thought.

And then thoughts of the outlaw lovers left him as he poured himself into Lara, the woman who owned him heart and soul. He'd spent his life caught up in the past, but he'd found his future in the arms of a woman steeped in the present.

"Forever, Noah. I love you." Lara hugged his arm over her belly and snuggled with him, still joined.

He had trouble catching his breath. "Oh baby. Me too. You're mine. Never forget that."

"As if I could." She laughed, and he laughed with her.

Noah couldn't be sure, but he felt a soft sigh and the sense of approval from a powerful presence beyond them.

"Oh, she's glad we found each other," Lara whispered. "She's leaving me in peace now. And she's thankful we solved their murder."

He pulled her tighter against him. "I have all the

thanks I need, right here in my arms.”

“You said it, cowboy.” Lara sighed and settled against him. They lay in silence for some time before he finally withdrew, and Lara turned to face him. “Bend, Oregon, hmm? Tell me more about this PowerUp! gym and the people who work there...”

Chapter Thirteen

Frank had been right. A few days later, Noah and Lara were *still* pouring on the love with a saccharinity that made her teeth ache. Chloe squirmed in the uncomfortable seat on her flight that she prayed would make it back to Oregon in one piece. The lovebirds sat behind her holding hands and doing all that lovey-dovey crap that annoyed the hell out of her. Sure, she wanted her buddy to be happy, but his newfound emotions continued to impress upon her the deficiencies in her own life. What awaited her at home? A few cans of SpaghettiOs and some lint balls rolling on the floors of her near empty house?

Jeez, she hadn't seen any man action in close to a year. How pathetic was that?

"Change is coming."

Trust that fucking voice to be back now. Where had it been before, when she'd been close to circling the drain in that psycho's attic? On a good note, at

least they had the painting. Her boss would be pleased about that. Jack couldn't chew her ass that much about being late on delivery. Plus, he now had a much better balanced retrocog in Noah. Lara centered him, the couple was in love, and Jack no longer had to worry about losing Noah.

Though the boss man didn't show his emotions, he was the first one on her ass if he sensed anything wrong with her squad. The night-shift guys worked well as a unit, but he counted on Chloe to keep a closer eye on the general well-being of his agents. Kitty, her daytime counterpart, watched the dayshift. Of course, it helped that the empath could sense the emotional health of her team. Chloe had to go on gut instinct and direct supervision. And with guys like Noah, Nathan, and Aiden, she had her hands full.

She shifted again, wishing her ass hadn't gone numb from the stupid seat. At least she had a space beside her. The rotund man on the aisle seat continued to snore his way home, but she could handle that with a view out the window.

She glanced at him, wondering if she closed

her eyes and napped, if she could count this as sleeping with another man. How boring was her life that the past few days had been more excitement than she'd seen in months? Not having a sex life was pathetic yet doable. But God, she *really* missed her work with the PWP.

"Be careful what you wish for." The warning shocked her. She heard the voices; she was a clairaudient. But they never sounded worried. Dry, matter-of-fact, not concerned. What the hell?

"Who are you?" Maybe this time she'd get the answers she'd been seeking. Who talked to her? And why? Why her?

"We're coming, Chloe. It's time."

"What?" Coming? We? *"How many are you?"*

"Ah. Hope you don't mind, but the lady back there needed to breastfeed. Hello, uncomfortable." Frank Hanover, aka Ian Ryder, stepped over the man in the aisle seat and sat next to her with a big grin on his face. "Happy to see me? Noah thought I might be a help to the team. Said I was wasting my time in Brownville, and your boss was eager to meet me."

She ignored her concern about the voices and turned to glare at Noah over the seat. "Thanks a lot."

He smiled. "No problem. Hey, maybe Frank can take some of my shifts. I'm thinking about teaching at the local college a few nights a week. Lara thinks I should embrace my sense of history. Might help me deal with the past while strengthening my abilities for the group, you know?"

She huffed and turned back around, not dignifying that possibility with an answer.

Frank grinned at her. "Just think, Chloe. What good friends we'll be."

"God help me." She ignored his chuckle. She even ignored the news that their flight would be delayed another half hour due to traffic on the runway. More time for her ass and the lumps in the seat to become better acquainted.

Then the voices returned.

"We're coming, Chloe King. Find us before it's too late. For all of us."

Her life suddenly got a lot more interesting.

THE END

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Marie Harte

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic, but especially all things romance. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-three years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.