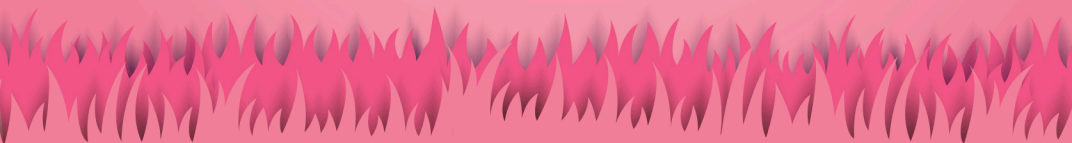




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“Are you okay?” a deep male voice asked.

She was covered in sand, grabbing her wrist and whimpering like a baby seal that had lost its mama. Did she look okay?

“I’m fine,” she lied. “Just a little spill.”

She looked up—way, way up—and somehow wasn’t surprised to find the other runner she had spotted a few moments earlier.

Her instincts were right. He was great-looking. She had an impression of dark hair and concerned blue eyes that looked familiar. He wore running shorts and a formfitting performance shirt that molded to powerfully defined muscles.

She swallowed and managed to sit up. What kind of weird karma was this? She had just wished for a man in her life and suddenly a gorgeous one seemed to pop up out of nowhere.

Surely it had to be a coincidence.

* * *

**THE WOMEN OF BRAMBLEBERRY HOUSE:
Finding love, one floor at a time**

Chapter One

Some days, a girl reached a point where her best course of action was to run away from her problems.

Melissa Fielding hung up the phone after yet another unproductive discussion with her frustrating ex-husband, drew in a deep, cleansing breath, then threw on her favorite pair of jogging shoes.

Yes, she had a million things to do. The laundry basket spilled over with clothes, she had bills to pay, dirty dishes filled her sink, and she was scheduled to go into the doctor's office where she worked in less than two hours.

None of that mattered right now. She had too much energy seething through her, wave after wave like the sea pounding Cannon Beach during a storm.

Even Brambleberry House, the huge, rambling Vic-

torian where she and her daughter lived in the first-floor apartment, seemed too small right now.

She needed a little good, hard exercise to work some of it off or she would be a stressed, angry mess at work.

She and Cody had been divorced for three years, separated four, but he could still make her more frustrated than anybody else on earth. Fortunately, their seven-year-old daughter, Skye, was at school, so she didn't have to witness her parents arguing yet again.

She yanked open her apartment door to head for the outside door when it opened from the other side. Rosa Galvez, her de facto landlady who ran the three-unit building for her aunt and a friend, walked inside, arms loaded with groceries.

Her friend took one look at Melissa's face and frowned. "Uh-oh. Bad morning?" Rosa asked, her lovely features twisted with concern.

Now that she was off the phone, the heat of Melissa's anger cooled a degree or two, but she could still feel the restless energy spitting and hissing through her like a downed power line.

"You know how it goes. Five minutes on the phone with my ex and I either have to punch something, spend an hour doing yoga or go for a hard run on the beach. I don't have a free hour and punching something would be counterproductive, so a good run is the winner." Melissa took two bags of groceries from Rosa and led the way up the stairs to the other woman's third-floor apartment.

"Run an extra mile or two for me, would you?" Rosa asked.

"Sure thing."

“What does he want this time?”

She sighed. “It’s a long story.” She didn’t want to complain to her friend about Cody. It made her sound bitter and small, and she wasn’t, only frustrated at all the broken promises and endless disappointments.

Guilt, an old, unwelcome companion, poked her on the shoulder. Her daughter loved her father despite his failings. Skye couldn’t see what Melissa did—that even though Skye was only seven, there was a chance she was more mature than her fun-loving, thrill-chasing father.

She ignored the guilt, reminding herself once more there was nothing she could do about her past mistakes but continue trying to make the best of things for her child’s sake.

Rosa opened the door to her wide, window-filled apartment, and Melissa wasn’t surprised to find Rosa’s much-loved dog, an Irish setter named Fiona, waiting just inside.

“Can I take Fiona on my run?” she asked impulsively, after setting the groceries in the kitchen.

“That would be great!” Rosa exclaimed. “We were going to go on a walk as soon as I put the groceries away, but she would love a run much more. Thank you! Her leash is there on the hook.”

At the word *leash*, Fiona loped to the door and did a little circular dance of joy that made more of Melissa’s bad mood seep away.

“Let’s do this, sweetheart,” she said, grabbing the leash from its place by the door and hooking it to Fiona’s shamrock-green collar.

“Thank you for this. Have fun.” Rosa opened the door

for them, and the strong dog just about pulled Melissa toward the stairs. She waved at her friend, then she and the dog hurried outside.

The April morning was one of those rare and precious days along the Oregon Coast when Mother Nature decided it was finally time to get serious about spring. Sunlight gleamed on the water and all the colors seemed saturated and bright from the rains of the preceding few days.

The well-tended gardens of Brambleberry House were overflowing with sweet-smelling flowers—cherry blossoms, magnolia, camellias. It was sheer delight. She inhaled the heavenly aroma, enjoying the undertone of sea and sand and other smells that were inexorable scent-memories of her childhood.

Fiona pulled at the leash, forcing Melissa to pick up her pace. Yes. A good run was exactly the prescription she was writing herself.

As she headed down the path toward the gate that led to the water, she spotted Sonia, the third tenant of Brambleberry House, working in a bed of lavender that hadn't yet burst into bloom.

Sonia was an interesting creature. She wasn't rude, exactly, she simply kept to herself and had done so for the seven months Melissa had lived downstairs from her.

Melissa always felt so guilty when she watched the other woman make her painstaking way up the stairs to her second-floor apartment, often pausing to rest on the landing. She didn't know the nature of Sonia's health issues, but she obviously struggled with something. She walked with a limp, and Rosa had told Melissa once

that the other woman had vision issues that precluded driving.

Right after moving in, Melissa had offered to switch apartments with her so Sonia wouldn't have to make the climb, but her offer had been refused.

"I need...the exercise," Sonia had said in her halting, odd cadence. "Going upstairs is good...physical therapy...for me."

Melissa had to admire someone willing to push herself out of her comfort zone, sustained only by the hope that she would grow from the experience.

That was a good life lesson for her. She wasted entirely too much energy dwelling on the painful reality that life hadn't turned out exactly as she planned, that some of her dreams were destined to disappointment.

Like Sonia, maybe it was time she stopped being cranky about things she couldn't control and took any chance that came along to force herself to stretch outside her comfort zone. She needed to learn how to make the best of things, to simply enjoy a gorgeous April day.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

"Lovely," Sonia said with her somewhat lopsided smile. "Hello...Melissa. Hello...Fiona."

She scratched the dog under her chin and was rewarded with one of Fi's doggie grins.

While the Irish setter technically lived with Rosa, the cheerful dog seemed to consider all the occupants of Bramleberry House her particular pack. That shared pet care worked out well for Melissa. Her daughter had been begging for a dog since before the divorce. Skye had been in heaven when they'd moved into Bramle-

berry House and discovered Rosa had a dog she was more than willing to share. This way, they got the benefits of having a dog without the onus of being responsible for one all the time.

That was yet another thing she had to be grateful for on this beautiful spring day. She had been so blessed to find an open apartment in Brambleberry House when she and Skye returned to Cannon Beach after all those years of wandering. It was almost a little miracle, since the previous tenant had only moved out to get married the week before Melissa returned to her hometown and started looking for a place.

She didn't know if it was fate or kismet or luck or simply somebody watching out for them. She only knew that she and Skye had finally found a place to throw down roots.

She ran hard, accompanied by the sun on her face, the low murmur of the waves, the crunch of sand under her running shoes. All of it helped calm her.

By the time she and Fiona made it the mile and a half to the end of the beach and she'd turned around to head back, the rest of her frustration had abated, and she focused instead on the endorphins from the run and the joy of living in this beautiful place.

She paused for a moment to catch her breath, looking out at the rock formations offshore, the towering haystacks that so defined this part of the Oregon Coast, then the craggy green mountains to the east.

It was so good to be home. She had friends here, connections. Her dad was buried not far from here. Her mom and stepfather were here most of the time, though

they had just bought an RV and were spending a few months traveling around the country.

She would have thought being a military wife to Melissa's dad would have cured her mother's wanderlust, but apparently not. They would be back soon.

Melissa didn't envy them. After moving to a new base every few years during her childhood and then following Cody around from continent to continent, she loved being in one place. *This* place. She had missed it more than she even realized, until she finally decided to bring Skye here.

She should have done it years ago instead of trying so hard to stay close to her ex-husband for Skye's sake. She had enjoyed living on Oahu, his home training location, but the cost of living had been prohibitive. Most of her salary as a nurse had gone to housing and the rest to food.

When he decided to move to South America on a whim, she had finally thrown up her hands and opted not to follow him. Instead, she had packed up her daughter for one last move and come home to Cannon Beach.

She started her run again, not wanting to spend more time than she already had that morning dwelling on her mistakes.

It made her sad, wondering if she should have tried harder to make things work, even though she was fully aware both of them had left the marriage long before they finally divorced.

Now wasn't the time to obsess about her failures or the loneliness that kept her up at night.

He had gotten married again. That was what he called

to tell her earlier. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision and they'd gone to St. Croix for their honeymoon, which had been beautiful but expensive. He'd spent so much on the honeymoon, in fact, that he couldn't make that month's child support payment, but he would make it up to her.

He was coming back to Oregon to stay this time, and was willing to finally step up and be the dad he should have been all along. She'd been hearing that story or versions of it for fifteen years. She hoped it would happen, she really did.

Cody wasn't a bad man. She wouldn't have loved him all those years and followed him from country to country to support his dreams if he were. But with the birth of their child, her priorities had changed, while she was afraid his never would.

Enough about Cody. She was genuinely happy for her ex, even if hearing about his new marriage did make her wish she had someone special in her own life.

She sighed again and gripped Fiona's leash. "Come on, Fi. Let's go home."

An odd wind danced across the sand, warmer than the air around it. She almost thought she could hear laughter rippling around her, though she was virtually alone on the beach.

She was hearing things again. Once in a while at the house, she could swear she heard a woman's laugh when no one was there, and a few times she had smelled roses on the stairwell, for no apparent reason.

Maybe the ghost of Brambleberry House had been

in the mood for a run today, too. The thought made her smile and she continued heading home.

Few people were out on the beach on this off-season morning, but she did happen to catch sight of a guy running toward her from the opposite direction. He was too far away for her to really see clearly, but she had the random impression of lean strength and fluid grace.

Ridiculous, she told herself. How could she know that from two hundred yards away?

She continued running, intent now only on finishing so she could go into work.

Fiona trotted along beside her in the same rhythm they had worked out through countless runs like this together. She was aware of the other runner coming closer. He had a dog, too, a small black one who also looked familiar.

They were only fifty feet apart when Fiona, for no apparent reason, suddenly veered in front of Melissa, then stopped stock-still.

With no time to change course or put on the brakes, Melissa toppled over the eighty-pound dog and went flying across the sand. She shoved her hands out to catch her fall instinctively. Her right arm hit sand and she felt a jolt in her shoulder from the impact, but the left one must have made contact with a rock buried beneath the sand, causing a wrenching pain to shoot from her wrist up her arm.

This day just kept getting better and better.

She gasped and flopped over onto her back, cradling the injured wrist as a haze of pain clouded her vision.

Fiona nosed her side as if in apology, and Melissa

bit back her instinctive scold. What on earth had gotten into Fiona? They had run together dozens of times. The Irish setter was usually graceful, beautifully trained, and never cut across her path like that.

For about ten seconds, it was all she could do not to writhe around on the ground and howl. She was trying not to cry when she gradually became aware she wasn't alone.

"Are you okay?" a deep male voice asked.

She was covered in sand, grabbing her wrist and whimpering like a baby seal that had lost its mama. Did she *look* okay?

"I'm fine," she lied. "Just a little spill."

She looked up—way, way up—and somehow wasn't surprised to find the other runner she had spotted a few moments earlier.

Her instincts were right. He *was* great-looking. She had an impression of dark hair and concerned blue eyes that looked familiar. He wore running shorts and a form-fitting performance shirt that molded to powerfully defined muscles.

She swallowed and managed to sit up. What kind of weird karma was this? She had just wished for a man in her life, and suddenly a gorgeous one seemed to pop up out of nowhere.

Surely it had to be a coincidence.

Anyway, she might like the idea of a man in her life, but she wasn't at all prepared for the reality of it—especially not a dark-haired, blue-eyed runner who still somehow managed to smell delicious.

He also had a little dog on a leash, a small black

schnauzer who was sniffing Fiona like they were old friends.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"Um. Sure."

Still cradling her injured wrist, she reached out with her right hand, and he grasped it firmly and tugged her to her feet. For one odd moment, she could swear she smelled roses above the clean, crisp, masculine scent of him, but that made absolutely no sense.

Was she hallucinating? Maybe she had bonked her head in that gloriously graceful free fall.

"You hurt your wrist," he observed. "Need me to take a look at it? I'm a doctor."

What were the odds that she would fall and injure herself in front of a gorgeous tourist who also happened to be a doctor?

"Isn't that convenient?" she muttered, wondering again at the weird little twist of fate.

He gave her an odd look, half curious and half concerned. Again, she had the strange feeling that she knew him somehow, but she had such a lousy memory for faces and names.

"Melissa. Melissa Blake?"

She narrowed her gaze, more embarrassed at her own lousy memory than anything. He knew her so she obviously had met him before.

"Yes. Actually, it's Melissa Fielding now."

"Oh. Right. You married Cody Fielding, Cannon Beach's celebrity."

And divorced him, she wanted to add. *Don't forget that part.*

"I'm sorry. You know me, but I'm afraid I don't remember your name."

He shrugged. "No reason you should. I was a few years older and I've been gone a long time."

She looked closer. There was something about the shape of his mouth. She had seen it recently on someone else...

"Eli?"

"That's right. Hi, Melissa."

She should have known! All the clues came together. The dog, whom she now recognized as Max, the smart little dog who belonged to Eli's father. The fact that he said he was a doctor. Those startling, searching blue eyes that now seemed unforgettable.

How embarrassing!

In her defense, the last time she had seen Eli Sanderson, he had been eighteen and she had been fifteen. He had graduated from high school and was about to take off across the country to college. The Eli she remembered had been studious and serious. He had kept mostly to himself, more interested in leading the academic decathlon than coming to any sporting events or social functions.

She had been the opposite, always down for a party, as long as it distracted her from the sadness at home in those first years after her father died of brain cancer.

The Eli she remembered had been long and lanky, skinny even. This man, on the other hand, was anything *but* nerdy. He was buff, gorgeous, with lean, masculine features and the kind of shoulders that made a woman want to grab hold and not let go.

Wow. The military had really filled him out.

"I understand you work with my dad," he said.

She worked *for* his father. Melissa was a nurse at Dr. Wendell Sanderson's family medicine clinic. Now she realized why that mouth looked so familiar. She should have picked up on it immediately. His dad's mouth was shaped the same, but somehow that full bottom lip looked very different on Dr. Sanderson Jr.

Her wrist still ached fiercely. "How's your dad?" she asked, trying to divert her attention from it. "I stopped by to see him yesterday after his surgery and was going to call the hospital to check on him today as soon as I finished my run."

"He's good. I was trying to be here before he went under the knife, but my plane was delayed until last night. I did speak to the orthopedic surgeon, who is happy with the outcome so far. Both knee replacements seem to have gone well."

"Oh, good. He won't tolerate being down for long. I guess that's why it made sense for him to do both at the same time."

"You know him well."

After several months of working for the kindly family medicine doctor, she had gained a solid insight into his personality. Wendell was sweet, patient, genuinely concerned about his patients. He was the best boss she'd ever had.

"Let's take a look at this wrist," Eli said now. Unlike his father, Wendell's son could never be described as kindly or avuncular.

"I'm sure it's fine."

“Again, I’m a doctor. Why don’t you let me be the judge of how fine it might be? I saw that nasty tumble and could hear the impact of your fall all the way across the sand. You might have broken something, in which case you’re going to want to have it looked at sooner rather than later.”

She was strangely reluctant to hand over her wrist—or anything else—to the man and fought the urge to hide her hand behind her back, as if she were caught with a fistful of Oreos in front of an empty cookie jar.

“I can have the radiologist at the clinic x-ray it when I go in to work in an hour.”

“Or you can let me take a look at it right now.”

She frowned at the implacable set of his jaw. He held his hand out and she sighed. “Ugh. You’re as stubborn as your father.”

“Thank you. Anytime someone compares me to my father, I take it as a compliment.”

He gave his outstretched hand a pointed look, and she frowned again and, cornered, held out her wrist. The movement made her hurt all over again, and she flushed at the unwilling tears she could feel gather.

His skin was much warmer than she might have expected on a lovely but still cool April morning. Seductively warm. His hands were long-fingered, masculine, much longer than her own, and he wore a sleek Tag Heuer watch.

Her stomach felt hollow, her nerves tight, but she wasn’t sure if that was in reaction to the injury or from the unexpected pleasure of skin against skin. He was a

doctor taking a look at an injury, she reminded herself, not a sexy guy wanting to hold her hand.

Melissa aimed a glare at Fiona, who had started the whole thing. The dog had planted her haunches in the sand, tail wagging, and seemed to be watching the whole episode with an expression that appeared strangely like amusement.

"It doesn't feel like anything is broken. You can move it, right?"

He held her hand while she wiggled her fingers, then rotated her wrist. It hurt like the devil, but she didn't feel any structural impingement in movement.

"Yes. I told you it wasn't broken. It's already feeling better."

"You can't be completely sure without an X-ray, but I'm all right waiting forty-eight hours or so to check it. I suspect a sprain, but it might be easier to tell in a few days. Do you have a way to splint it? If you don't, I'm sure my dad has something at the office."

"I've got a wrist brace I've worn before when I had carpal tunnel problems."

"You'll want to put that on and have it checked again in a few days. Meanwhile, ice and elevation are your best friends. At least ten minutes every two hours."

As if she had time for that. "I'll do my best. Thanks."

A sudden thought occurred to her, one she was almost afraid to entertain. "How long will you be in town?"

When he was making arrangements to be gone for his surgery, Wendell had hoped Eli might be able to cover for him at the clinic. The last she had heard, though, Eli's hadn't been able to get leave from his military as-

signment so his father had arranged a substitute doctor through a service in Portland.

Given that Eli was here, she had a feeling all that was about to change—which meant Eli might be her boss for the foreseeable future.

“I’m not sure how much time I can get,” he answered now. “That depends on a few things still in play. I’m hoping for a month but I’ll be here for the next two to three weeks, at least.”

“I see.”

She did see, entirely too clearly. This would obviously not be the last she would see of Eli Sanderson.

“I need to go. Thanks for your help,” she said quickly.

“I didn’t do anything except take a look at your injury. At least promise me you’ll raise it up and put some ice on it.”

Considering she was scheduled to work at his father’s clinic starting in just over an hour and still needed to shower, she wouldn’t have time for much self-pampering. “I’ll do my best. Thanks.”

“How far do you have to go? I can at least help you walk your dog home.”

“Fiona isn’t my dog. She belongs to my neighbor. We were just sort of exercising each other. And for the record, she’s usually very well behaved. I don’t quite know what happened earlier, but we’ll be fine to make it home on our own. I don’t want to disturb your run more than I already have.”

“Are you sure?”

“We don’t have far to go. I live at Brambleberry House.”

His expression registered his surprise. “Wow. You’re practically next door to my dad’s place.”

They couldn’t avoid each other, even if they wanted to. She didn’t necessarily want to avoid *him*, but considering she was now bedraggled and covered with sand, she was pretty sure he wouldn’t be in a hurry to see her again.

“Thanks again for your help. I’ll see you later.”

“Remember your RICE.”

Right. Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation. The first-aid prescription for injuries like hers. “I’ll do my best. Thanks. See you later.”

This time as she headed for the house, Fiona trotted along beside her, docile and well behaved.

Melissa’s wrist, on the other hand, complained vociferously all the way back to the house. She did her best to ignore it, focusing instead on the unsettling encounter with Dr. Sanderson’s only son.

Eli told himself he was only keeping an eye on Melissa as she made her slow way along the beach toward Bramleberry House because he was concerned about her condition, especially whether she had other injuries from her fall she had chosen not to reveal to him.

He was only being a concerned physician, watching over someone who had been hurt while he was nearby.

The explanation rang hollow. He knew it was more than that.

Melissa Blake Fielding had always been a beautiful girl and had fascinated him more than he had wanted to

admit to himself or anyone else when he was eighteen and she was only fifteen.

She had been a pretty cheerleader, popular and well-liked—mostly because she always had a smile for everyone, even geeky science students who weren't the greatest at talking to popular, pretty, well-liked cheerleaders.

He had danced with her once at a school dance toward the end of his senior year. She had been there with her date—and future husband—Cody Fielding, who had been ignoring her, as usual.

While his own date had been dancing with her dad, the high school gym teacher and chaperone, Eli had gathered his nerve to ask Melissa to dance, hating that the nicest girl in school had been stuck sitting alone while her jerk of a boyfriend ignored her.

He remembered she had been everything sweet to him during that memorable dance, asking about his plans after graduation.

Did she know her boyfriend and future husband hadn't taken kindly to Eli's nerve in asking Cody's date to dance and had tried to make him pay? He still had a scar above his eyebrow from their subsequent little altercation.

It had been a long time ago. He was a completely different man than he'd been back then, with wholly different priorities.

He hadn't thought about her in years, at least until his father had mentioned a few months earlier that Melissa was back in town and working for him.

At the time, he had been grieving, lost, more than a little raw. He remembered now that the memory of Melissa had made him smile for the first time in weeks.

Now he had to wonder if that was one of the reasons he had worked hard to arrange things so that he could come home and help his father out during Wendell's recovery from double knee-replacement surgery. On some subconscious level, had he remembered Melissa worked at the clinic and been driven to see her again?

He didn't want to think so. He would be one sorry idiot if that were the case, especially since he didn't have room in his life right now for that kind of complication.

If he *had* given it any thought at all, on any level, he probably would have assumed it wouldn't matter. He was older, she was older. It had been a long time since he'd felt like that awkward, socially inept nerd he'd been in the days when he lived here in Cannon Beach.

He had been deployed most of the last five years and had been through bombings, genocides, refugee disasters. He had seen things he never expected to, had survived things others hadn't.

He could handle this unexpected reunion with a woman he might have had a crush on. He only had to remember that he was no longer that geeky, awkward kid but a well-respected physician now.

In comparison to everything he had been through in the last few years—and especially the horror of six months ago that he was still trying to process—he expected these few weeks of substituting for his father in Cannon Beach to be a walk in the park.

Chapter Two

“You’re late.” Carmen Marquez, the clinic’s receptionist and office manager, gave an arch look over the top of her readers, and Melissa winced but held up her braced wrist.

“I know. It’s been a crazy day. I’m sorry. Blame it on this.”

“What did you do? Punch somebody?” Tiffany Lowell, one of their certified nursing assistants, gave her a wide-eyed look—though the college student and part-time band front woman wore so much makeup, she had the same expression most of the time.

“I tripped over a big, goofy Irish setter and sprained my wrist. I’m sorry I’m late, but I was on strict orders to rest and put ice on it.”

“That’s exactly what you should be doing. In fact,

it's what Dr. Sanderson would be telling you to do if he were here," Carmen said.

Dr. Sanderson Jr. *had* been the one to give her the instructions, but she wasn't ready to share that interesting bit of gossip with the other women.

"You look like you're either going to puke or pass out," Tiffany observed.

"We don't have any patients scheduled for another half hour," Carmen said with a great deal more sympathy in her voice. "You should at least sit down."

"I'm fine. I need to get ready for the new doctor. He should be coming in today."

Carmen angled her head in a strange way, her mouth pursed and her eyes twinkling. "He's already here. Oh, honey. Have we got a surprise for you."

The butterflies that had been dancing in her stomach since earlier on the beach seemed to pick up their pace. "The substitute doctor is Dr. Sanderson's son, Eli."

"Whoa! Did your fall make you psychic or something?" Tiffany asked with much more respect than she usually awarded Melissa.

"In a way, I guess you could say that. Sort of. I bumped into him on the beach this morning. He was a firsthand witness when I made my graceful face-plant into the sand, and he ended up kindly helping me up."

The memory of the concern in his blue eyes and of his strong fingers holding her hand, his skin warm against hers, made her nerve endings tingle.

She firmly clamped down on the memory. She would have to work closely with him for at least the next few weeks while Wendell recovered. It would be a disaster

if she couldn't manage to keep a lid on her unexpected attraction to the man.

"I keep forgetting you grew up in town," Carmen said. "You must know Eli, then."

While Cannon Beach could swarm with tourists during the summer months, it was really a small town at heart. Most permanent residents knew one another.

"We went to school together. He was older. I was a freshman the year he was a senior. I didn't know he was going to be filling in until I bumped into him this morning. Last I heard, we were getting a temp from the Portland agency."

"That's what I heard, too," Carmen said. "I guess we have to roll with what we get."

"I'm pretty sure plenty of women in Cannon Beach will want to roll with Doc Sanderson's son when they see him." Tiffany smirked.

Melissa turned her shocked laugh into a cough. "He told me he wasn't sure until the last minute whether he'd be able to make it back to fill in."

"You know where he's been, right?" Carmen asked.

"Some kind of war zone," Tiffany said.

Wendell had told her something about what his son was doing, how since finishing his internship in emergency medicine several years earlier, Eli had been on a special assignment from the military to work with aid agencies, setting up medical clinics and providing care to desperate, helpless people whose countries were in turmoil. He had been deployed almost constantly over the last five years.

Wendell had been so proud of his son for stepping

up, even though his service put him in harm's way time and again. He had also been worried for him.

"He feels things so deeply," her boss had said. "I can't imagine it's easy, the kinds of things he has to see now."

She remembered feeling great sympathy for Eli and admiration for him, though at the time she had pictured him as the nerdy, scholarly, skinny teenager she remembered, not the buff, gorgeous man she had encountered that morning on the beach.

"One thing I need to ask, though. Maybe you know the answer," Carmen said. "How can he just show up in Cannon Beach and start practicing medicine here? Do I need to check with the licensing board? Doesn't he need an Oregon license or something?"

"Fun and interesting fact. The particular license given to U.S. Army doctors allows them to practice medicine anywhere."

Melissa could feel her vertebrae stiffen and nerves flutter at the deep voice from behind her.

Oh, it was going to be a long two or three weeks if she didn't take control of this ridiculous crush she had suddenly formed for Eli Sanderson.

"I guess that makes sense," Carmen said.

"Yes," he answered. "Think how confusing it would be if an army doc had to go before the licensing board every time he was called to an emergency or had a new assignment."

"That would be a serious pain." Melissa hated the slightly breathless note in her voice. She sounded ridiculous, like the kind of brainless bikini-clad groupies who used to follow the pro surfers on the circuit.

She cleared her throat, wishing she could clear away her nerves as easily.

"Good to know. I'll file that little tidbit away, in case I'm ever on a game show where 'Army Doctors' is a category."

Tiffany snorted, and Eli's mouth quirked up into a little smile, teeth flashing. She had the strangest feeling he hadn't found that many things to smile about lately, though she couldn't have said exactly why she had that impression.

"That would be the most boring game show ever," he said. "Unless you love learning about regulations and protocol."

"I really don't. As long as you can legally see your father's patients, that's all I care about."

"I'll do my best. I know he's been worried about his caseload."

"Your dad is a great doctor, but he worries too much about his patients," Tiffany said.

"Is that possible?" Eli asked.

"He should have worried a little more about himself. He could barely stand up the last few weeks before the surgery."

Tiffany was a bit rough around the edges but like everyone else, she adored Dr. Sanderson and frequently told patients how cool it was that she now worked for the doctor who had delivered her twenty years earlier.

"Your father was so worried about taking time away from his patients he almost didn't have the surgery, though his specialist has been urging him to for months. At least as long as I've been here," Melissa said.

“Longer,” Carmen said, her expression exasperated. The older woman liked to mother everyone, even their boss, who was at least two or three years older than the office manager.

“I think he would have continued putting it off and hobbling around if he hadn’t injured the right one so badly two weeks ago,” Melissa said. “Then the surgery became not only urgent but imperative.”

“Everything worked out for the best,” Eli said. “I was able to create a gap in my schedule and here I am, at least for a few weeks.”

Yes. Here you are.

She had thought him gorgeous in skintight workout clothes. That was nothing compared to the sight of him in khaki slacks, a white exam coat and a crisply ironed button-down shirt a few shades lighter than his blue eyes.

She had been a nurse for years and had never been particularly drawn to a physician, until right this moment.

“How’s the wrist?” he asked.

At his words, the pain she had been staving off seemed to rush back. She held up the brace and wriggled her fingers. “Still aches but it’s bearable. I agree with you that I should hold off a day or two before I have it x-rayed.”

“Did you have any time to put ice on it?”

“A few minutes. Which is the main reason I’m late.”

“Good. That’s the best thing you can do.”

They lapsed into silence and she tried to keep from gawking at him. She loved her job, working with Wendell Sanderson. The man had been nothing but kind to her since the day she’d come back to Cannon Beach. She

hated thinking things would be awkward and uncomfortable with Eli here.

She could handle anything for a few weeks, Melissa reminded herself. Even working for a man for whom she had developed a serious thirst.

"Can you give me the charts of those who have appointments today? I'd like to try familiarizing myself with their files."

His words were directed to Carmen yet still provided Melissa the reminder she needed. He was her boss and she couldn't forget that.

"I've already pulled the charts of those coming in this morning. They're on your dad's desk, since I figured you would be setting up in there," the office manager replied. "I'll find the rest and bring them in for you."

"Thank you." He gave the woman a polite smile, and Melissa could swear she felt her ovaries melt.

When he walked back down the hallway toward his office, Melissa slumped into one of the chairs in the waiting room.

Oh, this was not good. At all. She might have silently wished for a man this morning, but in truth she didn't have time for that kind of complication. She had Skye and work and friends, not to mention the online classes she was taking to work toward her nurse practitioner license. There was no room left for her to be stupid about Eli.

"Are you okay?" Carmen asked.

"I will be."

Eventually.

"He seems nice, doesn't he?" Tiffany said. "Dr. Sand-

erson talks about his son like all the time, but I always pictured him different, somehow. Since he's in the army, I thought he'd have a buzz cut and be all harsh and by the book."

She hadn't pictured him at all, hadn't really given Eli Sanderson much thought over the years. Now she was afraid she would be able to think about little else.

Even her throbbing wrist couldn't seem to distract her.

"How did your first day go? Any problems or unique diagnoses you think I need to know about?"

Eli adjusted his dad's pillow, giving him a stern look. "Your only job right now is to focus on healing from this surgery. I can take care of your patients, got it? You don't need to worry about them."

"I have no concerns on that front," Wendell assured him. "You're a better doctor than I ever could have dreamed of being at your age."

Eli knew that was far from true. How could it be? His own dreams were haunted by the ghosts of all those he couldn't save. Miri. Justine. Those ghosts at least had names and faces, but there were scores of others who drifted through, anonymous and lost.

He let out a breath, wondering when the hell the sense of guilt and loss would leave him. It had been six months but still felt like yesterday.

He turned his attention back to his father, instead of that war-battered market town.

"Dad, I could never be half the doctor you are. We both know that. I'll be trying my whole life to catch up."

His father rolled his eyes. "We could be here all day patting each other on the back, but I know what I know.

And what I know is that you're a damn fine doctor and I'm proud to call you my son. There's no one else on earth I would trust more than you to fill in for me while I'm laid up. When I ask about my patients, it's only because I'm concerned about them, not because I don't think you can care for them the way I would."

His father had been the best doctor Eli knew. Wendell and his genuine concern for his patients had been the main reason Eli had gone to medical school in the first place. He had wanted to help people, to deliver babies and diagnose illnesses and give little kids their first shots.

He had never expected that his first years of practicing medicine would be in a series of emergency shelters and refugee camps, but that was the path he had chosen and he couldn't regret it.

"If I'm not mistaken, that sweet Julia Garrett was supposed to come in today for a prenatal checkup. She and Will had an early-term miscarriage during her last pregnancy, so I've been watching her closely. How did things look today?"

Though he instinctively wanted to tell his father to put all his patients out of his head, Eli knew that wouldn't happen. Wendell wanted to stay current on all the people he had cared for over thirty-five years of practicing in Cannon Beach. Eli had a feeling that was the only way his father would be able to endure the long recovery from his double knee replacement.

"Everything looked good today. The baby measured exactly where she should be at this stage in the pregnancy, the heartbeat sounded strong and steady, and Julia

appears healthy and happy. She didn't report any unusual concerns."

"Oh, that's good. This is her fourth pregnancy—fifth, if you count the baby they lost and sixth if you count the fact that her first were twins—and I wanted her to feel confident and comfortable."

As far as Eli was concerned, his father was the iconic family physician. Wendell was dedicated to his patients, compassionate over their troubles and driven to provide them the best possible care. He had delivered some of his own patients—like Will Garrett—and was now delivering the second generation and providing care over their children.

Those patients had saved his father, plucking him out of the deep depression Wendell had fallen into after Eli's mother died following a short but hard-fought battle against breast cancer when Eli was twelve.

They had both been devastated and had dealt with the blow in different ways. Eli had retreated into books, withdrawing from his friends, from baseball, from social activities. His father had done the same, focusing only on his patients and on his son.

The pain of losing Ada Sanderson had eased over the years but hadn't left completely. Eli suspected it never would.

"And how are you, son? I mean, how are you *really*? You haven't talked about what happened with that friend of yours, but I know it still eats at you."

The question, so intuitive, seemed to knock his own knees out from under him. It had always seemed impossible to conceal his inner struggles from his father's gim-

let gaze. Still, Eli did his best. He had never told Wendell how close he had been to Justine, or how her death and Miri's had been his fault.

Somehow he managed to summon an expression he hoped resembled a smile. "I'm good. Why wouldn't I be? It's a beautiful time of year to be home in Oregon. I don't remember the last April I was here. I'm not sure what I'm looking forward to more—watching the spring storms churning across the water or savoring the explosion of flowers."

Wendell saw right through him, as usual. His father gave him a searching look even as he shifted on his hospital bed to find a more comfortable position.

"After all the exotic places the army has sent you, are you sure you won't be bored out of your mind treating cold sores and high blood pressure?"

"No. I'm looking forward to that, too, if you want the truth. It will be a nice, calm change of pace. Just what I need to decompress."

"Maybe this will help you figure out whether you're going to stay in the military or settle down somewhere and open a practice. Or maybe join a practice that's already busy with tourists and locals alike."

Since the day Eli finished his residency, Wendell had been after him to become his partner here.

It had always been in his long-range plan, but how could he walk away now, with this heavy sense of responsibility he carried everywhere? He felt the weight of it even more on his shoulders now, after what happened to Justine. She had been dedicated, compassionate, completely driven to help those in turmoil. Her dedication had

been silenced forever and she could no longer carry out her work. He had made a vow to carry on in her place.

"Tell me how they have been treating you here," he said to change the subject. "Have you already charmed all the nurses?"

"Not all of them. A few of these nurses have been coming to my office since they were children. I'm afraid they know all my tricks by now."

Wendell was regaling him with a story about the surgeon who had operated on him when Eli heard a slight knock on the door.

A moment later, it was pushed open, and a delicate-looking girl of about seven held the door open while cradling a huge cellophane-wrapped basket in the other.

"Hi, Dr. Sanderson," she said cheerfully, giving his father a winsome smile.

Wendell beamed back at her. "Well, hello there, my dear. Isn't this a lovely surprise?"

She gave a grin, missing her two front teeth, and held up the basket. "This is for you. My mom was busy talking to her friend at the nurses station and I got tired of waiting for her, so I told her I would come by myself. This thing is *heavy*."

"Eli, help my friend Skye out and take that big basket from her before her arms break right off, will you?"

He dutifully rose so he could take the basket out of the girl's arms and set it on the small table next to his father's bed.

While he was occupied, the girl stole his chair, the one right next to Wendell's bedside.

"That stuff is all for you" she said, pointing to the

basket. "Even the candy. My mom and I went shopping in three different stores, trying to find all the things you love."

"That is so sweet of you. Your mother is a treasure and so are you, my dear."

She giggled. "My grandma says I'm a pill and too big for my britches."

"I don't doubt that's true," Wendell said.

The girl turned to Eli with a curious look. "Hi," she said brightly. "I'm Skye Fielding. What's your name?"

When she identified herself, he gave her a closer look. Skye Fielding. This had to be Melissa's daughter. He should have picked up the resemblance before she even identified herself. Now he could see she shared the same vivid green eyes with her mother and the same dimple that appeared and disappeared on one side of her mouth.

"This is my son, Elias Alexander Sanderson."

"Whoa. That's a big name. It's..." She counted on her small fingers. "Ten syllables."

Yes. He was fully aware. Try filling out all those letters on military forms designed for guys named Joe Smith. "You can call me Eli," he said.

"Hi, Eli." She settled deeper into his chair, perfectly at home, which he found more amusing than anything he'd seen in a long time. With nowhere else to sit in the room, he leaned against the sink.

"Mom says you got brand-new knees because your old ones hurt you all the time," she said.

"*Old* is the key word there," Wendell muttered.

His father wasn't that old. He was only in his early sixties and vibrant for his age. Why hadn't Wendell

started dating and married someone? His father was still a handsome man. Judging by all the flowers and cards in his room, he was fairly popular around town, too. Maybe Eli could work on that while he was home.

"My mom says you have to stay here for two whole weeks!"

She seemed positively aghast at the idea.

"It's not that bad. They have fun things to do all day long. Games and movies and music time. Plus, they serve good food and have free popcorn in the cafeteria."

Eli had a feeling Wendell was trying to convince himself as much as he was the little girl. His father wasn't thrilled about the time that loomed ahead of him in the rehabilitation center, but that was the price for his impatience and desire to do both knees at the same time, when he needed daily therapy and his house wasn't fully accessible.

"Free popcorn! You're lucky. I love popcorn."

"So do I, but if I eat all the free popcorn, I might have a tough time getting back on my feet."

"I guess." She appeared to consider that. "Do you think I could have some now?"

Wendell laughed. "Maybe. You'll have to ask your mom. Where do you think she is?"

"Probably still talking to her friend," Skye said.

A moment later, as if to prove her daughter wrong, Melissa appeared in the doorway, looking slightly frazzled.

He had seen her three times that day, in three different wardrobe changes.

This morning on the beach, she had been wearing running clothes—leggings and a comfortable-looking

hoodie, with her hair up in a ponytail. All day he had been aware of her moving around the office in burgundy-colored scrubs and a black cardigan. Tonight, Melissa had changed into jeans and a soft coral sweater and had let her hair down to curl around her shoulders.

He wasn't sure which version he found more attractive. It was a little like being asked to choose among his favorite ice cream flavors.

"Oh," she exclaimed, slightly breathless, with a stern look to her daughter. "Here you are. I didn't know where you went. I was busy talking to Jan and when I turned around, you had completely disappeared."

He could still see the shadows of unease in her expression and felt a wave of sympathy. He didn't have children, but he knew that panicked feeling of not being able to find someone you cared for deeply. He had a flashback of running through a panicked crowd, everyone else screaming and trying to escape the market center while he ran toward the chaos and fear. He closed his eyes, trying to scrub it away and return to the moment.

"I told you two times I was going to carry the basket to room forty-one," Skye informed her mother. "I guess you just didn't hear me."

More of Melissa's fear seemed to seep away and she hugged her child. "I'm sorry, honey. Jan is an old friend of mine from nursing school. I didn't know she was working here. I'm afraid I got a little distracted, catching up with her."

"My arms were too tired to keep holding the basket, so I found the room and gave it myself to Dr. Sanderson."

"I see that. Thanks, kiddo." She ran a hand over her

daughter's hair and the sweet, tender familiarity of the gesture sent an odd lump rising in his throat.

The unexpected emotions intensified when she leaned forward and kissed Wendell on the cheek.

"And how are you? How are the new knees?"

His father shrugged, clearly pleased at the visit from Melissa and her daughter. "I can't complain. Though I'm not ready to dance the salsa yet, I can tell they're already less painful than the old ones. They'll be even better once I break them in."

"Don't be in too big of a rush. How many times have I heard you tell your patients that true healing takes time?"

His father made a face. "Do you know how annoying it is to have your own words thrown back in your face?"

She laughed. "It's for your own good."

"I know." He gestured to the brace she wore. "What happened to your wrist?"

Her gaze shifted to Eli, and he thought he saw a soft brush of color soak her cheeks. "It's a long story. Let's just say Fiona was in a strange mood this morning and I fell. But it's feeling much better. Your son checked it out for me."

Whether she had wanted him to or not. She didn't say the words, but he had a feeling she was thinking them.

"That's good to hear. He's a good boy and an excellent doctor. I've been waiting for him to come back so he can meet you."

Oh, no. That sounded entirely too much like match-making. He had to cut that off before Wendell got any inappropriate ideas.

"We've met, Dad. You remember. Melissa and I went

to high school together for a year, though I'm older. I knew her ex-husband, too."

"My dad got married again and his wife is going to have a baby."

Melissa gave her daughter an exasperated look, and Eli had the feeling she wasn't thrilled with Skye for sharing that particular nugget of information.

"Yes," she said. "We're very happy for them both."

"Sounds like you've got a lot on your plate," Wendell said. "That makes your visit mean even more. A visit would have been enough, you know. You didn't have to bring along a huge care package, so heavy your strong seven-year-old daughter could barely carry it."

"It's only a few things, I promise. The fancy packaging always makes baskets look bigger than they are."

Except for that fleeting glance, she seemed to be avoiding looking at him directly. Why? Had he done something wrong that day in the office? There had been a little awkwardness early on, but Eli had thought by the end of the day they had started to establish a bit of a comfortable rhythm.

Skye nudged the basket closer to Wendell. "Open it. I want to see if you like the stuff we picked out."

"I'm sure I will love everything. It came from you, so of course I will." He smiled at the girl, who beamed back at him.

His father's rapport with both Melissa and her daughter didn't surprise him. Wendell loved people, one reason his staff adored him and his patients returned to him for generations.

"Go on," Skye pressed. "Open it."

He helped his father out by setting the basket on Wendell's lap, then watched as his father went through the contents. There was nothing elaborate, but all the gifts seemed thoughtful and sweet—a paperback mystery he knew Wendell would adore, a book of crossword puzzles, a box of chocolates and a bag of lemon drops, a journal, a soft-looking knit throw that would feel perfect on chilly spring mornings.

His father was delighted with all of it.

"Thank you so very much," he said after he had unearthed each new delight. "How did I ever get so lucky to have you both in my life?"

"We're the lucky ones," Melissa said with a smile.

"I don't have a grandpa and he doesn't have a grandkid, so Dr. Wendell said we can both pretend we belong to each other," Skye informed Eli.

It warmed his heart that Melissa appeared to watch out for his father. She struck him as someone who couldn't help caring about others. He had witnessed it all day. Even with her own injured wrist, she had been kind and caring to each patient they had seen.

"What are you two up to tonight, besides coming here and making my day?" Wendell asked them.

"We're going to have pizza," Skye informed him. "It's Friday and we always have pizza on Friday. Sometimes we make it ourselves and sometimes we order it from a pizza place and sometimes we go out. Tonight we're going out."

"Nice. Where are you heading?"

"We're going to A Slice of Heaven."

"Oh, good choice," Wendell said. "It's one of my favorites. Have you been there yet, son?"

Considering Eli had only been back in town for thirty-six hours and had been working or sleeping for most of that time—or visiting his father—hitting all the local hot spots hadn't exactly been on his priority list. "Not yet."

"You can't miss it. Trust me," his father said.

"You could come with us," Skye offered with that charmer of a smile. "Mom says maybe we can even get cheesy bread. They have the *best* cheesy bread."

"It's been a long day," Melissa said, a trace of defiance in her voice. "I need a few carbs to the rescue."

He wanted to suggest she also might need to rest and ice her wrist, but he didn't want to stand in the way of a girl and her carbs.

His father shifted on the bed and yawned, his mouth drawn and his eyes clouding with exhaustion.

"We should go," Melissa said, picking up the hint. "Come on, Skye."

"Do you have to?" Wendell said, though Eli heard the exhaustion in his voice.

"I should go, too, so you can get some rest. That's the best thing for you, in case your doctor hasn't mentioned it."

"He has," Wendell said glumly. "I hate being in this hospital bed."

"You know what they say about doctors making the worst patients. Try to behave yourself. I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Thanks."

His father rolled over, and Eli could tell he was al-

ready dozing off. He followed Melissa and her daughter out of the room.

"That was thoughtful of you, bringing a care package to my father," he said when they were out in the hallway. "It obviously touched him."

"Dr. Sanderson has been nothing but kind to us since we moved back to town. It's the very least we can do, giving him a few things to help him pass the time while he's laid up. He's a wonderful man, your father."

"He is."

"Seriously. I've worked with a lot of jerk doctors in my day and your father is a breath of fresh air, as compassionate to his staff as he is to his patients."

"It's always good to hear my own opinion confirmed by those who work closely with him."

"Not gonna lie. He's my favorite of all the doctors I've ever worked with. You have big shoes to fill."

"My feet will never fit in those shoes. Why do you think I haven't come home before now to try? I just have to do my best to stumble along as best I can while I'm here."

That was probably more revealing than he intended, at least judging by the probing look Melissa sent his way. He opted to change the subject. "So you're off to have pizza?"

"Yep. Like I said, we always have pizza on Friday night," Skye told him. "Pizza on Friday, Tacos on Tuesday. The rest of the time, we like to mix things up."

He found it charming that she included herself in the meal-planning process. As precocious as the girl

seemed, he wouldn't be surprised if she could fix a gourmet meal all by herself, given the chance.

"That's good. You wouldn't want to be too predictable."

"What are you having for dinner?" Skye asked him.

"I don't know. I haven't crossed that bridge yet. Unfortunately, I do *not* have a pizza-on-Friday tradition, but it sounds good."

More than likely, he would head back to his father's house and make a sandwich or heat up a TV dinner—neither of which sounded very appetizing compared to the carbtastic wonders of A Slice of Heaven.

"You could come with us," Skye suggested.

He glanced at Melissa, who looked taken aback by the invitation. She didn't seem crazy about the idea, yet Eli was surprised at how very much he wanted to accept. The idea of eating alone again at his father's house held no appeal.

"I don't want to impose on your night out together."

"We eat together every night," Skye said. "Besides, pizza always tastes better when it's shared. It's a scientific fact. Anyway, that's what my mom says."

"Funny. I don't remember learning about that in school."

He sent a sidelong look to Melissa, who shrugged and blushed at the same time.

"You must have missed the breakthrough study. Plus, when you share a pizza, the calories don't count."

"Good to know. I wasn't aware."

"But you've probably had a long day," she said. "Don't let us pressure you into it."

He should gracefully back out of it. She didn't want

him there anyway. But he found he wasn't willing to do it. He wanted pizza and he wanted to spend more time with her. Neither craving was necessarily good for him, but that didn't seem to matter.

"I haven't had pizza from A Slice of Heaven in years. Now that you've planted that seed, I'm afraid nothing else will do except that. Thank you for inviting me."

She paused, then gave a smile that seemed only a little forced. "Great. Do you remember where the pizza parlor is?"

"I could probably find it in my sleep. I'll meet you there."

"See you." Skye tugged on her mom's hand. "Let's go. I'm starving!"

She followed her daughter out of the rehab center, and he watched them go for a moment before following closely behind.

As delicious as the wood-fired pizza was at the beloved seaside pizzeria, he found Melissa and her daughter even more appealing.

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A ROAD TO LOVE NOVEL

CHAPTER ONE

MARY DANIELS HUFFED as she continued to climb the rock path on the hillside, her briefcase in hand. Had she known that the Mustang Transport courier service was inaccessible unless a person planned to hike, she wouldn't have worn one of her nicest blouses. Or a skirt. Or the low-heeled shoes that were now starting to rub her heels raw.

Being short and excessively curvy made it difficult to find clothes that fit in a way to play down her proportions rather than emphasize them. She thought she'd succeeded, but now...

She had the awful suspicion that she'd started to sweat.

Worse, as she looked around at the not-impressive surroundings, she very well might be overdressed.

Tendrils of her hair, always a little frizzy, began to spring loose from her topknot. With the late-morning July sun full on her face, no doubt her freckles showed stark against her flushed skin.

Misery.

But finally, finally, a building came into view. Granted, it looked more like a garage with an office attached than an elite business, but she went where she was directed, conducting the business assigned to her, with the people her employer chose.

She reached level ground—and froze, stunned.

The building sat to her right, but to her left stood a man, his naked upper body under the hood of a junker

as he worked on...well, something. The engine maybe. He wore ridiculously faded jeans that almost fell off his hips, with work boots. Muscles flexed in brawny arms and his broad back glistened in the sunshine.

No man had ever left her breathless, but she'd never seen a man like him before. Suddenly her clothes felt too tight and her lungs seemed to have stopped working.

Behind him, a woman tickled her fingertips down the groove of his spine to those low-slung jeans, across his butt and...

Mary gasped as the woman reached under him for a bold fondle.

A big lazy gray dog, which she hadn't even noticed, lifted its head and gave one vaguely interested "Woof."

The man didn't appear to notice being sexually stroked in the light of day, out in the yard, while working on a car—but with the dog's bark he glanced at her and away—and quickly came back for another, more assessing look.

Good Lord. Her heart stalled, then shot into a gallop.

Slowly, he straightened. His dark brown eyes, framed by crazy thick lashes, locked on her. Grease streaked parts of his broad, hairy chest, down solid abs, even across a flat stomach bisected by that same downy hair...

It suddenly struck her *where* she was looking and she ripped her attention back up to his face.

Though his mouth curled in a sign of amusement, his granite shoulders flexed as if in anger. Without releasing her from his stare, he cleaned his hands on a rag, then swiped a wrist across his forehead beneath a bandanna he'd tied around unruly brown hair.

The woman, a stunning blonde in a barely there sundress, stepped in front of him to ask her, "Who are you?"

Mary stiffened. The woman's suspicious tone made it clear that she'd intruded on an intimate moment.

An intimate moment, out in the yard of a business, in broad daylight.

Struggling to focus on anything else, Mary noted the dirt racetrack beyond the people. Adjacent to that property she saw a drive that probably wound around the hill and to the main road below—which meant she had parked below and climbed those awful stone stairs for no reason.

Well, really, they needed a sign with some directions for customers.

Movement in the building drew her gaze and she spotted an attractive man—a clean man, fully dressed—stepping out from behind a desk.

Thank God. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said to the woman and hurried to the door.

The gentleman from inside beat her to it, opening the door with a smile. “May I help you?”

“Yes, thank you.” She wanted inside—away from the caveman, the model and the grueling heat, but he stood there, inadvertently blocking her way. He was as tall as the caveman, not quite as bulky but still very fit, wearing a polo shirt and khakis.

Attractive, yes, but not overwhelmingly so like the other one. “I’m here to discuss business with Brodie Crews.”

The man smiled. *He* didn’t look like a Neanderthal. *He* wasn’t covered in grease. And best of all, *he* wore a respectable amount of clothes.

But he said, “I’m Jack Crews.” Looking beyond her, he said, “Brodie?”

Oh. Oh *no*. Dread crept over Mary. No, no, no.

The scent of grease and heated male alerted her to his

nearness before a rumbling deep voice said from right behind her, "I'm Brodie. What can I do you for?"

AT HIS DELIBERATELY misspoken question, little Red whirled, her expression aghast. She looked ready to faint. Or maybe scream.

Odds of her running away were high.

Brodie grinned—then winced at the pain in his head.

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She closed it again, breathing deeply from flared nostrils.

Gorgeous mouth, he noticed. Full lips that looked a little pouty when he doubted this woman knew how to pout. As he stared at her, more freckles appeared over the bridge of her narrow, hoity nose. Her eyes were vivid blue, like the midday sky or sapphires or... Hell, he was too hungover to pinpoint the exact color of her eyes.

Her hair, though, he could nail that: fire red. And curly.

His gaze swept over her body quickly, but a glance was all he'd needed to realize she was stacked and doing her best to hide it.

Jack cleared his throat and the woman jumped as if his brother had goosed her. She looked back at Jack with longing, then at Brodie with distaste. "You're Brodie?"

Never had a woman said his name with such disappointment. True, he wasn't at his best, but still...

Just then, Gina's boobs smooshed up against his sweaty back as she draped herself over him, trying to stake a claim.

"Brodie," she whined in his ear. "About tonight?"

There'd be no shrugging her off, so he said to Red, "Scuse me a sec," and turned to walk toward the car. After a smug look shot at Red, Gina came along.

He hadn't gone far enough away not to be heard, but

it was his best stab at compassion. He shoved his hands in the back pockets of his sagging jeans. "I already told you no. No for tonight, no forever. Let it go, okay?"

"But—"

"No buts. Jack and I share a lot, but not that."

He heard Red gasp again, heard Jack growl, and then the office door opened. Brodie glanced their way in time to see his brother escorting the scorched redhead inside.

Why the hell did that bug him so much? *Because she came here for me.*

"Jack was a mistake. I want you, Brodie."

He rolled his eyes. Now she was insulting his brother? Did the woman not know his feelings on family?

Apparently not.

"This isn't a carnival. You don't get a ticket for all the rides." Her pout was deliberate and perfectly practiced. If she hadn't screwed his brother, he might've been interested. "Go home," he said, a little more gently. "We're not happening."

Without bothering to look at Gina again, he turned to Howler. The dog had sprawled in the scant shade of the Mustang, catcher-mitt paws in the air, junk on display, one loose lip drooping down to touch a floppy ear. "C'mon, boy. Let's go cool off."

Howler opened one eye, grumbled and closed it again.

"I'm going to get lunch."

That got his attention. The dog's long bony legs flailed in the air as he frantically struggled upright, lumbered to his feet and ran over with a "Woof."

Quiet voices reached him as Brodie stepped inside; Jack's calming, Red's rushed denial. The brush of cooled air played over his fevered skin, drying the sweat on his body and tightening his nipples. He went past Jack's office, glancing in only long enough to say, "Be right back."

He saw Charlotte—his and Jack’s secretary, who was more like a little sister since they’d known her forever—fetching cold bottles of water.

He leaned in to whisper, “Don’t let her flee, okay? I gotta wash up but I’ll only be a minute.”

Brows up, Charlotte snorted. “I’m not your pimp.”

Brodie cocked one brow. “She wants to hire me, brat.”

“Not anymore, she doesn’t. She’s doing her best to convince Jack to take the job instead.” With a wink, she sidled past him and down the hall to the office with the drinks.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered to her back, apparently not low enough.

Red leaned out the door to frown at him, but was guided back inside when Charlotte entered.

He heard Jack doing introductions. “Ms. Daniels, this is Charlotte Parrish, our assistant.”

“Their *everything*,” Charlotte corrected. Then the little witch shut the door so he couldn’t hear anything else.

Howler gave Brodie a look, then pivoted to trot after Charlotte, knowing she was the real source of food.

Annoyed, Brodie shoved into the bathroom, but wished he hadn’t when the door hit the wall and his head tried to crack and fall off his shoulders.

After digging aspirin from the crooked medicine cabinet, he washed them down with water from the tap, scrubbed his hands with the special soap to remove as much grease as he could and splashed his face and chest.

One look in the mirror and he knew he hadn’t improved things much. He still looked like hell. He thought about getting his shirt from his car...

Fuck it.

He rapidly dried off and sauntered to the office, open-

ing the door and stepping inside just as Red was making her argument.

Charlotte blew him a kiss on her way out.

“Yes, my boss requested Brodie specifically, but that was based off internet research. I’m sure he wouldn’t be opposed to hiring you instead—”

“No.” Brodie turned a chair to face her profile and slouched into it, his sprawled legs only inches from touching her small feet.

As Red inhaled, her extraordinary chest swelled, her chin tucked in and her brows came down. It was an impressive show of anger and control.

If he wasn’t such a dick, he might have felt chastened.

She slowly turned her head to pinpoint him with her brilliant blue-eyed disdain. “You look inebriated,” she stated, her voice a little louder than it needed to be.

“Cuz I was. But that was last night. Now I’m just suffering a hangover.” He winced theatrically. “Have a heart and talk a little softer.”

“Why,” she asked, her voice not one iota quieter, “are you working in the sun if you’re—”

“How else will I learn?” Keeping his face straight wasn’t easy, but her expression made the effort worthwhile.

Her brows smoothed out, then lifted. “Pardon?”

Jack laughed—and since he was a loving brother, *he* at least moderated his tone. “Brodie is a big believer in self-discipline.”

“More like self-castigation,” Charlotte muttered as she returned with a tray of sandwiches and chips on paper plates. “If he suffers the ill effects of his decisions, maybe he’ll make better ones.”

Brodie saluted her with his water bottle, then took half

of his sandwich and offered it to Howler. The dog gulped it down in one big bite, then waited hopefully for another.

“Damn, man. You seriously gotta learn to chew.”

Ears up and alert, the dog licked his loose lips.

Red blinked quickly.

Brodie blinked back at her. Mocking. Taunting.

Why, he didn’t know, but it just happened.

She rolled in those soft, plush lips and turned away, her curvy little body stiff. “Mr. Crews—”

Jack and Brodie both said, “Yes?”

Her spine straightened even more. Her gaze stayed only on Jack. “I’m quite sure my employer would be pleased to—”

“Jack’s not available.” Brodie bit into the other half of his sandwich.

Her hands fisted in her lap. “I haven’t yet said when I need him.”

When she *needed* him? Smirking, the wheels already turning—

Jack glared a not-too-subtle warning at him, cutting off the joke he so badly wanted to make. Yeah, he got it. They needed the job.

He swallowed the bite and asked, “What’re the specifics for the job?”

Somehow, the little prude managed to stiffen even more. She looked ready to break—and damn, how he wanted to see that.

Her attention only on Jack—or so she wanted them to believe—she pulled out a manila folder from the soft briefcase she held in her lap.

Tilting his head, Brodie studied her shapely calves and trim ankles beneath a knee-length skirt. Her skin was pale, her legs smooth, her feet small.

Hell, he'd known plenty of small smooth pale women, so why was he getting so twitchy?

"The job is immediate." She slid the folder across the desk.

As she did so, the skirt grew taut over her sexy rump and rounded thighs.

Yeah, he noticed. Hell, no amount of alcohol or morning-after headaches would keep him from seeing something that luscious.

Little red ringlets, curled from the humidity, stuck to her delicate nape and dangled around ears decorated only with pearl studs.

Realizing he was taking interested inventory, Brodie lounged farther back in his seat and gestured for Jack to open the folder and peruse the contents.

First, Jack set aside the enclosed business card, then looked over what Brodie assumed to be a proposed contract. After a few seconds of reading, Jack asked, "Mari-gold, Kentucky?"

"A very small town that borders Tennessee. I've estimated it to be a single-day job. Five hours to drive there, an hour to retrieve the item my employer has purchased, then the drive back." She nodded at the papers. "Sign and you're hired."

Jack turned the contract so Brodie could see it, but spoke to the lady. "This says five thousand dollars. For a *day* job?"

Brodie nearly whistled. That was some serious cash. "What are we picking up? A dead body?"

Soft lips pinched. "Of course not."

"A *live* body?"

She swiveled her head to glare at him, cobalt eyes trying to cut out his heart.

"Hey, I've seen *The Transporter*."

She inhaled, making her breasts strain the front of that damp, thus sheer, blouse. “What my employer has purchased is very important to him. He wants to ensure its safety...and it needs to be delivered to him by end of day tomorrow.”

“Does the contract say what it is?” Brodie asked.

“Does it matter?” she returned.

Jack and Brodie shared a look, but hey, five grand was five grand. If he got there and it was anything shady, he could deal with it then.

Decision made, Brodie enjoyed telling her, “Well, Jack’s out.”

“True,” Jack said with sincere apology. “I have a previous commitment that can’t be changed. But Brodie—”

“Your *first* choice,” Brodie chimed in.

“—is absolutely available.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Knowing he’d gotten his way, without quite knowing why it mattered, Brodie put his arms back in a relaxed pose, his fingers laced behind his neck so he could pop out some tension without being obvious about it. He really did feel like shit.

Yet the day rapidly improved.

Miss Priss glanced at his armpits, scrunched her face in disapproval and turned back to Jack with a plea. “But—”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said.

She disapproved of *armpits*? Everyone had them, even prissy redheads. Brodie smiled. “I can leave at 5:00 a.m.”

After prolonged hesitation and, he guessed, some teeth grinding, she finally nodded.

Thwarting the lady felt so good, it even took the edge off the drumbeat in his temples as he watched her averted face. “Just give me the address and the name of the per-

son I'll be seeing, whatever other info I need, and I'll get it done."

Silently, she closed her briefcase, slid a long strap over her shoulder and stood.

Jack came to his feet, too.

Brodie didn't. He tipped his chair back on two legs and watched the frustration play over her face. She wasn't a real beauty, but she was certainly pretty. The hair was a showstopper. Those eyes, so damn blue they defied description, would always draw attention. And that mouth, even while compressed in annoyance, could inspire fantasies.

Here in the cooler air, her freckles weren't as noticeable.

Shame. They were kinda cute. Maybe sexy even.

All that with curves galore in such a small package, and it was no wonder she affected him.

"Ahem."

Brodie forced his eyes off the lady long enough to cock a brow at his brother.

Jack's scowl sent a message loud and clear: *if you lose this job by being an asshole, I'll make sure you regret it later.*

Knowing Jack, he'd probably take advantage of Brodie's diminished state. Sighing, he decided to attempt some gentlemanly behavior.

But Red beat him to it.

"I'll have all the pertinent details, as well as half the payment, with me tomorrow before we leave. We can finalize the contract then."

His chair dropped forward with a clatter, making his head nearly explode. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw to contain his brain, which seemed to

be doing aerobics between his ears. When it finally eased up he cracked open one eye.

Both Jack and Red watched him, the first with pity, the second with annoyance.

“We?” Brodie rasped, unsure he’d heard correctly.

“It is my responsibility to ensure the safety of my employer’s purchases.” She looked down her nose at him. “You are merely the transporter.”

Merely the transporter? Indignation brought him to his feet so that he towered over her. Her haughty little nose barely reached his collarbone, but did she back up a step?

No, not this ballsy lady. Instead she tipped back her head and met him glare for glare.

Brows drawn together, Brodie pointed a finger and opened his mouth.

But she wasn’t done.

“Be sober tomorrow.”

He almost sputtered at that flat demand. “I don’t drink and drive!”

One brow arched up. “No hangover, either.” Her stern gaze dipped over his body, and then she dismissed him as she turned away—with a last cutting remark. “And, Mr. Crews?”

He waited.

One hand on the doorknob, she glanced over her shoulder. “If you truly want the job, you must be fully dressed.”

With that edict, she marched out of the office and toward the exit.

Brodie stepped out to the hall to stare after her, watching that well-rounded behind barely sway at all as she went through the door and into the dusty yard. Well, damn.

Joining him, Jack put a hand to his shoulder. “I like her.”

“You would,” he grumbled. But honestly, he liked her, too. The lady was a fireball. He started to grin.

“No,” Jack said. “We need the money, so don’t fuck it up or I’ll demolish you.”

“That’s the thing with you,” Brodie complained with good humor. “You only look like the civilized one.”

MARY CURSED HERSELF for the hundredth—maybe the thousandth—time as she sat on the bed, her laptop open before her at three in the morning. Her eyes burned and she couldn’t stop yawning, but then she hadn’t slept much through the night.

She put the blame for her sleepless night squarely on the boulder shoulders of that scruffy-faced, rude, provoking cretin that Therman insisted she hire. When he’d first named Brodie Crews as the courier he wanted, she’d thought nothing of it. Their last transporter had relocated and hadn’t been that reliable anyway. Twice he’d been unable to accept Therman’s assignments, and that had left them scrambling for a replacement. If Brodie Crews worked out, Therman wanted him on retainer.

But then her boss, Therman Ritter, an eighty-six-year-old eccentric sweetheart, didn’t have to be around the man. No, Therman stayed tucked away in his million-dollar retreat, collecting his “valuables” and avoiding society.

It was Mary’s job to socialize, to make human contact and to ensure the acquisitions happened without a hitch. She always accompanied the courier to guarantee Therman’s interests were respected—and kept private.

She should have had Mr. Crews sign the contract yesterday, but at that point she’d still been hoping to talk Therman out of hiring him.

And she’d wanted to get away from the man as quickly as possible.

In some indefinable way, he threatened her peace of mind and her carefully crafted persona. A first for her, and damn him, she didn't like it.

Looking over all the research she could find on Brodie, she marveled that Therman had chosen him. She couldn't find one overwhelming reason to explain why her unusual boss had focused on that brother instead of the other, but she did know now that Jack wouldn't have been accepted. Therman had been very clear on that point.

Thank God Brodie had insisted, because Therman had been very displeased with her efforts to switch up brothers. Her descriptions of them, her comparisons, hadn't mattered at all.

Therman wanted Brodie, and only Brodie.

It wasn't the Mustang Transport website that had convinced him. It was still being built and contained only the basics. It wasn't Brodie's bio, either, which mostly mentioned his history as a courier and dedicated work ethic. Nor would it be his stellar driving record, because that was expected for his career choice.

No, the one thing that had won over Therman was Brodie's rescue of that oversize, long-boned dog. Therman had read a lot into it: compassion, determination, duty, honor... The list went on and on. That single heroic incident had convinced him that Brodie was the perfect person to complete the job.

Frustrated, Mary sat back against the pillows and read the too-brief article again. Brodie had found the dog chained to a stake in the broiling sun near a junkyard. No food, no water. Signs of abuse.

Mary swiped away a tear, furious with the idea that anyone would ever mistreat any animal. In many ways, it was the same as mistreating a child. One couldn't speak, and the other was often too afraid to tell.

Brodie must've been furious, too, because he found the owners and offered for the dog. In doing so he'd apparently stumbled onto a drug deal in progress. Guns were drawn, shots fired—and somehow Brodie had come out of it whole hide, with three men wounded. He'd taken the dog home, rehabilitated him and given him the cushy life.

That was a year ago, and while Mary did consider it incredibly heroic, it had absolutely nothing to do with transporting Therman's valuables.

Knowing she couldn't put it off any longer, she closed her laptop and got up to shower and dress. It'd be a long drive, requiring professional yet comfortable clothes. Knowing things didn't always go as planned, she carried an overnight bag with an outfit change and other necessities, just in case. In the past she'd been caught in downpours, had food or drinks dumped on her, and once she'd slipped on a muddy hill.

Since she detested her freckles, she also packed her makeup for touch-ups.

Today, she would not let Brodie rile her.

She wouldn't deliberately breathe in his earthy scent, either.

Or admire his body... The way those massive shoulders flexed with each small movement, or how his muscular frame tapered into lean hips, and how that damp, curling body hair teased down his torso and into the loose jeans that hung so low...

Mary stifled a small groan. Ungluing her feet from the floor, she rushed into the shower, vowing that she definitely wouldn't notice that.

Given her instructions on his presentation, namely that he be fully clothed, it should be a little easier.

She'd never known a man like him, never experienced

such casual rudeness and disregard for propriety, never met a man so, so...unashamedly masculine.

She'd never felt the ridiculous magnetism.

Mary covered her face, whispering aloud her shameful truth, "Physical attraction." She was hotly, keenly turned on by a goon, a brute, a man who flung his maleness out there for all to gawk at.

And gawk she had.

Over and over again the scenario in the office played in her mind. The way he'd slouched in his seat, uncaring that his legs had sprawled out, his big feet in the rough boots almost touching her chair, those solid thighs straining the worn material of his jeans.

The soft bulge behind his fly nearly impossible to ignore.

He'd positioned those thick arms behind his head, exposing his underarms as if it were a casual thing to display himself in front of a possible client. The pose had flattened his impressive pec muscles into solid slabs over his chest, while bulging his biceps and tightening his abs.

And she'd looked. Against her will, against her usual comportment, against every proper behavior she'd always adhered to, she'd been unable *not* to look.

It was as if all decorum and civility had been stripped away from him, leaving only hot, raw man and she, as a woman, had instinctively reacted.

But that was yesterday and this was today, and today would be different. She'd see to it.

By the time she headed out of her apartment to her silver Ford, she'd donned as much armor as she could.

Subtle makeup covered her freckles.

Her wild hair was tightly contained in a knot at the top of her head.

She wore a long loose gauze skirt that skimmed her ankles, with a snug-fitting tank, topped by a blouse for

extra coverage in case his car's air-conditioning made her too cool, and comfortable slip-on sandals. She looked neat and professional, but not stuffy.

And best of all, her overblown curves weren't that noticeable.

After stowing her briefcase and small overnight bag in the back seat, she checked her phone one more time to ensure she hadn't missed any messages. Therman often had last-minute instructions, but today, with Brodie, he remained silent.

Ignoring the tiny thrill zinging through her bloodstream, she set off for the Mustang Transport office.

She had a feeling today would be quite the adventure—because Brodie Crews was quite the man.

CHAPTER TWO

THE OFFICES WERE EMPTY, the air heavy and still, only Howler's snores breaking the silence.

Brodie glanced at his phone screen to check the time, then returned it to his back pocket. Red was two minutes late. He folded his arms. What if he'd scared her off? What if she'd found some other courier to take the job?

They could use the money both to make repairs to the existing office and to expand the business. But that was only part of the reason he wanted her to show.

Yesterday he'd been in a fog of discomfort, so he wasn't sure if her impact on him had been as sharp as he remembered. Red hair, blue eyes, a full rack and a handful at the rear... Nice, yes. Sexy, sure.

But altogether, did she really pack such a lusty punch to the libido, or had he only been weakened by the hang-over?

He kept picturing her with her frowns and derision, contrasted with that rockin' bod, and why the hell that'd make his cock jump, he had no idea. But even now he felt it, the brief stirring, the pull.

Fuck that.

Today, he decided, he would play it cool. He'd be businesslike. Circumspect. Calmly polite.

If she showed.

Damn it, he should have gotten the contract signed yesterday. If he hadn't been so busy pricking her temper

and enjoying her reactions, he might've thought ahead to do it.

Jack, who hadn't been nearly as fascinated with her, should have seen to it. But no, that dick just let him wallow in his bad manners with only the occasional glare.

Why the hell hadn't Charlotte made it a priority? She had enough experience, along with a real head for business, to know it should've been done. Why had they let a financial catch like Mary Daniels slip out with no more than a verbal commitment?

Suddenly Howler perked up one ear. That was followed by one eye opening. That single eye searched the area directly in front of him—because Howler wasn't getting up just out of curiosity. As headlights flashed over the track, the big dog managed to lift his head enough to issue a single “Woof.”

That done, he stretched out again.

“What a good dog,” Brodie said in the voice reserved only for Howler. He knelt and stroked the animal's neck. “You're the best guard dog ever. Yes, you are.” Howler's tail thumped at the praise. “Contract first,” Brodie told him, though he suspected Howler was back asleep. “Then we'll go.”

At that particular word, the dog bounded up in a clumsy rush and circled his car, looking for a way to get in.

“Not yet, boy. Patience.” Waiting for Red to reach him—which, given her snail's pace, could take a while—Brodie leaned against the fender and crossed his arms. Anticipation prickled along his spine.

Why, he didn't know, but there you had it.

Per her request, aka demand, he was clearheaded this morning, freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. The thick morning air settled dew on everything, including him. On the ground beside him, a packed

cooler waited with a thermos of coffee leaning against it, lidded travel mugs on top.

Her car, a pristine silver Ford, rolled up behind his. Through the dim light of the security lamps, he watched her put the car in Park. She opened her door and out came one small foot, adorned in a white sandal with a fluttery floral skirt drifting around it. Her toenails were painted a shiny color that closely matched her skin.

Not looking at him, she stepped out and brought her seat forward so she could retrieve a few things from the back seat.

Her briefcase and...an overnight bag? Interesting.

Down, he told his baser instincts. *We're not spending the night with her.*

Noticing that she didn't have a cooler, Brodie suppressed a smile. He could behave and still have some fun. Perfect.

After locking her doors, she finally glanced up at him, her assessing gaze going over him as if looking for signs of dissolution.

Brodie spread his arms wide. "Do I pass muster? Got enough covered up to spare your delicate sensibilities? I don't need a hat, do I?" He ran his fingers through his messy hair, then down over his throat. "A muffler? It's damn hot for a muffler but if throats shock you—"

"You'll do," she cut in, her tone calm and controlled. Too controlled, damn it.

Sapphire eyes clashed with his, then she sniffed and looked away. "A shave wouldn't have killed you."

"How do you know?" He scratched over his scruffy jaw, hearing the rasp of a two-day shadow. "I shave every other week. That's enough torture for any man."

Her widened gaze came back to his. "Every other?"

"Week," he filled in for her since she seemed too ap-

palled to manage the last word. Every muscle in his body flexed with interest. Insane. She wasn't wearing anything sexy—the opposite, in fact. She didn't make any overt gesture toward him. And her poor hair—she'd drawn it up so tightly it made his temples sympathize.

“And in the meantime?”

He'd been so busy thinking about liberating her hair, it took him a second to catch her meaning. “In between shaves, I have whiskers. Not a big deal, you know. Men are hairy. People—” he silently mouthed, *You* “—should learn to deal with it.”

Hostility tightened her jaw. “So you won't have to bother grooming yourself?”

“Hey, I'm groomed. Mostly anyway. I showered, brushed my teeth, sort of combed my hair—”

“Sort of?”

He wiggled his fingers. “Works as well as a comb.” Before he forgot that he was supposed to be polite and nice and all that other sugary shit, he swiped a forearm over the narrow trunk space and the low spoiler at the back of his Mustang to remove the dew. “Contract?”

“Oh.” As if coming out of a daze, she withdrew papers and looked toward the office.

“Still locked up. Charlotte won't get here till nine, Jack is gone for the day, and we should have headed out five minutes ago.” A subtle jab while withholding a last bathroom break. *That's what you get, Red, for your constant criticisms.*

She frowned. “I'm only a few minutes late, and only because I wasn't familiar with the road that came up here. Yesterday I climbed those grueling rock stairs and I didn't want to have to do that again.”

“I run those bitches like Rocky, but yeah.” He dropped

his gaze to her hips, then to her ankles and those shiny little toes. "Guess I'm a little more muscular than you."

"A little," she said, her tone prim.

What an understatement. At about five-two, she was at least a foot shorter than him and no doubt a hundred pounds lighter, with most of her weight being tits and ass. But whatever. She might've lacked brute strength, but she made up for it with attitude and confidence.

At a loss as to how to reply to that, she just looked at him.

He gestured at her briefcase. "Contract?" he said again, but what he really meant was: Check?

"Of course." She approached the car and, with reluctance, laid her briefcase against the trunk with the contract on top. She handed him a fancy pen that probably cost more than a tankful of gas.

After quickly reading it over, he saw that it was a standard agreement except for the amount paid and the stipulation that he had a very short time frame to deliver. Interesting that Mary Daniels was listed as an agent to contact for any issues and all communication related to the delivery service.

It meant he still didn't know who he worked for, only that Red was employed to see the job done.

He twirled the pen. "So who are we delivering to?"

"It's not a secret, so don't look so suspicious."

"Time's tickin' away here, Red."

"Mary," she corrected, going rigid as the rebar used to reinforce concrete. "I'm employed by Therman Ritter." Her stiff smile was more like a baring of teeth. "If you sign the contract, you will be employed by him as well."

Brodie sighed. "Fine." He scribbled his name at the appropriate place.

She handed him a check, careful not to touch him.

“Half now, half once we deliver.” She folded her hands together. “There’s one more thing.”

Before she could say something that might make him rethink the deal, he tucked the check away in his wallet.

Easiest money ever made—so far. With that done, he looked down at her.

Even in the dim dawn, her hair shone like a beacon, picking up each and every beam of available light. God, how he’d love to see it down.

Not like that’d happen anytime soon, though.

She really was a little thing. And those expressive eyes, those plush lips... He drew a breath. “What’s the other thing?”

“If this exchange goes well, Therman is interested in putting Mustang Transport on retainer.”

“No shit?”

“Er...”

“Like he’d use us exclusively?” How many high-end deals did this guy make a year? A month?

She nodded but then corrected, “More specifically, he wants to put *you* on retainer.”

“Huh.” Should he be flattered or wary? Unsure, Brodie squinted across the landscape at the rising sun. “How about we discuss that on the road?” He needed to ensure the success of *this* transport before planning the future.

“Certainly.” She glanced around. “Where’s your car?”

Keeping his smile inside, he opened the driver’s door, pulled the seat forward and whistled. Howler, who’d been sitting not too patiently, came alive in that clumsy, rushing way unique to him and his too-long limbs. In one big leap, he shot through the slim space into the back seat. Sitting much like an old man with his head and shoulders stooped forward, knobby knees up, and expectation

on his long face, he took up every available inch of room on the seats.

Brodie closed the door, circled to the passenger side and with an absurd flourish, opened her door.

At first she didn't move. She appeared to be taking in the obvious with disbelief bordering on horror.

Finally she closed her mouth and found her voice. "*This* is the car you're taking?"

"Yup." He stroked along the roof. "She's the girl that never lets me down."

Red struck a militant pose, her arms stiff down at her sides, hands fisted, jaw tight. "Does this car even run?"

He put on a face of affront. "Of course she runs."

"*She's* rusted."

"No, she's touched up with primer because soon she'll be—" he looked at Mary's hair "*—red*. I would think you'd know the difference between falling apart and a trip to the salon."

Blue eyes flared, then narrowed severely. In a dangerous purr, she asked, "You think I deliberately made my hair this color?"

Hmm. He would have teased her more, but he detected a hint of hurt in her tone, as if she didn't like her hair. Hard to imagine since he thought it was sexy personified, but he'd tackle that in a bit—after the steam stopped coming out of her ears. "I think it's hot as hell out here and my dog will roast if you don't get a move on."

She fumed a few seconds more, then seemed to catch herself. Her lashes lowered as she took a deep breath that swelled her chest, and when she opened them again, he saw the banked ire as well as that iron control.

Admirable. There were a lot of facets to the lady's personality. He'd never been that fond of puzzles, but damned if he didn't want to figure her out.

“You were working on her—” she shook her head “—*it*, yesterday.”

Nose in the air, he stated, “Her name is Matilda.” At that bit of nonsense, Red looked ready to stomp.

In fact, she *did* stomp—on her way to the car. She shoved the overnight case onto the back seat. As she slid in, she muttered under her breath, “*Matilda.*”

Brodie let himself grin as he said, “Buckle up.” Then he circled around to the other side of the car and did the same with Howler. “That’s a good boy,” he crooned to the dog. “Good dog. Yes, you are.”

As if in slow motion, Red swiveled around to ogle him.

He kissed the dog on his wrinkled forehead, which earned him a big sloppy tongue kiss, right up his chin to his left eye.

Using his shoulder to wipe away slobber, he grimaced. “You’re the only dude I’ll let do that, bud.”

Red was still giving him that look of incredulity as he moved her case to the floor, away from Howler. He even helped block it with the hard-sided cooler, then poured himself a coffee.

One look at her face and he huffed. “Howler is in a perpetual state of teething. If I hadn’t moved your case, he’d have gnawed on it the whole trip.”

“That dog is not a baby.”

“Try telling him that.” Brodie shrugged. “Next to sleeping and eating, his favorite activity is chewing.” Pretty much everything—except for the chew toys he had in abundance.

“Thank you, but that’s not what I meant.” Her right eyebrow rose. “You baby-talk your dog.”

“So?”

“So you and that particular tone are a very odd mix.”

“Howler likes it.” And that was what mattered. Before she could ask him how he knew that, he offered, “Coffee?”

Catching her bottom lip in her teeth, she hesitated.

Mmm. He wouldn’t mind biting that lip himself. It was plump and soft, rosy and wet, and he’d bet his left nut she tasted really good.

“You have another cup?”

His gaze jumped up to hers. Was she afraid to share with him? Thought he might give her cooties? Somehow every damn thing she said managed to offend him.

Or turn him on.

Mostly turn him on. “I don’t give my morning coffee to just anyone, so yes, I have another cup.”

“Then thank you.”

“I have cream and sugar packets if you—”

“Black is good.” She took it from him, sipped and murmured, “Oh, that’s so good,” in a husky whisper that tiptoed down his spine. Lashes at half-mast, she held the travel mug close to her stubborn little nose and breathed in the aroma.

Brodie stood there, a little dumbfounded that she could make drinking coffee look and sound so sexual. “Anyway.” He poured another cup, snapped on the lid and put it in the console holder between the seats, then got behind the wheel. “You don’t mind Howler going along?” Here he’d been all prepped for her arguments and she’d surprised him by not giving any.

“Not if he’s used to going along. Since he has his own car restraints, I assume he is.”

“Yeah, he hates to be left behind. Breaks my black heart to hear him whining, so he goes where I go. I had to make the restraint, by the way, because they don’t make them big enough to fit his—” he glanced at Howler as if worried he might offend “—bone structure. But it’s

definitely necessary.” With the turn of a key, the engine rumbled to life, purring like a kitten.

Maybe a pissed-off kitten, but still a kitten.

“Howler loves to ride, but if anything spooks him, and just about everything does, he crawls into the front seat and tries to get on my lap. Brought me close to wrecking a few times, so now I buckle him in.”

“It’s clever.” As he pulled away, she shifted to see the restraint again.

Brodie had to admit it wasn’t as pretty as something store-bought, but it got the job done. He’d designed it to attach to the seat belt buckle and to the harness that Howler only wore while riding. For extra stability, he’d expanded the usual single strap to two so it latched on both sides.

Howler had a tendency to topple on turns.

“You love him a lot.”

That particular soft voice from her could be lethal to his libido...if she said anything else. Why the hell would she use that word? Did the woman not date? Did she not know that men like him and that particular word didn’t mix? Any mention of love, even in relation to his dog, set off warning bells. Too many women had tried to go down that road, but unlike his dad, he’d wait to settle down until he was damn good and ready.

He wasn’t ready yet.

“He’s mine and I take care of what’s mine.”

“He wasn’t yours when you rescued him.”

Pushy, that was what she was.

He felt her watching him, but he concentrated on the road.

“You’ve had him ever since?”

Not a story he’d go into with her. Though it was a full year ago, thinking about it still put him in a dangerous

rage. Talking about it left him exposed. So he switched topics. "What about you? Any pets?"

"No." Turning to stare out the windshield, she held her coffee in both hands and sipped. "I'd love a dog or a cat, but I'm not home enough and it wouldn't be fair."

Something in her voice drew him. "Did you have pets as a kid?"

Her humorless laugh broke off quickly and she sipped again. "No, no pets."

Hmm. That edgy laugh put him on alert. "Ever?"

"Let's talk about future employment and what it'd mean to be under a retainer."

No one would ever mistake him for a gentleman. In fact, other than family, those who knew him would call him the exact opposite—and worse. But he knew how to read women, and this woman's desperate grasp for a new subject meant something about her past, maybe her upbringing, had left her emotionally bleeding.

Jerk or not, he would never deliberately hurt a woman, any woman. But for some bizarre reason that basic, bone-deep urge to protect suddenly burned extra hot.

If Red knew he was feeling territorial, that he wanted to shield her, she'd probably give him hell. She could take care of herself, he didn't doubt it, but that didn't matter to his baser instincts. He never fought the inevitable.

Nodding his agreement, he took the ramp onto I-71 South. "Lay it on me."

FOR ABOUT AN HOUR, Brodie was somewhat pleasant, causing Mary to change her initial assessment of him. He'd shared his coffee with her until they'd finished off the entire thermos. As they did so, they'd spoken amicably about a retainer agreement, with him accepting the re-

quirements without complaint. Overall he'd acted like a relaxed, competent, albeit rough-edged man.

So she decided to give him a second chance.

After all, having a hangover could have thrown off anyone. Plus she'd obviously caught him by surprise with her visit.

And granted, with the heat of the day and the embarrassing way she'd reacted to him, part of their adversarial byplay yesterday was her fault.

They passed another exit, and Mary squirmed. She glanced at Brodie's profile, wondering if she should ask him to stop.

Smug satisfaction curved his mouth into a smile.

Oh, it was small. Barely there, even. But she saw that little curl to his sensuous lips, the crinkle at the corners of his lushly lashed eyes.

That was when she started to wonder just how wicked he might be.

She'd made the early trip to his office—which had been closed. Then after sharing his coffee—the whole blasted thermos, most of which she'd drunk—he'd asked her to get them each a bottle of water from the cooler. Unsuspecting at the time, she'd politely accepted, and though he'd only taken a few drinks of his, she'd finished off her bottle.

Now they'd been on the road for a little over two hours, two and a half for her, and he showed no signs of stopping.

She was deeply regretting her beverage choices.

How difficult would it have been for him to unlock the office? And why, after their initial confrontation yesterday, had he gone out of his way to share with her this morning?

As they were passing yet another exit, he pointed

out—with a twinkle in his dark eyes—that they were right on schedule, making great time...unless she needed a pit stop?

The man was diabolical.

Well, if he thought she'd cry uncle, he'd be sadly mistaken. Pressing her lips together, she vowed that he'd give out before she would.

He turned on some music. "Feel free to nap."

Impossible. She crossed her legs and glanced at Howler. The big dog slumped sideways, his head drooped against the window where he'd started out watching the passing scenery but had since fallen asleep and begun snoring. All hope that the dog might need a pit stop died.

"Don't worry about Howler," Brodie said, as if he'd read her mind. "He sleeps more than he does anything else. Usually only *f-o-o-d* can rouse him."

The dog cracked open an eye, making her smile despite her need for a bathroom break. "I think he can spell."

"He catches on quick," Brodie agreed.

After a long sigh that sounded amazingly like disappointment, Howler's eye sank shut again and his snores returned.

Mary had a hundred questions about him, but she didn't want to chance stirring Brodie's curiosity again.

Her past was strictly off-limits.

The music, a mellow country tune, drifted in the air. She was more of a rock-and-roll woman, but she appreciated the sight of Brodie moving ever so slightly with the music, his fingers tapping against the steering wheel.

If a boulder could be relaxed, she'd say he was just that. Yet, while his expression seemed peaceful, his shoulders stretched his dark T-shirt and his biceps bunched and flexed with each small adjustment.

How exactly did a man go about getting a body like that?
“Do you work out?”

Mouth kicking up in amusement, he glanced at her. That dark-eyed gaze flashed over her before he returned his attention to the road. “You realize that’s a pickup line, right?”

Oh Lord, his eyes were...well, amazing. And hot. If it wasn’t for the unfamiliar lick of heat that intense look caused, she might’ve been embarrassed. Instead, her reaction threw her off.

Oh, she had her fair share of male attention, but usually it left her indifferent.

Not so with Brodie Crews.

Her MO was to steer clear of interested, or interesting, men, but really, what harm would it cause to look? She’d see him during this ride, then not again for a while. For that reason, she’d looked her fill—without being obvious.

His profile fascinated her, the way those thick, dark lashes shadowed his eyes, the high bridge of his strong nose and the curve to his mouth. His dark, thick hair held a slight wave, and no matter how many times he tunneled his fingers through it, it fell forward over his brow. The growth of whiskers on his jaw made her curious to know how it would feel to her fingertips.

And her lips.

“I’m just wondering,” she said, trying to play it off as idle chitchat. “You’re muscular for a man who makes his living driving a car.”

“I also work on cars.” He slid her an intimate smile. “As you know.”

The reminder of her first sight of him sent another flush over her skin. Coolly, she replied, “Is that what you were doing? I got an entirely different impression.”

“Because of the way Gina groped me?”

He said it without an iota of shame, making her jaw loosen and her mouth fall open.

Obviously, she was out of her league.

Brodie chuckled. "If I hadn't been struggling to stay upright, I'd have shaken her off sooner, but Gina can always sense weakness. She thought she'd sneak in there while my defenses were down."

"Your defenses?"

"I'm not at my best after a night of drinking."

"Then why did you do it?" Personally, she'd never seen the draw. She sometimes had wine on very special occasions, which were few and far between. Drink, drugs... They caused a loss of control, leaving you not only vulnerable, but oblivious to all that really mattered.

"I've turned her down more times than I can count." Brodie's mouth went sideways, then he scratched the top of his head. "She's persistent, I'll give her that."

"Is she in love with you?"

"Ha! No, not even a little." Laughing, he shook his head. "Gina likes me okay, but that's it. Mostly she wants bragging rights to say she's banged Jack and me both."

It took all Mary had not to drop her jaw again.

"The lady has a healthy sex drive. Unfortunately she also has a mean competitive streak."

"A..." Mary cleared the frog from her throat. "A mean competitive streak?"

"Yeah, you might not have noticed, but our business is in a small town. Small as in minuscule. Everyone knows Jack and me, and vice versa. My mom worked in the cafeteria at school, and Dad was known for his stunt driving." He rolled one shoulder. "Guess it'd be a coup to tag us both."

In a scandalized whisper, Mary asked, "At the same time?"

He looked stricken. “You know, I never thought to ask. If that is her preference, I doubt she gets her way very often. I know a lot of the guys she’s been with and I can’t think of any who’d go for that.”

“And now she wants you and Jack?”

He shrugged. “The lady’s doomed to failure, at least where I’m concerned.” His grin flashed. “Years ago, she and Jack spent a few hours together, and that puts her at the top of my no-go list. But over the last year, she’s decided I’m next...or something. Maybe I’m just the only game in town now.”

For some reason, this whole conversation got her annoyed. “So if she hadn’t been with Jack, you might have—”

“Doubtful. I guess I’ve known her too long, you know? Grew up with her older brother, and she was the nagging little sis who wouldn’t leave us alone. Doesn’t seem to matter that Gina’s a knockout now. Uninhibited, fun, isn’t clingy—”

Mary snorted.

Humor crinkled the corners of his eyes again. “Should I have been more specific?” Before she could answer, he said, “I should’ve. I meant she doesn’t get emotionally attached. Physically, yeah, she’s an octopus, but in a good way, you know?”

No, she didn’t know and didn’t want to know. “Does it bother your brother that she’s coming on to you?”

“Nah. They had a hookup, not a date or anything.”

Such a cavalier attitude made her stomach roil—because she knew she wasn’t the norm. For her, sexual involvement had always meant so much more than quick release, convenience or a lost hour. Too much more.

Keeping his eyes on the road, his voice neutral, Brodie asked, “You don’t hook up?”

She started to shake her head before she realized how inappropriate their entire conversation had become. How had she let it get that bad? To cover her faux pas, she blurted, “We need to stop for a break.”

“Thank God. I was beginning to think you were a camel.” Almost immediately he glanced in his mirrors, then switched lanes until he could take an exit to a rest stop.

Suspicious, Mary narrowed her eyes. “If you had to go, too, why did you make me ask?”

“To see if you would?”

That he said it like a question made her seethe. “So it was a game?”

“Or maybe just for the hell of it.” He steered into a parking spot. “Who knows how my mind works?”

“That’s the most—”

“Did it kill you to ask? No, it didn’t,” he replied before she could. “Count it as something new that you’ve learned.”

“I’ve learned you’re a jerk!”

“Maybe,” he agreed with a small smile. “But I didn’t bite, right? So while we’re together—”

Her eyes widened.

“For *business*, feel free to tell me when you need something.” He paused. “Even when it’s *not* business, just...tell me. Okay?”

Mary was trying to think how to reply, but as he turned off the car, the dog woke with a flurry of activity.

“Hang on, bud,” Brodie said to him. “You’re first on the agenda, I promise.”

The urge to rush from the car and hurry to the building with the restrooms was difficult to suppress, but she managed to leave the car in a leisurely manner. She even waited while he attached a leash to Howler’s harness.

Right there at the curb, Howler relieved himself. Then

again on a garbage can. And once more on a bush lining the path to the vending machines.

“Dude, we’re not in the pet area yet. Contain it, will you? People are looking.”

Mary didn’t mean to, but the laugh bubbled out. “You’re the one who made him wait so long.”

“You got me there.” He looked down at her, those dark eyes first teasing, but slowly warming with awareness. “You don’t have to stay with us.”

“Yes, well...” Every time he looked at her like that, it felt as if he’d physically touched her. Her breathing deepened. Her skin warmed. Her blood seemed to rush...

Abruptly, she turned away.

The rest area wasn’t crowded, but there were enough people to convince her she should hurry before she got caught in a line. “I’ll be right back.”

As she walked away, she felt his gaze tracking her, and it made her feel so funny inside, in a way she’d never really felt before.

Annoyance, she decided. He was too bold, too deliberately provoking, and he annoyed her.

That was all it could be. She wouldn’t let it be anything else.

While in the restroom, she took the time to freshen up. Her hair was still in the topknot, so she didn’t need to do anything to that, but she did touch up her makeup and chew a mint.

When she came back out, she found Brodie sitting in the picnic area at a wooden table under a tree. Howler stretched out his leash to sniff every blade of grass. He found a bug and ran a circle around it.

Mary checked the time. They were ahead of schedule and she was starting to get hungry. “Want to take a turn?” She indicated the restrooms. “I can hold his leash.”

“Thanks.” He handed it to her, then dug out a dog dish and walked off at an easy pace.

She realized she was watching his behind when Howler frantically tried to follow and pulled her half-way off the bench.

As if he’d expected it, Brodie turned. “Stay. I’ll be right back.”

When Howler sat, she felt safe in assuming Brodie’s order was for the dog.

Howler kept his attention glued on Brodie, a low, groaning whine coming from his throat.

Poor baby. Mary stroked his muscular neck. “You love him, don’t you?” She, at least, didn’t use baby talk. “He won’t be long. You’ll see.” Howler glanced at her, gave her hand a quick lick and went back to waiting.

Luckily Brodie returned in only minutes, balancing the dish, now full of water, which he set in front of Howler. The dog was too busy greeting him as if he’d just returned from war to take a drink.

When Brodie took the leash from her, she said, “I think I’ll grab something from the vending machines—unless you had other plans?” Whenever possible, she tried to defer to the driver’s preference.

“You said you always ride along with the drivers?”

“Yes. Therman insists that I be there to protect his interests.” A breeze carried her skirt against her legs, and she tipped up her face, eyes closed, to enjoy the shade and the scent of fresh air. After the long drive, it felt heavenly.

When Brodie said nothing else, she opened her eyes and found him studying her.

The probing intensity of his gaze made her breathless. Their eyes held for a few heartbeats before she managed to find her voice. After clearing her throat, she dragged

her attention to Howler. She tried to sound casual, but knew she failed miserably. "Why do you ask?"

After a few more seconds of perceptible scrutiny, he replied with a shrug in his tone, "Just wondering what it is you usually do for meals."

"I'm easy." The seconds the words left her mouth, she blanched. She knew without looking that Brodie now wore a smirk. She felt it, damn him.

What was it about Brodie that rattled her so badly? She'd dealt with drivers for three years now. Some were indifferent, some too anxious, some complete professionals.

None of them had been as explicitly sexual as Brodie.

None of them had made her too warm with just a look.

Gathering her wits, she explained, "By easy, I mean that I leave it up to the driver. Some like to grab fast food, some want to stop and stretch their legs at an actual restaurant."

"You adjust accordingly, huh? Nice. Gotta love an agreeable woman."

Everything he said screamed of innuendo, which made everything *she* said the same.

Gritting her teeth and barely repressing a snarl, she stated, "The contract stipulated that your expenses are covered. You saw that, correct?"

He nodded, then produced the cooler from under the table.

Howler jerked around so fast he tripped over his own feet. Eyes wide, his tail swinging in the air, he looked hopefully toward the food source.

"Take a seat," Brodie said to her as he withdrew cloth napkins first. "I packed enough for two."

"You packed food?" That seemed so incredibly domestic, which was in direct contrast with his carnal manner. "For me?"

He gave her a wicked grin as he produced wrapped sandwiches. "It's bad enough having Howler salivate over my food."

And now teasing?

She really wished he'd settle on one mood long enough to allow her to adjust to it. "I wouldn't have salivated." But her stomach growled as he set out two containers and more bottled water.

Before he unwrapped the food, he opened one bottle, took a drink, then pretended to put it in the water dish.

Howler ignored it.

"First you drink," Brodie said, his tone firm.

The dog looked at the bowl, back at Brodie—who hadn't moved—and back at the bowl. Finally he drank it all, his broad tongue slinging water everywhere.

Brodie refilled it with the bottle, then got out another dog dish.

On alert, Howler tracked his every move.

He opened a can of dog food—and pretended to eat some, even making a few "Mmm, mmm" sounds. Howler got to his feet, body tense in anticipation, and when Brodie put the food in the dish and gave it to him, the dog ate it so fast Mary couldn't hold in her laugh.

"I know, right?" Brodie turned on the bench to face her, his mouth twitching. "He has to think I'm giving him people food or he doesn't want it. 'Course, that's not healthy, so I fake it when I can."

"You two are hilarious."

"You find spoiled dogs funny?" He unwrapped a sandwich, then passed it to her.

"Guess I do." She looked at the loaded croissant. "What is this?"

"Chicken salad." He bit into his own with an expression of ecstasy that nearly stopped her heart.

Was that how he'd look during sex? Or would he appear more feral?

"My mom makes the best there is."

With a flush of embarrassment, she wrenched her gaze off his mouth and up to those dark eyes. His lashes cast shadows over his cheekbones as he watched her.

He looked as if he knew exactly what she'd imagined.

Mary cleared her throat. "Your mom?"

"You thought I was hatched in a lab?" When he peeled back the lids on the other containers, she saw dill pickles and potato chips. He gestured. "Help yourself."

"I've never before had a picnic with a driver." But here, under the tree with the sun shining bright and Howler still licking his lips, it felt completely natural to accept his offer. She took a bite of the sandwich, and agreed with him. "Mmm. This is delicious." Far, far better than anything she could have gotten from the vending machine or a fast-food drive-through.

"Told you so." He grabbed up a few chips. "So you usually keep it all stuffy and professional with the couriers, even though you're stuck in the car with them for hours?"

"It's easier than you think when I can sit in the back seat and do work along the way."

"Ah. But Howler has the back seat and there's no room for you." He nodded with what looked like pure satisfaction. "So I forced your hand on that."

Mary tipped her head. "In a sense." It was her job to understand the courier, to determine their reliability, their loyalty, but she wasn't sure a lifetime around Brodie would help her to understand him. "Was it important to you to 'force my hand'?"

"For the sake of my sanity, yeah." He ate half a pickle wedge in one big bite.

There he went, confusing her again. “Your sanity?”

“Yeah, I can’t do uptight.” He gestured with the remaining bite of pickle. “Bugs the hell out of me. If you want me on retainer, you’re gonna have to loosen up.” He gave her a wolf’s grin. “Might as well start today.”

CHAPTER THREE

BRODIE WATCHED THE wariness creep into her eyes seconds before she angled her face away. He could almost hear the gears turning as she dissected what he'd said, and how she wanted to respond.

Probably searching for a professional reply.

He snorted.

Her gaze darted up at the rude sound. "Excuse me?"

"Stop weighing your words. Forget what's appropriate and what isn't. You have real reactions, Red." He held out his arms. "Lay 'em on me."

As if in slow motion, her shoulders went back, her gaze became direct and her eyes narrowed.

Bad time for him to notice that the outer corners of her eyes slightly turned up, that her lashes were thicker there, giving her an erotic expression even in anger.

Cat eyes, that was what she had. Very blue cat eyes.

"So far," she said, "absolutely everything with you is inappropriate, from our initial meeting where you behaved horribly, to our discussion of your friend Gina, to this cozy little picnic."

"It is cozy, isn't it?" A hapless bee got too close to her, and she nearly punched it away.

The lady had a fiery temper that for unaccountable reasons tweaked his interest.

Good thing the bee was quicker than her swing. He enjoyed getting a rise out of her, maybe because then he

saw the real *her*. “You might as well know, if I’m your guy, it’ll be picnics all the way.” And he was pretty sure, given her boss’s preference, that he was her guy.

“Therman chose you, yes. But when I give him my report—”

It was Brodie’s turn to straighten. “Your *report*?”

Smug, she reached out and chose a pickle. “Once the job is complete he’ll want an evaluation before he makes a decision on the retainer.”

Well, hell. “You’re *evaluating* me?” Again? Still?

“You do like to stress words, almost like reports and evaluations spook you.” Her smile was deliberately mean, as was her casually spoken “I wonder why.”

He felt like snatching that pickle right out of her hand. “And to think I shared my mother’s chicken salad with you.”

Red surprised him by snickering. At his affronted expression, she covered her mouth with a napkin, but the laughter came through, and finally, bending, with both hands over her face, she gave in to honest, loud, natural guffaws.

Brodie couldn’t keep his own lips from twitching. Damn, she was pretty when she laughed. Looser. Softer. Fucking sexier.

“What?” he asked, just to keep her going.

Wrapping an arm around her middle, that napkin still crushed in her hand, gasping breaths, she managed to say, “Your face!”

“Most ladies like my face.” Shame she didn’t like it more. He could easily imagine wrapping up this trip with a good hard ride—in bed. His imagination took off without his mind’s permission, envisioning those heavy breasts bare, her gorgeous hair loose, her parted thighs cradling—

“Even when you’re dumbstruck?” Gingerly she wiped her eyes, still grinning hugely.

“Yeah, even then.” Damn it, he was half-hard. If she noticed, she’d be thinking he didn’t have any control at all when control hadn’t been a problem since his teenage years.

Propping his elbows on the table, arms folded, he studied her. Humor added a whole new dimension to her demeanor. A more approachable dimension.

It dawned on him that other women didn’t leave him dumbstruck. Huh.

They didn’t fascinate him, either, but Red did, in a dozen different ways.

Reaching beneath the table, he adjusted himself. Luckily she was still patting her eyes, trying to remove the tears of hilarity without smudging her makeup. “So what will you put in that report?” Before she could answer, he added, “It better include my generous nature, and how I can make you laugh.”

“Oh, definitely,” she teased. “In fact, if we remove yesterday morning from the equation, I’d say it’d almost all be accolades.”

“Almost all?”

She pointed the pickle spear at him. “You did ply me with coffee and water just to deny me a bathroom break.”

She didn’t sound at all irate over it.

Damn, but he couldn’t stop marveling over her, and how ridiculous was that?

Brodie made a presentation of crossing his heart. “My motives were just to get you to bend a little. I mean, how prissy can a woman be when she has to pee?”

Red choked, then glared.

“Seriously?” Brodie did his best to hide his amusement.

No pretty blushes for Red. No, instead her face turned blotchy and it cracked him up.

Perversely, it made him want to tease her even more.

"The mention of *pee* has you blushing?"

"You're ridiculous."

"Me?" God, it was fun, riling her. Fun, and far too easy. "You're a mature woman, for crying out loud. Sedate, sure, but you have an important job, and no one would accuse you of lacking confidence."

"Am I supposed to thank you for pointing out the obvious?"

"Why not? They were compliments." One minute she was laughing almost hysterically, and now she was miffed again. "How old are you anyway?"

"Thirty," she growled as she came to her feet and began gathering up her garbage with hard, jerking movements. "Not that age matters when you're being deliberately crude and trying to—" The tongue-lashing died a sudden death as her gaze went past him to the parking area. Surprise replaced umbrage. "Someone's looking at your car."

Brodie jerked around and sure enough, two men were hovering near Matilda, one even crouching down at the back, out of sight. "Stay here with Howler." Already on his feet, he headed for the lot. All his focus was on the men, two of them, dressed in dark T-shirts and jeans, sunglasses hiding their eyes, *GQ* haircuts.

His instincts screamed and he strode faster, harder. Once he was close enough, he called out, "Can I help you?" which was the universal "nice" way of asking, *What the fuck are you up to?*

The upright man grinned. "Sweet ride. '05?"

"Yeah." Brodie circled the car until he stood over the

bastard crouched by the back fender. Saying nothing, he stared down at him until the man warily regained his feet.

Both of them were big, but not as big as him. They were slick, too, but not like Jack, who Brodie likened to a polished rock. No, these dipshits had a veneer of shine over cheap plastic.

Leaning against the back of the car, Brodie crossed his arms and eyed both men. They looked to be in their early thirties, just a little younger than him. He'd run across plenty of men like them, but he'd be willing to bet they hadn't encountered another like him.

Because he'd gladly kick both their asses if they were up to anything shady. And hey, he already sensed that they were.

"Rather than fidget around like virgins at prom, why don't you bozos tell me what the fuck you want and what you were doing to my car?"

"Doing?" Cautious now, they glanced at each other.

In an almost choreographed move, they pushed up their sunglasses.

The one who'd been behind the car tried a laugh as he held out his hands. "I wasn't doing anything, dude. Just checking her out."

"Uh-huh. And your dipshit friend wasn't a lookout, either?"

The friend bunched up. "What's your problem, man?"

Do it, Brodie silently urged, staring the man in the eyes. *Make a fucking move*. "Other than having to deal with idiots, you mean?"

Hands bunched, shoulders tensed, the two stepped forward together.

Anticipation sizzled along his skin and Brodie gave up his relaxed pose on the car. His smile taunted. And—

"Are you ready to go?" Breathless, her tone ludicrously

jovial, Red joined them as if there wasn't a conflict going down. She struggled with the dog's leash wrapped firmly around one hand while hauling his cooler in the other. She had trouble staying on her feet as Howler did his best demon-dog impression, quietly enraged, straining at his harness, his loose lips pulled back to show sharp teeth, muscles in his shoulders rolling.

Red must've packed up at Mach speed.

Before she lost her footing, he relieved her of the dog's leash, shortening it in his fist so Howler couldn't get too close to the men.

He said to her, "Wait for me in the car."

Though her smile didn't slip, her tone grew a little more strident. "No, I don't think so." She plopped down the cooler and, despite his narrow-eyed warning, came to stand beside him.

Like they were a fucking team?

Brodie stared at her, but then so did the other men.

Wasn't every day you met a lady like Mary Daniels.

Oozing innocence, she smiled. "The car will be stunning after she's painted, but even wearing primer, she's beautiful. Do you like Mustangs?"

The men appeared just as boggled as Brodie. The look-out dumbly nodded.

"You were admiring her, right?" Like a freaking caress, she ran a hand along the car. "I'm not much of a car aficionado. Is there something in particular about her rear that you liked?"

Brodie choked.

Red peered down at the car, her nose scrunched. "All I see is a fender and a muffler." She stroked those teasing fingers along the trunk lock—and the men all tracked the progress as if they, too, could feel it.

"Mary—" he started.

“Does she have something special going on back here?”

The two jerks looked at Brodie as if unsure whether to laugh or run.

“Do you prefer the rear?”

He almost groaned.

“She has some excellent curves up front as well.”

Predictably, the goons dropped their gazes to her magnificent chest.

Brodie wanted to annihilate them both.

“Do you gentlemen have a preference?”

“Don’t answer that,” Brodie growled at them, and then to her, he said, “Damn it, Red—”

Expression angelic, she smiled up at him. “I can go on all day, or we can get in the car and leave.” She patted Howler. “There’s no reason for you to upset your dog.”

Good God, she’d done it on purpose, talking sexually shaded nonsense just to defuse the situation. *Hard for me to kick ass when all three of us are now thinking about women’s behinds.*

She folded her hands in front of her, that contented smile not budging.

Scowling, Brodie warned her, “We’ll discuss this later.” He turned to the mute men. “This is your one and only warning. Don’t touch my car.”

They wisely took advantage of Mary’s interference and backed away until they reached a black SUV.

“Clichéd fucks,” he muttered.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Hired thugs should at least try to *not* look like thugs, right?” After Brodie watched the car drive away, he went to his knees to study the fender, the undercarriage, the tailpipe. He felt around the license plate and the back tires. “Nothing.”

“Did you expect a bug? A booby trap?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Because you believe them to be *thugs*?”

“You don’t?” he challenged.

“Well, if I’d had doubts, Howler convinced me.” She hugged the dog’s neck. “He paid no mind to anyone else, but with those two, I do believe he wanted to draw blood.”

“He’d have mangled them.” Brodie straightened, wondering what he’d missed.

Stepping back to do her own survey of the car, Red touched her chin thoughtfully. “Hmm. The only thing of interest back here is your license plate. If they have the right connections, they could track you down with your license number, right?”

Brodie stared at her. “You’re a genius.”

“Smart,” she agreed. “But not that smart. If I was, I’d know why they wanted to identify you.”

The urge to swing her up, maybe even kiss her, must have shown on his face because she turned quickly for the passenger door. “We should be on our way. We don’t want to be late.”

Brodie went along with that plan, getting Howler buckled in and storing his cooler. But once on the road, he decided it was past time he knew what Mustang Transport was getting into.

“You know this has to be related to whatever we’re picking up.”

While texting a message, Red nodded. “Possibly, though it’s doubtful they know what it is.”

“So what are we fetching?” he pressed.

“I can’t tell you that.” She finished her message and tucked away the phone.

He did not like mysteries. Well, other than Red. He wouldn’t mind putting together that particular puzzle. “At least tell me if it’s legal.”

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "Of course it's legal. Therman Ritter is an upstanding, honest man—and he regards loyalty very highly. He'll be pleased to know you continued on despite your nervousness about a threat."

Nervousness? Of all the idiotic... "Who's nervous?" Insult hung heavy in his tone. "I'm not *nervous*."

She gave him a *Yeah, right* look and then continued, "Personally, I'm not worried, and I just told Therman as much." She relaxed in the seat. "There are a lot of rivals for unique collection items."

Unique collection items. Like severed heads? He had to wonder.

"At times it can get ugly. We face the occasional confrontation and, yes, attempted theft. It's why Therman doesn't have his purchased items mailed."

"Too risky?"

"Mail can be intercepted." She half turned in the seat to better face him, one leg slightly drawn up. "What would you have done if I hadn't interrupted?"

"Gotten some answers." He still wanted them, damn it. He felt primed for violence.

The only good substitute was hot, hard sex, and while he felt the interest surging between them, Red was doing her best to ignore it. Given they could really use the income from future jobs with her well-to-do employer, he should try to let it go, too.

Easier said than done.

She tipped her head at his statement. "Just like that?"

He didn't have any illusions about his ability. "Intimidation goes a long way. Neither of those clowns wanted a fight, so odds are they'd have spilled their guts quick enough." He shot her a look. "If you hadn't ruined it."

Her expression sharpened. "Let's cover a few things

now that I might have been remiss in mentioning at the onset.”

Brodie hated that she was back in prim and proper mode. “Yeah, let’s.”

“First, I’ll remind you that I don’t work for you. We each work for Therman Ritter and the hierarchy places me above you, not beneath.”

Oh, the things he could say. One look at her pinched face and he wisely decided to play mum. Didn’t stop the images in his brain, but at least he didn’t say something that’d get him maimed.

She appeared suspicious over his control. “Also,” she continued with a bite, “Therman does not condone violence if there is any other alternative.”

“I was using intimidation, not violence.” Though violence could have easily followed. Hell, given how he felt now, he wished it had.

She nodded once. “Since I’m not familiar with your tactics, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. In the future—if there is a future—I’ll try to trust your judgment...as long as you understand that violence is a last resort.”

“Got it.” Determined that there *would* be a future, he promised, “No cracking heads if it’s not absolutely necessary.”

Frown stern, she said, “It would rarely, *very* rarely, be necessary.”

Did she have to beat it into the ground? Did she think he ran around looking for excuses to swing his fists? He was a peaceful man. A *nice* man, damn it. “I said I’ve got it. Move on already.”

“Fine,” she snapped right back, then sucked in a breath. And another. Calmer now, she said, “My name is Mary. I thought you’d completely forgotten it, but you did say it when those men were there.”

“Respect.”

Her brows shot up. “What?”

“I would never disrespect you in front of goons by using a nickname.” Brodie popped his neck to the side, disgusted to find he was now tense. Getting lectured by Red had a very muscle-tightening effect on him.

It left him feeling anything but nice.

She aggressively angled her body back toward him again. “How about you don’t disrespect me at all, ever?”

Was that what she thought? Was she so damned strict, she couldn’t indulge in conversation with the hired help?

Or had he inadvertently hurt her feelings?

That idea bothered him a lot. In many ways, he could tell that Mary was different from other women he’d known.

Hell, from *everyone* he’d known.

He had the suspicion that she used her formality as a barrier against the rest of the world.

But why? That was what he wanted to know.

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROBYN CARR

A SULLIVAN'S CROSSING NOVEL

THE BEST OF US



1

ON THE FIRST REALLY WARM, DRY DAY IN EARLY MARCH, Dr. Leigh Culver left her clinic at lunchtime and drove out to Sullivan's Crossing. As she walked into the store at the campground, the owner, Sully, peeked around the corner from the kitchen. "Hi," Leigh said. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"Just about to," Sully replied.

"Let me take you to lunch," she said. "What's your pleasure?"

"My usual—turkey on whole wheat. In fact, I just made it."

"Aw, I'd like to treat you."

"Appreciate the sentiment, Doc, but it's my store. I can't let you buy me a sandwich that's already bought and paid for. In fact, I'll make another one real quick if that sounds good to you." He started pulling out his supplies. "What are you doing out here, in the middle of the day?"

"I wanted to sit outside for a little while," she said. "It's gorgeous. There are no sidewalk cafés in town and I don't have any patio furniture yet. Can we sit on the porch?"

"I hosed it down this morning," he said. "It's probably dried off by now. Got a little spring fever, do you?"

"It seemed like a long winter, didn't it? And I haven't seen this place in spring. People around here talk about spring a lot."

Sully handed her a plate and picked up his own. "Grab yourself a drink, girl. Yeah, this place livens up in spring. The wildflowers come out and the wildlife shows off their young'uns. Winter was probably long for you because everyone had the flu."

"Including me," she said. "I'm looking forward to the spring babies. I got here last summer in plenty of time for the fall foliage and rutting season. There was a lot of noise." She took a bite of her sandwich. "Yum, this is outstanding, thank you."

"Hmph. *Outstanding* would be a hamburger," he grouched. "I'm almost up to burger day. I get one a month."

She laughed. "Is that what your doctor recommends?"

"Let me put it this way—it's not on the diet the nutritionist gave me but the doctor said one a month probably wouldn't kill me. He said *probably*. I think it's a lot of bullshit. I mean, I get that it ain't heart-healthy to slather butter on my steak every day, but if this diet's so goddamn healthy, why ain't I lost a pound in two years?"

"Maybe you're the right weight. You've lost a couple of pounds since the heart attack," she said. She had, after all, seen his chart. When Leigh was considering moving to the small-town clinic, she visited Timberlake to check out the surroundings. It was small, pleasant, clean and quiet. The clinic was a good urgent care facility and she had credentials in both family medicine and emergency medicine—she was made to order. It was owned and operated by a hospital chain out of Denver so they could afford her. And she was ready for a slower life in a scenic place.

When she first arrived, someone—she couldn't remember who—suggested she go out to Sully's to look around. People from town liked to go out there to swim; firefighters and paramedics, as well as Rangers and search-and-rescue teams, liked to hike and rock climb around there, then grab a cold beer at the general store. Sully, she learned, always had people around. Long-distance hikers came off the Continental Divide Trail right at the Crossing. It was a good place to camp, collect mail, restock supplies from socks to water purification kits. That's when she first got to know Sully.

She had looked around in June and moved to Timberlake the next month. She might have missed the spring explosion of wildflowers but she was in awe of the changing leaves in fall and heard the elk bugle, grunt and squeak in the woods. It took her about five minutes to fall in love.

"What have you done?" her aunt Helen had said when she visited the town and saw the clinic.

She and her aunt lived in a suburb of Chicago and Leigh's move was a very big step. She was looking for a change. She'd been working very long hours in a busy urban emergency room and saw patients in a small family practice, as well. She needed a slower pace. Aunt Helen wasn't a small-town kind of woman, though she was getting sick of Midwestern winters.

They were the only family either of them had. Leaving Helen had been so hard. Leigh had grown up, gone to college and medical school and had done her residency in Chicago. Although Helen traveled quite a bit, leaving Leigh on her own for weeks or more at a time, Leigh was married to the hospital and had still lived in the house she grew up in. But Leigh was thirty-four years old and still living with her aunt, the aunt who had been like a mother to her. She thought it was, in a way, disgraceful. She was a bit embarrassed by what

must appear as her dependence. She'd decided it was time to be an adult and move on.

She shook herself out of her memories. "Such a gorgeous day," she said to Sully. "Nobody camping yet?"

"It'll start up pretty soon," he said. "Spring break brings the first bunch, but until the weather is predictably warm and dry, it ain't so busy. This is when I do my spring-cleaning around the grounds, getting ready for summer. What do you hear from Chicago?"

"They're having a snowstorm. My aunt says she hopes it's the last one."

Sully grunted. "If we'd have a snowstorm, I wouldn't have to clean out the gutters or paint the picnic tables."

"You ever get a snowstorm this late in the year? Because I thought that was a Midwestern trick."

"It's happened a time or two. Not lately. How is your aunt? Why hasn't anyone met her yet?"

"She made a couple of very quick trips last fall. I wasn't very good about introducing her around. Besides patients, I didn't really know a lot of people yet. She's planning to come here this spring, once she finishes her book, and this time she'll stay awhile." Leigh laughed and took another bite of her sandwich. "That won't cause her to leave the laptop at home. She's always working on something."

"She always been a writer?" he asked.

"No. When I was growing up, she was a teacher. Then she was a teacher and a writer. Then she was a retired teacher and full-time writer. But after I finished med school, she grew wings. She's been traveling. She's always loved to travel but the last few years it's been more frequent. Sometimes she takes me with her. She's had some wonderful trips and cruises. Seems like she's been almost everywhere by now."

"Egypt?" Sully asked.

"Yep. China, Morocco, Italy, many other places. And the last few winters she's gone someplace warm for at least a couple of months. She always works, though. A lot."

"Hmph. What kind of books?"

Leigh grinned. "Mysteries. Want me to get you one? You have any aspirations to write the tales of Sullivan's Crossing?"

"Girl, I have trouble writing my own name."

"I'll get you one of her books. It's okay if it's not your thing."

"She been married?"

"No, never married. But that could be a matter of family complications. My mother wasn't married when I was born and the only person she had to help her was her big sister, Helen. Then my mother died—I was only four. That left poor Aunt Helen with a child to raise alone. A working woman with a child. Where was she going to find a guy with all that going on?"

Sully was quiet for a moment. "That's a good woman, loses her sister and takes on her niece. A good woman. You must miss her a lot."

"Sure. But..." She stopped there. They had been together for thirty-four years but they ran in different circles. "We never spent all our time together. There were plenty of separations with my education and her travel. We shared a house but we're independent. Aunt Helen has friends all over the world. And writers are always going to some conference or other, where she has a million friends."

But, of course, she missed Helen madly. She asked herself daily if this wasn't the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Was she trying to prove she could take care of herself?

"Well, I suppose the waiting room is filling up with people."

"Is it busy every day?" he asked, picking up their plates.

“Manageable,” she said. “Some days you’d think I’m giving away pizza. Thanks for lunch, Sully. It was a nice break.”

“You come on out here any time you like. You’re good company. You make turkey on whole wheat a lot more interesting.”

“I want you to do something for me,” she said. “You tell me when you’re ready for that hamburger. I want to take you to lunch.”

“That’s a promise! You don’t need to mention it to Maggie.”

“We have laws that prevent talking about patients,” she informed him, “even if she is your daughter and a doctor.”

“That applies to lunch?” he said. “That’s good news! Then I’ll have a beer with my hamburger, in that case.”

“Hey, boss,” Eleanor said when Leigh walked in. “We have a few appointments this afternoon and then the usual walk-ins. Did you have a nice lunch?”

“Excellent,” she said. “Spring is coming fast! There are buds on trees and green shoots poking out of the ground.”

“Rain in the forecast,” said Gretchen.

Leigh had two assistants, both RNs. Eleanor was about fifty years old, maternal and sweet-natured, while Gretchen was about thirty, impatient and sometimes cranky. They were both perfectly efficient. Both of them were excellent nurses. They’d known each other for a long time but Leigh got the impression they weren’t friends outside of work. Frankly, Leigh wondered if anyone was Gretchen’s friend.

“I’m ready when you are,” she said to the nurses, going back to her office.

There weren’t a lot of patients waiting, but with the number of appointments, the afternoon would be steady. Some people in town used the urgent care clinic as their primary doctor, which was fine if they didn’t need a specialist. Leigh referred

those appropriately. Leigh thought about the one time she'd treated Sully. He had an upper respiratory infection with a lingering cough. She ordered an X-ray, gave him some meds and told him to call his regular doctor. "Don't need any more doctors," he said. "I'll let you know if this doesn't work." Apparently it worked.

It was a good little clinic. There was another doctor who filled in two to three times a week for a few hours or a shift; he was semiretired. Bill Dodd. They kept pretty odd hours, staying open two nights a week and Saturdays. Outside clinic hours, patients had to drive to a nearby town to another urgent care. The clinic was there primarily for the locals. Emergencies were deployed to area hospitals, sometimes via ambulance.

Leigh hung her jacket on the hook behind her desk and replaced it with a white lab coat. She had worn business attire under her lab coat until she'd been puked on, bled on and pooped on a few times. She was a quick learner. Now she wore scrubs and tennis shoes like her nurses.

Not only was their attire pretty casual, the office was friendly and open. A few of the firefighters from across the street were known to drop in just to visit. *If* they could get past Gretchen, who was a tad rigid. Leigh thought it was nice to have this open, welcoming atmosphere when possible, when the place wasn't overflowing with kids with hacking coughs. "It wasn't like this when Doc Hawkins ran the place," her friend Connie Boyle said. "You always got the impression he was secretly glad for the company, but he couldn't smile. His face would crack." Leigh thought that described half the old men in town, but she was learning that underneath that rugged demeanor there were some sweethearts. Like Sully. He could come off as impatient or crabby, but really, she wanted to squeeze him in a big hug every time she saw him.

She saw a one-year-old who appeared to have croup; he was barking like a seal. Then there was a bad cold, a referral to the gastroenterologist for possible gallbladder issues and she splinted and wrapped a possible broken ankle before sending the patient off to the orthopedic surgeon.

Just as they were getting ready to close the clinic, there was some excitement. Rob Shandon, the owner of the pub down the street, brought in his seventeen-year-old son, Finn. Finn was as tall as Rob, and Rob was a bit over six feet. Finn's hand was wrapped in a bloody towel and his face was white as a sheet; Rob seemed to be supporting him with a hand under his arm. "Bad cut," Eleanor announced, steering them past Leigh and into the treatment room.

The towel was soaking up lots of blood and it looked like the patient might go down.

"On the table and lie down, please. Nice, deep breaths. You're going to be okay. Close your eyes a moment. Dad, can you tell me what happened?" she asked while snapping on a pair of gloves.

"Not totally sure," Rob said. "Something about a broken glass..."

Finn was recovering. "It broke in the dishwasher, I guess. I was emptying it and ran my hand right across a sharp edge. My palm. And the blood poured out. You should see the kitchen floor."

"Well, you wrapped it in a towel and have probably almost stopped the bleeding by now. I want you to stay flat, eyes closed, deep breaths. If you're not crazy about blood, looking is not a good idea. Me? Doesn't bother me a bit. And I'm going to have to unwrap this and examine the wound. Eleanor, can you set up a suture tray, please? Some lidocaine and extra gauze. Thanks." She positioned herself between the injury and Finn's line of vision. She pulled back the towel slowly

and a fresh swell of blood came out of a long, mean-looking gash across the palm of his hand. “Good news—you’re getting out of dishes for a while. Bad news—you’re getting stitches. Plenty of them.”

“Aww...”

“I’ll numb it, no worries.”

“I have practice,” he mumbled. “Baseball...”

“I don’t think that’s going to work out for you,” she said. “This is a bad cut. Let’s do this, okay?”

“I’m staying, if that’s all right,” Rob said.

“Sure,” she said. “Just stay out of my work space.” Leigh picked up the prepared syringe and injected Finn’s palm around the gash. “Only the first prick of the needle hurts,” she explained. She dabbed the cut with gauze. “It’s not as deep as it looks. I don’t think you’ve cut anything that’s going to impact movement. If I had even a question about that, I’d send you to a hand surgeon. It’s superficial. Still serious, but...”

Eleanor provided drapes, covering Finn, lying the hand on an absorbent pad that was on top of a flat, hard, polyurethane tray that was placed on his belly.

“Are you comfortable with the hand on this tray?”

“Okay,” he said.

Leigh tapped his palm with a hemostat. “Feel that?”

“Nope,” he said.

“Good. Then can I trust you not to move if we let your hand rest right here?”

“I won’t move. Is it still gushing?”

“Just some minor bleeding and I’m going to stop that quickly,” she said. Eleanor turned the Mayo stand so it hovered over Finn’s body and was within Leigh’s easy reach. Leigh cleaned the gash, applied antiseptic, picked up the needle with a hemostat and began to stitch. She dabbed away blood, tossing used gauze four-by-fours back on the Mayo

stand, making a nice pile. “You really did a number on this hand,” she said. “You must have hit that broken glass hard.”

“I was hurrying,” Finn said. “I wanted to get everything done so I could get to practice.”

“Yeah, that backfired,” she said. “Safety first, Finn.”

She dropped the bloody towel on the floor, stacked up more bloody gauze squares, applied a few more stitches. Then there was a sound behind her—a low, deep groan and a *swoosh*. Rob, his face roughly the color of toothpaste, leaned against the wall and slid slowly to the floor. “Rob,” she said. “I want you to stay right where you are, sitting on the floor, until I finish here. It won’t be long.”

“Ugh,” he said.

“You going to be sick?” she asked.

He was shaking his head but, fast as lightning, Eleanor passed a basin to him. “Stay down,” the nurse instructed. “Don’t try to stand up yet. That never works out.”

“I’ll be done in a couple of minutes,” Leigh said. Then she chuckled softly. “The bigger they are...”

“Did my dad faint?” Finn asked.

“Of course not,” Leigh said. “He’s just taking a load off.” She snipped the thread and dabbed at the wound. “Dang, kid. Fourteen stitches. It’s going to swell and hurt. I’m going to give you an antibiotic to fight off any infection and some pain pills. Eleanor is going to bandage your hand. Don’t get it wet. Do not take the bandage off. If you think the bandage has to come off, come in and see me. If I’m not here and you think that bandage has to come off for some reason, do not touch it. Call my cell. No matter what time it is. Now tell me, what is the most important thing to remember about the bandage?”

“Don’t take it off?” he asked.

“You’re a genius,” she said. “You come back in three days

and we'll look at it together, then wrap it up again. I want you to keep it elevated, so Eleanor will give you a sling."

"Aw, man..."

"Don't argue with me about this. If you dangle your hand down at your side or try to use it, you're going to have more bleeding, swelling and pain. Are we on the same page here?"

"Yeah. Jeez."

"He's all yours, Eleanor. Tell him about Press'n Seal."

She pulled off her gloves, sat on her little stool and rolled over to where Rob was propped against the wall. His knees were raised and he rested his forearms on them. "I'm fine now," he said. But he didn't move. She noticed a glistening sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

"Don't try to stand yet," she said. "Close your eyes. Touch your chin to your chest. Yeah, that's it." She gently massaged his shoulders and neck for a moment. Then she put her hands on his head and gently rubbed his scalp. She massaged his temples briefly, then moved back to his scalp. She heard him moan softly but this time it wasn't because he was about to faint. It was because it felt good. And she knew if it felt good and he relaxed, his blood would circulate better and he'd recover quickly. This little trick of massaging would take Rob's mind off his light-headedness and perhaps any nausea. "So, you're not so good with blood?" she asked very quietly.

"I've seen plenty of blood," he said. "Just not plenty of my son's blood." He took a deep breath. "I thought he cut his hand off."

"Not even close," she said. "It was a gusher, though. Some parts of the body really bleed. Like the head. You can get a cut on your head that's about an eighth of an inch, doesn't even need a stitch, and the blood flow will still ruin a perfectly good shirt. It's amazing." She kept massaging his head with her fingertips while Eleanor bandaged Finn's hand. El-

eanor was asking him about baseball and what college he'd be going to, and they even talked about his friends, most of whom Eleanor knew.

"Did I hit my head?" Rob asked.

"I don't think there was anything to hit it on. Why? You feel a sore spot or dizziness or something?"

"I think I hear bells or birds chirping," he said. He lifted his chin and looked up at her. He smiled very handsomely. "You keep doing that and I'm going to want to take you home with me."

She pulled her hands away. "You couldn't afford me. I'm wicked expensive."

He laughed. "I bet you are. Come down to the bar. I'll buy you a drink."

"That's neighborly. You feeling better? Want to get up?"

"Yeah," he said. Then he pulled himself to his feet and towered over her. "He's never going to let me live that down."

"Sure I will, Dad," Finn said from the table. "Some people just can't take the tough stuff."

"I seriously thought we were holding his hand together with that towel. Aw, look. We got blood on you," he said, touching Leigh's sleeve.

"I know how to get it out," she said. "Hydrogen peroxide. Straight. A little rubbing. Magic."

"Listen, I think we should just get married," he said. "You're perfect for me. You make a good living, you know how to get out bloodstains and that head massage thing—that's a little addicting."

"Not interested, but really—I just can't thank you enough for the offer. It sounds enchanting."

"Yeah, that's me. Mr. Enchantment. I will buy you a drink, though. Or however many drinks you want. You have a bad day—see me."

Eleanor demonstrated how Finn should wrap his bandaged hand with Press'n Seal when he took his shower. That would keep the bandage from getting wet. Rob looked on in fascination.

Leigh wrote out a couple of prescriptions. She handed them to Rob. "As soon as you get the pain meds filled, give him one. Stay ahead of the pain. The anesthetic will wear off in a couple of hours. It's going to throb, sting and eventually itch. No matter what, do not take that bandage off!"

"Yeah, I heard all that. Do you tell everyone that and do they still take it off?" Rob asked.

"You just wouldn't believe it," she said.

After Rob and Finn left, Leigh helped Eleanor clean up the treatment room.

"I love Rob," Eleanor said. "I think you should just marry him. He's probably ready to remarry now."

Leigh knew he was a single father, but little else. "Is he divorced?"

"Widowed," Eleanor said. "The poor guy. He lost his wife when the boys were little. That's when he came to Timberlake to open the pub. He said he needed a business with flexible hours so he could raise his sons. He's a wonderful father. He must be the best catch in town."

Leigh's mouth hung open for a moment. She hadn't shared any details of her personal life with Eleanor. She had lost her mother very young. Years later when she was still quite young, she was abandoned by her fiancé just a week before their wedding and it had felt so much like a death. She rarely dated. And she was not shopping around for a guy. He could find someone else to get his stains out.

When Leigh Culver was a little girl, her childhood was idyllic. She was a lovely child with blond ringlets, a bit of a

tomboy with a risky curiosity and an outgoing nature. The Holliday family lived next door; they had three children and their middle child was Leigh's age. Johnny and Leigh were best friends from the age of three. Inseparable. They had regular sleepovers until Dottie Holliday and Aunt Helen decided they were getting too old for that to be appropriate.

Leigh's mother had moved in with Aunt Helen when she realized she was pregnant at the age of eighteen. It was so long ago that her mother had died, Leigh could barely remember her. But Helen remembered and reminded her of the details—it was a freak accident. She'd had a reaction to anesthesia during a routine appendectomy, went into heart failure and they couldn't save her. From that moment on it was Helen and Leigh.

Leigh went to and from school with Johnny and the other Holliday kids. Sometimes she went to Helen's classroom after school and worked on her homework assignments while Helen finished her work. They had a very nice routine for many years. And, over time, Johnny Holliday went from being a best buddy to a boyfriend and they dated all through high school.

Leigh and Johnny wanted to get married as soon as they graduated. Johnny wanted to go into the marines and take Leigh with him. Helen wanted Leigh to go to college, get an education. "Haven't we learned anything?" she'd said. "You could find yourself the sole support of a family! I won't make you wait too long, but we have to find a way for you to get an education."

They compromised. Johnny enlisted in the army reserve. Leigh registered at the local university. She wanted to be a teacher like her aunt Helen. Biology caught her interest. She would get her degree and they would marry at the age of twenty-one.

For a couple of years, things rolled by without too much stress

or trauma, even though, looking back on it, she could see that Johnny had a tendency to grow restless. Helen went off now and then to visit writing friends or attend conferences when school was not in session. Johnny worked in his father's home furnishings store and was gone for occasional reserve weekends or training.

Then he deployed. After nine months in Kuwait he was on his way home. Their wedding was scheduled to take place a few weeks after he got home. But something had changed. Suddenly, he had doubts. He said he couldn't do it. He said he was sorry, he just wasn't ready. He wanted to see more of the world. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life working in his father's store and living in the neighborhood he grew up in. And since he'd never even dated anyone else, how could he be sure she was the right woman for him? How could Leigh be sure, for that matter?

They argued and fought and then Johnny told her he was being transferred to an army reserve unit in California. He thought they should make a clean break and, maybe in a year or two, see if they still wanted to be together.

She begged him not to go. Crying, sobbing, feeling as if her heart was being ripped from her breast, she pleaded with him not to end their beautiful, perfect love match. The humiliation of begging just about did her in.

Helen was beside herself. "That self-centered little bastard! I think you dodged a bullet. That is *not* good husband material!" Helen pointed out that things weren't as perfect as Leigh wanted them to be. That he'd been an imperfect boyfriend who flirted with other girls, went through spells of neediness that required a lot of special attention from her, that he was spoiled by his mother. Despite the fact that Helen liked Dottie Holliday and was grateful for her support while she raised Leigh alone, she was critical of Dottie's blind eye where her middle son was concerned.

As for Johnny's claim of having never dated another girl, Helen was not so sure. He hadn't dated anyone Leigh knew about but Helen taught at the high school. She saw things and heard things. Helen thought Johnny was not as loyal as Leigh believed, but Leigh refused to believe that.

She grieved. Johnny wasn't going to change his mind. He said it was best, they should both be sure. And they both needed to experience a little more of life. Though clearly he was not concentrating on what she needed, leaving Leigh and Helen to deal with calling off the wedding and returning gifts that had arrived early.

"You're so young," Helen said. "Someday you'll see he didn't deserve you."

It took Leigh a while to stand upright, to sleep through the night without crying, to face the world without her best friend and fiancé. She plagued Mrs. Holliday for news of Johnny. She called him, relentlessly pleading with him to come back or invite her to move to California. He rejected her. "Come on, Leigh, I'm happy! Why can't you just be happy, too?"

She was shattered.

She took some time off from school but ironically it was school that eventually brought out the best in her. She was so angry and hurt she decided her revenge would be to succeed, on her own, without him! She pursued her degree in biology. Johnny's mother told her Johnny was engaged to a California girl, and when Leigh was done crying her heart out, she said, "Fuck him!" and then took the MCAT and applied to medical school, losing herself in the difficult study, relieved not to have time to think about being lonely. She was driven and she worked with a vengeance.

She knew lots of girls and young women had traumatic breakups, but she always felt hers was different. She had spent her whole life loving Johnny, forgiving him when he was a

screwup and moving with a single-mindedness toward their hopes and dreams, their forever together. How could he walk away from that so easily? Had she been wrong about him all along? Helen's books did better each year and she retired from teaching to write full-time. She began to travel, writing everywhere she went, taking Leigh with her now and then.

Johnny's parents sold their house and moved to Arizona to enjoy the warmer weather while Leigh went on to not one but a double residency. And she *wasn't* lonely—she had many friends within her field just as her independent aunt had many friends within her profession. She dated now and then but nothing clicked. And that was fine, Leigh was happy and accepted she would be just like Helen—active, self-sufficient, free and fun-loving. But probably not attached.

Helen kept in touch with Dottie Holliday and Leigh learned Johnny had married, had a couple of kids; they were having trouble making ends meet sometimes. Johnny even got in touch with Leigh when she was a new ER doctor. He asked her if she was happy and she said, “Deliriously.” Johnny had said he thought maybe the biggest mistake of his life was letting Leigh get away. “Actually, that isn't what happened,” Leigh said. “You dumped me. You practically left me standing at the altar.” And she hung up on him. Not long after that she learned that Johnny had divorced and remarried.

She got over him, of course. She even relented that her life was much better than it would have been had she married Johnny at the age of twenty-one. And then Aunt Helen told her she'd heard from Dottie Holliday again. By the age of thirty, Johnny was unhappy in his second marriage.

And Leigh thought, *Whew! Dodged a bullet indeed!*

Not long after Helen retired from her teaching position, she said that she wasn't planning to live the rest of her life

in Chicago. “As much as I love it, I’m over the winters here. Of course, I’ll be back often...in spring, summer and fall. I’m shopping for a more hospitable climate.” She spent a few months in California one winter, Florida another, even Texas once. Leigh often visited her for a winter respite and Helen always came home for a long summer stay. Helen also returned to the Chicago suburbs for Christmas but it didn’t take too many of those visits to confirm that she was right—she’d had enough of those harsh winters. That was when Leigh started thinking maybe she also could use a change. Their Naperville house was paid for, their incomes were sufficient; they hadn’t spent twelve months of the year together in a long time. It was time for Leigh to find her special place.

“Timberlake, Colorado?” Helen had asked. “What’s the population there? Three hundred people, six hundred elk?”

“Something like that,” Leigh said. “You can visit me in the summer when it’s warm and I’ll visit you in the winter wherever you are. I’ve only signed a two-year contract so this is just my first possibility. Who knows? I might end up in Maui!”

“Can we please try La Jolla?” Helen asked.

“We’ll see. You’ve been indulging your wanderlust for ten years now. It’s my turn to have a look around. I’ll try to settle on a place where you won’t slip on the ice when you’re old and brittle. You know I’ll always take care of you. You always took care of me.”

“I’m not planning to get old and brittle,” Helen threw back. “That’s why I keep moving! It’s the best defense.”

So, the time was coming up. Helen would spend most of her spring and summer in Timberlake with Leigh. The house in Illinois was sitting empty for longer and longer now with Leigh in Colorado and Helen always on the move.

Leigh had clearly learned the importance of autonomy from Helen, who was so comfortable being a single woman. It

took her a long time to get over Johnny Holliday and there had not been a man with real potential in her life since him. She had had a dalliance here and there, but nothing serious. Her sixty-two-year-old aunt was her best friend, and quite the girlfriend she was. She wrote books, traveled the world, tried living in new places, taught writing classes all over the country and online and had a wonderful group of writer girlfriends everywhere. She'd been on a couple of writers' organization boards of directors, toured to promote her books and had even taught a summer writing course at Boston University. She was open to anything, it seemed. She was fearless and Leigh thought she was beautiful. And she believed her—Helen had no intention of getting old, no matter how old she got.

Leigh knew her move to Timberlake was good for her. She needed to establish her own life but, if she was honest with herself, sometimes she missed having a best friend of the male persuasion. *I think we should just get married. You're perfect for me.* Rob was kidding, of course. He had no way of knowing those were the words that she most wanted to hear but that most terrified her.



A person often meets his destiny

on the road he took to avoid it.

—JEAN DE LA FONTAINE

2

“THEN DAD HIT ON DR. CULVER,” FINN SAID.

All movement stopped. Everyone in the kitchen froze. Present were Rob’s younger son, Sean, his sister, Sidney, and her husband, Dakota Jones. And of course Rob. He had made dinner and Sidney and Dakota wanted to check on Finn since the accident.

“I guess those pain pills are stronger than I thought,” Rob said.

“Dad, you totally hit on her. And I think she liked it.”

“This sounds interesting,” Dakota said, leaning back on his chair.

“Go ahead and tell us all about it, Finn,” Sid said.

“He almost passed out from the blood and stitches. He was sitting on the floor, I guess to keep from fainting, and she told him to stay down. Then she rubbed his shoulders or something and talked to him real soft. Oh, and the nurse gave him a bowl to puke in.”

“You puked?” Sean asked. It was hard to tell if he was appalled or thrilled.

“I did not puke,” Rob said. “I got dizzy and light-headed. Not from the blood and stitches but... Through all the injuries these two have had, this one actually scared me. I thought he’d cut his hand in half. When the doctor had it under control, I had an adrenaline drop. That’s all it was. She told me not to try to get up too fast. She rubbed my shoulders and head for a minute.”

“And Dad said, ‘Marry me.’”

Rob shrugged and grinned. “In that position, I think that’s just what you do. I admit, I forgot you were in the room for a minute.”

“No kidding,” Finn said.

The doorbell rang and Sean shot away from the table with a hearty, “*I got it!*” A moment later, the sound of female voices talking and laughing came from the living room.

“Can I be excused?” Finn asked.

“Sure. Of course.”

The house was full of teenage girls, momentarily. They were all fussing over Finn. They brought him flowers and chocolate, let him tell his war story, which Rob was relieved didn’t seem to include him hitting on the doctor. Rob counted. There were six of them. All adorable. All around seventeen. Included among them, Finn’s girlfriend of the past year, Maia—a sweet beauty.

Dakota took a drink from his bottle of beer. “That never happened to me,” he said.

“Or to me,” Rob said.

“Uh...it most certainly happened to you,” Sidney said to her brother. “Maybe not identical circumstances, but girls chased you all the time. I was the wallflower who never went to a prom or formal. Not even in college.”

"I don't remember that," Rob said. He glanced into the living room to see six girls and two boys sitting on the furniture, floor, anywhere, talking and laughing. "My house is going to be dripping in testosterone tonight."

"I'll help you clean up the dishes," Sid said. "Why'd you have to make spaghetti? I hate cleaning up the spaghetti pots."

"I got it," Rob said. "I left Kathleen in charge at the pub. In case Finn needs me."

"Oh, I think you're the last person he needs," Dakota said. A burst of laughter came from the living room. "He seems to have this under control."

Sidney started rinsing plates while Rob gathered pots off the stove and put away leftovers.

"It wouldn't kill you to take a woman on a proper date," she said to Rob.

"Nah. Someone around here has to keep a clear head."

"She seems like a nice woman, the doctor. Not at all crazy—a plus in this town."

"Agreed, she seems nice," he said. "And she knows how to get out stains. Did you know hydrogen peroxide gets out blood? I could've used her expertise while I was raising those two maniacs."

"Not to mention a discount in medical costs," Sid said. "You know, the boys are certainly old enough to accept the idea of their father going out with women now and then. After all, *they* do."

"Sean isn't exactly dating yet," Rob pointed out.

"I bet he's got something going on—walking a girl to classes, sitting with a girl at games, that stuff. Finn has a steady girl," Sid said.

"I think he lucked into that," Rob said. "She's a sweetheart. And smart."

“They’re going to leave you, you know,” she said. “You should be looking. For companionship.”

“Maybe I am and don’t want to talk about it. Keep the water in the sink, please,” he said.

And then he thought about it. He’d always had an open mind. But most of the women he’d met since his wife died nine years ago had been a bit too eager and anxious to win over his sons and take charge of his life. He just hadn’t been ready for that. There were a couple of women from out of town he’d had casual relationships with. What that meant was he’d see them briefly, talk to them occasionally, maybe there would be a quick roll in the hay. He’d had that kind of relationship with a woman named Rebecca for a couple of years, then she wandered off for a more serious man. A couple of years later he met Suzanne. She was in sales for restaurant supplies. He took her out for a drink, learned she was divorced, had a couple of grown daughters and was not interested in anything serious. That was about his speed. They got together infrequently but when he did spend a little time with her, it was good. She was also nice and didn’t seem to want anything more than he did.

She didn’t rub his neck or head, as he recalled. And she didn’t have that creamy, peachy skin. He wondered how long Leigh Culver’s hair was—it was always tied up in a bun when he saw her. She had playful green eyes. And a real take-charge attitude. She came into the pub from time to time, was well-liked in town. Today was the first day he’d called on her professional services.

He wouldn’t mind seeing more of her, but that was complicated in a town like Timberlake. Two dates and the whole town had you engaged. Maybe that didn’t happen to everyone but he and Leigh were pretty high-profile—the town doctor and the town pub owner. They would run into more

people every day than the average citizen. And people had been trying to fix him up for years.

He wondered if she'd been fixed up lately. He didn't even know if she'd ever been married. Maybe if he got to know her, he'd find she wasn't such a prize.

No, that wasn't going to happen. Eleanor and her husband liked to eat at the pub and Eleanor loved Leigh. Eleanor didn't suffer fools gladly. Connie Boyle was always saying she was great, as did some of his fellow firefighters.

"Dad? Is it almost time for another one of those pills?" Finn asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Rob looked into Finn's eyes. He could see he was hurting. He felt his head—warm. But he'd gotten antibiotics. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's throbbing. It feels like the bandage is too tight."

"Let's take your temperature," he said.

It was just barely above normal.

"You're almost due a pain pill," he said. "We'll watch your temperature. If you're still having trouble in the morning, I'll call the doctor. If it gets bad in the night, I have her cell number." She had said it would save her a world of trouble if he'd just call that number rather than meeting a big problem first thing in the morning. Made sense. "We're going to be good boys and not take off that bandage. I don't know what happens if you do that but I think she executes you. It sounded serious." He craned his neck toward the living room. "Your girls gone?" There they sat, waiting patiently. Quietly.

"Everything okay?" Sid asked, drying the last pot.

"Pain, like she said would happen," Rob said.

"Can you put ice on it?" Sid asked.

Rob got a shocked look on his face. "I don't know," he said. "I'll call her after things quiet down and ask."

"Good idea," Sid said. She leaned toward Finn and kissed

his cheek. “We’re going home. If you need me for any reason, please call.”

“We’re good,” Rob said.

Dakota put a hand on Finn’s shoulder. He leaned close. “Nice cheering section, bud,” he said.

“Thanks,” Finn said.

A half hour later, Finn had another pain pill and the girls retreated. Rob ordered Finn to bed and Sean to his room to either finish homework or find some quiet pastime—it would probably take place on his tablet or phone.

Once everything was quiet he called Dr. Culver.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I would expect. You can cover the bandage with Press’n Seal or a plastic bag and rest a bag of frozen peas in the palm. Gently.”

“We have a variety of cold packs,” he said. “Athletic boys. They have to ice knees and shoulders and even heads regularly.”

“As long as it’s a soft ice pack,” she said. “We don’t want to disturb the stitches. Why don’t you bring Finn by the clinic before school and let me have a quick look, just to be sure.”

He grinned so big his cheeks hurt. And he was glad no one could see his face. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll do that.”

“We mustn’t have any regrets,” Helen Culver said. “The house can sit empty until we’re absolutely sure. I have plenty of friends here in Naperville so after we sell the house I can come back for a visit anytime. I don’t have to have my own house to visit friends.”

“It’s the only home I’ve ever known, but I’m not there. It’s just that...”

“You like knowing it’s waiting for you?” Helen asked.

“Well, I haven’t decided I’m staying here for the long-term, but I haven’t decided I’m not, either. And I understand you’re

done with those winters. Winter here is not like that. It's mostly calm. And with all the ski lodges, it's very festive. And cozy. There's nothing like a blazing fire on a snowy evening."

It was early morning. Helen and Leigh were both early risers. They usually had their daily chats before starting work and sometimes again after work in the evening. They talked every day with rare exceptions. Even when Helen was traveling.

"It should sell for a good price. The house is over fifty years old but in excellent shape in a nice neighborhood near shopping and restaurants, in a great school district..."

"Why does this come up today?" Leigh asked. "This morning?"

"I can't get the car out of the garage!" Helen said. "I'm snowed in."

"Oh," Leigh said, smothering a chuckle. "It looks like spring is on the way here, but there are no guarantees."

"You know I've been thinking about it, Leigh. I can arrange to have it polished up and put on the market. Maybe when I'm down there visiting you. Houses move nicely from spring through summer, before a new school year starts. If you're ready."

"Auntie, do you need the money from the sale?" Leigh asked.

"Nah, I've got money. I'm a miser! Eventually I'll buy something in a more hospitable climate. Not only am I tired of the cold, I'm bloody over gray skies!"

"You'll miss the changing seasons," Leigh predicted.

"As I've said, I can always visit. More likely my girls will visit me!"

She always called them her girls. They were friends of a certain age and they were wonderful fun. Wonderfully bad. All writers. Leigh adored them. They came and went over the years, but Helen was always surrounded by sassy, hard-

working, independent women, some married, some not. One of them was on her third husband. “What do you think, Auntie? La Jolla?”

“I’m not settled on that quite yet,” she said.

“La Jolla is a bit pricey, isn’t it?”

“Everything is pricey. I want you to decide if you’re settled. There’s no great hurry and it doesn’t have to be final. You might decide to go back to Chicago, in which case you can always buy a new house. Wherever I go will have room for you.”

“And I will always have room for you. We’ll spend the summer here.”

“Much of it, sure. I’m going to New York in May and visiting friends in San Francisco in July.”

“All right, I have a patient coming in early so I can look at his stitches. I’ll think about this. We’ll talk tonight.”

“Is he single?” Helen asked. “This patient?”

“Why, yes, he is,” Leigh said. “He’s seventeen.” No need to mention his handsome father.

“Ah! You’re no fun at all. I’ll let you go. Take this matter seriously. A house sitting empty is a liability. And I’m freezing! If we’re not going to live in it...”

“I’ll talk to you after work,” Leigh said. And just then she heard the bell on the front door of the clinic.

Helen was so right, she thought. Leigh didn’t see herself going back to that old life, that hectic grind in the big city. This probably wasn’t her final destination but she was enjoying her work life a lot more than she had a year ago. And she’d made some friends here. She actually had a pretty decent social life. Not like city life but still good.

She shrugged into her white lab coat and went to the reception area. Her staff hadn’t arrived yet and that early-morning time alone was great. The Shandon men stood in the wait-

ing room. This time the younger brother was also present. “Good morning, gentlemen,” she said. “How’s the pain this morning, Finn?”

“It comes and goes,” he said. “I didn’t sleep much.”

“Did the ice help?” she asked.

He shrugged. “A little bit.”

“Okay, let’s look at it. This once.”

They all gathered in the treatment room. Finn sat on the table. Leigh pulled her bandage scissors out of her pocket. She reminded herself he was a seventeen-year-old boy. Men were often melodramatic when it came to illness. They could power through pulled muscles and broken bones, but let ’em get the flu and it was like death. Same with bloody injuries.

She sliced through the wrap. “You’re probably going to be sorry,” she said. “Eleanor is a much gentler wrapper than I am, or so I’m told. And we’re not doing this every day, you know.”

“I know,” he said. “Can you put something on it to keep it from hurting?”

“Your palm and fingertips are very sensitive, but they’re also good healers. Ah,” she said, spreading the bandage. “Looks good. A little inflammation, no bleeding, stitches intact. Here’s what should concern you—if bleeding shows through the bandage or if a red line is traveling up your arm, call me immediately. And don’t take off the bandage.”

Sean leaned around Finn. “Cool.”

“It feels so much better off,” he said.

“And it is so much more susceptible to infection or damage to the incision and stitches. Why don’t you take a day off from school, rest, put ice on it from time to time, take your antibiotics and chill out. It could be sore for a few days but you’ll be all right. It’s healing as it should.”

“We were wondering, what exactly do you do to people who take off the bandage?” Rob asked.

“Your name goes on a list of patients who just won’t listen,” she said. “And I’m not above sharing the list. So, when there’s a bank robbery or something, I have a list of people who won’t follow the rules.” She grinned. “You take off the bandage, you risk infection, difficult healing, complications.”

The bell on the clinic door tinkled and moments later Eleanor popped into the treatment room. “Did he take that bandage off?” she asked, sounding annoyed.

Leigh winked at Finn. “No, I did. We’re just checking it.”

“Let me wash my hands and I’ll wrap it up again,” Eleanor said, turning away while swinging her jacket off her shoulders.

“You got lucky,” Leigh said to Finn. “Listen, it’s going to hurt and eventually itch like the devil. Be brave. This will pass.” Then she felt his head for fever. “Don’t forget to take all of the antibiotic pills.”

“I won’t,” he said.

“As much as I enjoy seeing you, I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“Not really,” he said, and he grinned.

What a handsome boy, she thought.

Finn went home from the clinic, took one of his pain pills and sprawled out on the couch, falling asleep instantly. It seemed like only seconds had passed when the doorbell rang. And rang again. He rolled to his side and looked at the time on his phone. It was noon. He’d been asleep for hours.

He opened the door and frowned in confusion. It was Maia. His girl. Probably the prettiest girl in his class. She smiled at him and held up a bag from McDonald’s. “What?” he asked, groggy.

“I brought you lunch,” she said. “Sean said your hand was so sore you were taking a day off.”

“But you have school.”

"I'll skip fifth period," she said. "They'll never miss me. I thought you could use a little special treatment."

"Wow," he said.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh," he said, running a hand over his head, taking note that he felt some serious bedhead. "Yeah, of course."

"Thanks," she said as he held the door open. "I texted you three times but you didn't respond. I hope you're up to company."

He looked at his phone. Yup, three texts. "I'm up to it, I just never expected it."

"I think I woke you up."

"I saw the doctor this morning. She looked at the stitches and told me to just take a day off if it was hurting. So, I took one of those pain pills and fell asleep on the couch. Gimme a sec." He headed for the bathroom. "I'll be right back."

He had to pee like a racehorse but first he looked in the mirror. Oh, man, not only was his hair weird, it looked like he'd drooled a little. What a stud. So he peed, washed his face, brushed his teeth and tried to smooth down his hair.

He'd known Maia since junior high; she was part of a whole group who were buddies. He'd had a crush on her about that long but it took him until his senior year to ask her out because, well, she was one of the most popular girls in school and she tended to date the most popular guys. He thought she'd never go for him. Then he came to his senses and noted that she hadn't had a steady boyfriend in a long time. He screwed up his courage and asked her out and was thrilled when she said, "Took you long enough."

Now she was sitting on the couch and had set up a little picnic on the coffee table.

"Aw, you didn't have to go to any trouble," she said.

He looked at her, confused.

“Your hair is wet,” she said.

“My hair was pretty goofy from sleep,” he said. “And my brain might be on drugs.”

Her hair was beautiful. She had long, shiny dark hair and he loved plunging his hands into it. It was black or almost black. Maybe a little light around the edges. Soft and silky. He couldn’t believe she gave him a chance.

“Big Mac, extralarge fries, apple pie. I bet I should’ve gotten two Big Macs.”

In front of her was a cheeseburger, regular fries, a Diet Coke. That wouldn’t even start his motor. “No, this is great,” he said. “Why’d you do this?”

“I was looking for you this morning and couldn’t find you. Sean said you stayed home because of your hand.”

“You were looking for me?”

“Finn, you’re wearing a sling. I thought, since we have three classes together, I could help you with your books. Carry them for you.”

“Huh. I never thought of that. I have a backpack.”

“I’d still be happy to help, if you want.”

“I’ll probably manage,” he said. Because he was an idiot! “I wouldn’t mind the company, though,” he said. “I mean, if you want to.”

“Finn, I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want to,” she said with a laugh. “Besides, we walk to class together, anyway.”

“Cool,” he said. Because he was oh-so-smooth. “This is good. This was really nice of you.” He’d rather be making out. But she’d brought food.

“You’re welcome.”

“What did I miss in trig?”

“Phfft, nothing. Same old drill—we went over the last assignment we turned in, he explained the next chapter, assigned the problems at the end. We have a big assignment

in English, though. A paper, due in a week. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I hate when he does that. Why didn't he give us more time?"

He groaned. "I'm lousy with writing assignments..."

"I can help," she said. Then she flashed him her beautiful smile. "Don't I always?"

She was in three of his classes. All three were college prep because she was smart. And beautiful. And thoughtful—she'd brought him McDonald's. He thought if he didn't fuck this up, he might get to kiss her for a while before she had to get back to class. "Tell me about the paper," he said.

"Essay format and it has to be on the original work, which is about two hundred years old. It was on the reading list for the year so I have it. I was going to read it but, of course, I didn't. It's horror and I hate horror."

"What am I going to do next year when we're at different colleges?" he asked.

"You're either going to find a new girlfriend or flunk English."

"I guess I'm going to flunk English. And you're not going to do that well in math."

"You're my go-to boy for math," she said, laughing.

Maia read all the time. She wanted to be an English teacher. But even though they were hot and heavy by now, she was going to college in Flagstaff and he was going to CU in Boulder. Boulder was close; he'd be home a lot of weekends. Flagstaff wasn't so close.

"I only read the directions on things I have to assemble," he said. "Or textbooks when there's going to be a quiz. Stories bore me."

"But you're a genius at math."

"Well, that's because I've got my aunt Sid—she knows

everything about math. She's *really* a genius. She's a physicist. Big-ass brain."

"I know. That is so cool." She nibbled her cheeseburger.

She took little bites, he noticed. Her fingernails were pink and he liked that. A lot of the girls were painting their nails green and blue and black. Freaky. Maia's nails were the color of her lips. And she didn't wear much makeup. Just lip stuff that tasted so good. Her eyelashes were so thick and dark she didn't have to dress them up.

They talked about school. Her favorite course was obviously English; he loved science and right now his favorite class was advanced chemistry. They talked about their teachers and both of them loved their math teacher even if Maia didn't love math. They talked about how they dreaded being separated while they were in college. Then, lunch devoured, he reached for her. "Don't hurt your hand," she said before landing on his lips.

A few minutes later he stopped the kissing. "You're making my hand feel better. Do you have to go all the way to NAU?" he asked.

"I love NAU. You should see it. It's almost like home."

"You can't guess how bad I'm going to miss you."

"That's funny. I had to drop hints for months before you even noticed me!"

"Oh, I noticed," he said, pulling her closer. Then he bumped his hand and yelped in pain and she pulled away.

"I'm going back to school before you do something to your hand."

"Will you come back after school? I don't have to work at the pub. The only bright spot..."

"I'll have to check in with my mom and see if she has anything I need to do."

"Tell her I'm seriously injured and need you," he said. "If

my dad likes me even a little bit, he'll make Sean work at the pub and we'll be alone."

"Are you going to behave?" she asked.

"I'll do whatever you say. But we could be alone."

"How long is it going to take for that hand to heal?"

"I don't know," he said. "We can use it to our advantage. Want to go out Friday night? Obviously I don't have baseball..."

"I have to babysit Friday night and till about five on Saturday afternoon. Then I'm free. I have to clear it with my parents, though."

"Tell them I'm pathetic and need you."

She giggled a little. Then she kissed his cheek. "I gotta go. Can you handle the trash with one hand?"

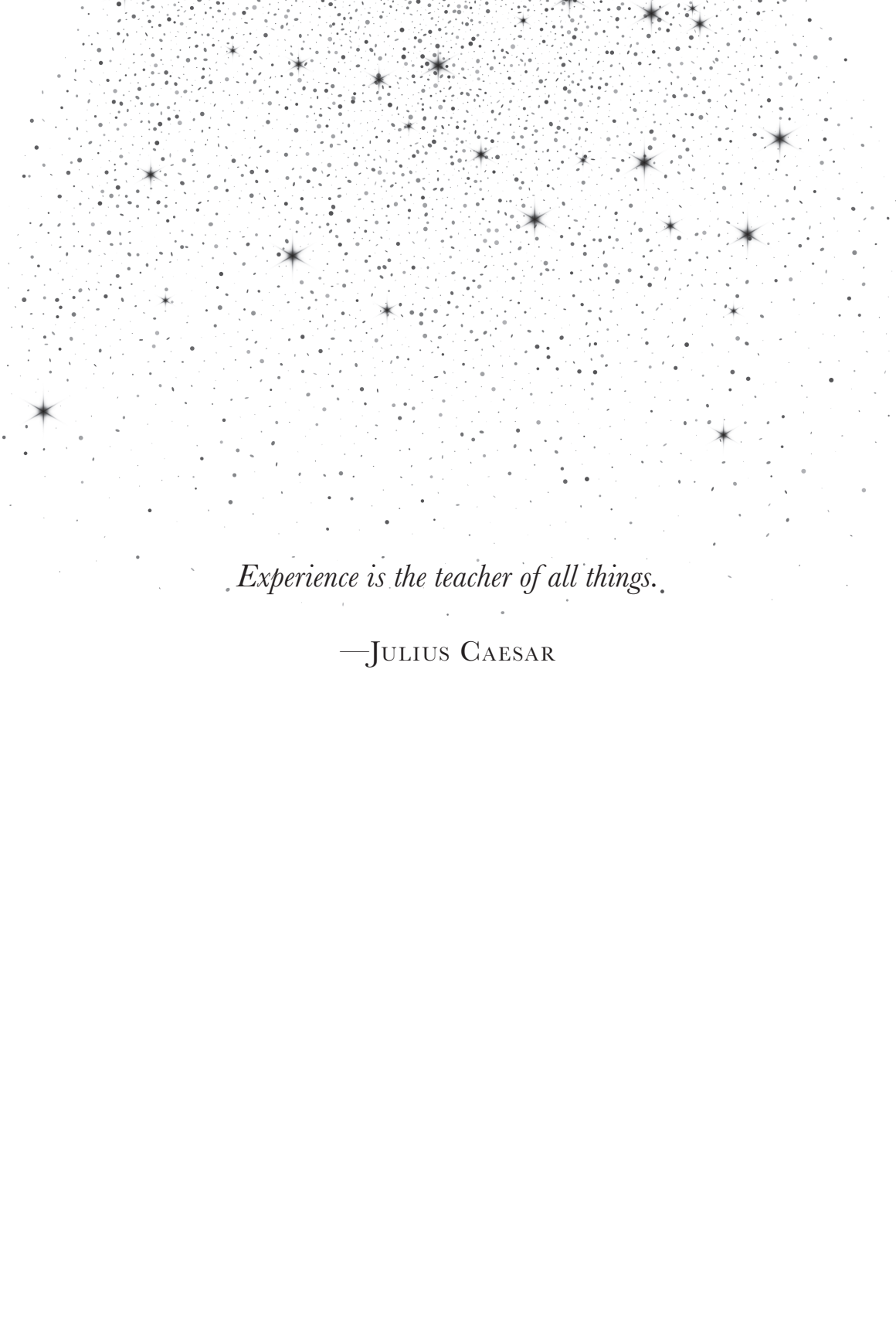
"Got it," he said, lifting the bag.

She took her Diet Coke and skipped out the door.

"Thank you!" he called out. And she smiled and waved.

He closed the door and leaned against it. "Thank you, God!" he said. She was the hottest, sweetest, coolest girl in his school. And she was his.

He backed up to the couch and flopped down on it. He did not sleep. His hand miraculously did not hurt. At. All.



Experience is the teacher of all things.

—JULIUS CAESAR

3

LEIGH WOKE UP AND LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AT THE heavy rain. She smiled as she remembered what Sully had told her when she'd asked him when he thought it would be hamburger day. "First really wet rainy day when I can't work outside," he said.

Knowing he got up even earlier than she did, she called Sully. "Can we meet at Shandon's Pub and will you let me buy you that hamburger today?" she asked.

"Perfect. That's where I like to get my beef. I'm not going to waste my special day on meat loaf at the diner."

"Noon?" she asked.

"That'll do," Sully said.

At fifteen minutes prior to noon Leigh put her raincoat over her scrubs. With her wallet and cell phone in her pocket and umbrella in hand, she told Eleanor where she was going. "Call if you get anything you can't handle," she said. Then she walked down the street in the rain. From within every

business doorway she passed, someone yelled, “Hey, Doc!” A couple of cars tooted their horns and she waved. This little town seemed to sparkle in the rain. It was clean and busy and shop owners left their doors open in a welcoming fashion unless it was freezing outside.

She was glad she’d given Helen her support in selling the house. She missed her aunt, but if she’d been working in Chicago, Helen wouldn’t have seen much of her, anyway. Her hours had been brutal and Helen was often away. Helen had been clear—those tough winters were in her rearview mirror. She was passing through Chicago for just a week and got caught in a huge spring blizzard. She announced that was the last time she’d be in the Midwest before May.

She shook her umbrella under the pub’s awning, closing it up. It was a little less busy than usual, probably because of the weather. She loved the food here but she usually got it to go. In fact, she usually got whatever anyone at the clinic wanted and took it all back. At least once a week they got take-out orders from the diner, the pub or the pizza kitchen down the street. Most other days they all packed a lunch or dashed home for a quick bite.

Today she chose a booth in the bar. Sully had not arrived yet.

“Hey, Doc,” Rob said, coming out from behind the bar. “How’s it going?”

“Excellent,” she said. “How’s my favorite patient?”

Rob chuckled and slid into the booth across from her. “After we left the clinic the other day, he stayed home from school and his girlfriend cut class to bring him lunch. His hand hasn’t hurt since.”

“Amazing how that works,” she said with a smile. “Bring him in next week and I’ll take his stitches out. I can fix him up with a more manageable bandage and he can see how

baseball works for him. Unless he's getting a lot of mileage out of the big, bulky one."

"He's always been kind of shy with girls. I'm amazed by the girlfriend. They've been an item all year," Rob said.

"I'm surprised to hear that he's shy with girls—he's so darn cute."

"Boys don't want to be cute, if I remember correctly," Rob said. "From a father's perspective, I'm happy he doesn't seem to be a player. But for the last several months every time I talk to him, his mind seems to be elsewhere. Can I get you something? Did you call in an order for lunch?"

"I'm eating here today," she said. "I have a date!"

"Do you now?" he said, smiling.

"You sittin' in my place, boy?" Sully said, looking down at Rob.

He got up immediately. "Sully! Long time, buddy! Is it hamburger day already?"

"I want bacon and cheddar on it, too," he said, sliding into the booth.

"You got it, pal. And for the lovely doctor?"

"Turkey club sandwich with a side salad, no fries or chips. And how about a Diet Coke?"

"Girl food," Sully scoffed. "I guess you're allowed. I'll take a water and coffee, black."

"I have to mind my figure, you know," she said.

"Your figure is fine," Sully said. "You doing any interesting doctoring today?" he asked.

"It is very boring doctoring today," she admitted. "Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow everyone who got their feet wet today will come to me complaining of a cold or cough. Being cooped up inside means people are exposed to more viruses and they all pass around the same germs. What's going on with your family, Mr. Sullivan?"

“Well, little Sam is walking and, when he picks up steam, running. Sierra’s big as a house and about ready to whelp. Elizabeth is talking nonstop but only about ten percent of her words are recognizable. Thing is, Cal and Maggie respond to her as if they can understand everything she says. Maybe they can. Dakota and Sid are just hanging around—Dakota’s still working on that garbage truck, sometimes they let him drive and he gets the biggest kick out of that. Sid helps out in here sometimes but she’s been back to UCLA a couple of times to work on those fancy computers. They’re going to move to Boulder at the end of summer. Sid has herself a job in the university computer lab and Dakota is going to take a few courses so he can teach in high school. He said he had a lousy experience in high school. He was bullied a lot...”

That caused Leigh’s eyes to widen in surprise. “Dakota? Bullied? He doesn’t look like he could’ve been the kind of kid to get picked on. He’s big, strong and to-die-for handsome!”

“No one is immune, that’s what. He was dirt poor and his father is crazy as a bedbug. Those Jones kids—they grew up with a lot of drama going on. The other Jones kids did all right in that regard but seems like Dakota took a real hit. So he thinks if he’s a teacher, he can profile bullies, help with that problem. Plus, I think he likes kids.”

She just stared at Sully. “That’s wonderful,” she said. “I think I love him for that.”

“Yeah, it was my lucky day when Cal hung out in my campground and eventually married my daughter. I inherited a whole family. So what’s up with your family?”

“I talked to Aunt Helen just this morning. We’re going to sell the house we shared in Chicago. Then she’ll come here for a visit. I miss her. I haven’t seen her in a while. We went to Maui for some sun. But she’ll be here next month

and she'll stay while she plans her next move. A couple of months, probably."

"Will you take time off then?" he asked.

"Maybe an extra day or two but Helen likes to stay busy. And she needs her writing time, which doesn't include me. Usually about this time of year she makes all her plans for the trips she'll take in the year to come. She goes to conferences, library events, visits friends all over the place. And she usually rents a house or condo in a warm place for winter."

Rob delivered their plates. "Sully, just like you like it," he said. "That burger should moo for you. And for you, Doctor, your boring turkey club."

"I'm saving my heavy eating for a little later in the day so I don't fall asleep while I'm icing an ankle or putting in stitches."

"And we all appreciate that," Rob said. "I'll refill your drinks in a minute."

"Are you on your own today?" Sully asked.

"Sid will be here soon but I'd insist on taking care of my two favorite customers even if she was here." And then he was gone.

Sully took a big bite of his burger and savored it. His eyes were closed. He was in heaven.

Leigh took a more delicate bite, and she smiled at him.

"Your aunt Helen lives like she's independently wealthy or something," he said.

"I believe her writing keeps her comfortable," Leigh said. "I'm sorry, I keep forgetting to get you a book! She's become an expert at visiting friends."

"Hmph. I'd be just as happy to never have to go farther than town," Sully said.

"She might be spending winters in Florida from now on, for all I know."

“She’d rather have hurricanes?” Sully asked.

Leigh laughed. “Good point. Do you like winter?”

“Winter here isn’t so bad,” he said. “So much skiing, skating, snowshoe hiking... Course, I’m very busy just keeping the road plowed and trying not to slip on the damn ice.”

“I enjoyed this winter,” she said. “It wasn’t nearly as challenging as winter in Chicago. Of course, I don’t have to contend with a freeway to get to work. Winter here seemed mild. Gentle.” And just the scenery, she remembered, was more like a snow globe than the harsh, blowing, difficult Midwestern city winter.

“Your aunt hike?” he asked.

“She likes long walks,” Leigh said. “She reads a lot. She writes three books a year. We talk about books all the time. She’ll call me and say, ‘What are you reading?’ And I’d better be reading something. But she’s so cool. I can’t wait to introduce you—I know you’ll like her.”

“I don’t know, I don’t read much,” he said, biting into that big burger again.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem,” she said. “You’re not her niece.”

Finn and Maia were experts at texting. It wasn’t interesting stuff, just silly stuff, just keeping close tabs on each other. They weren’t allowed to use their phones in school; if a teacher saw a phone, it was confiscated. But there was time before school, during breaks, after school, while at work. They didn’t start eating lunch together right at the beginning of senior year—Maia had her posse of girls and Finn had his guys. But it wasn’t long before they merged those friends so they could be together. Finn liked to put a hand on her knee under the table; she liked to give him a brief kiss on the cheek before heading to the next class.

They saw each other whenever they could. They walked to classes together, they went out on weekends, and Maia liked to watch him practice with the baseball team. They did homework together now and then, sometimes at one of their houses, sometimes on the phone. Maia's parents were ready to adopt Finn, and Rob and Sean were big Maia fans.

Then at night, they had those quiet serious talks that seemed to mark love in bloom. And there were long stretches of time when, phones pressed to their ears, they just listened to each other breathe.

Maia was not Finn's first kiss but there hadn't been that many girls before her. And he had fallen into those awesome, hot, steamy makeout sessions with Maia easily. And while love was in bloom, so was Colorado. Things were sprouting everywhere, from the ground to the treetops. April came with a blush on the land.

"It's obvious you're down for the count," Rob said to his son. "I like Maia, she seems like a real nice girl..."

"She's awesome. Brilliant and fun and cool," Finn said.

"So, is there anything we should talk about?" Rob asked. "Like ground rules? Boundaries? Safety? Responsibility?"

"Haven't we had this talk about fifty times?" Finn asked. "Maybe you should talk to Sean."

"Does Sean have a girlfriend?" Rob asked, eyebrows raised with surprise.

"Probably," Finn said. "He moves a little fast in that area. Faster than me."

Finn had never dated seriously before Maia. His focus had really been on school, work and sports, not necessarily in that order. He had to do well in school—it was a means to an end. If he was going to live well and have good man-toys, he'd have to find a way to earn a good living. And he did not want to own a bar or restaurant.

Then he noticed Maia and, holy shit, by Thanksgiving of his senior year he had fallen hard. He loved everything about her—her skin, her hair, her voice, her scent, her shape, her brain, her personality. She was the only girl he'd ever known who had it all. Really, all. He just couldn't believe she wanted to be with him.

He didn't know if this was what love felt like but he couldn't imagine it got any better.

He'd gotten his stitches out; the bandage was off but his hand still hurt sometimes, like when he caught a fly ball. He wasn't playing that well. He was hitting okay, catching worse. It frustrated him but graduation was nigh and he knew he wasn't scholarship material based on athletics. He was getting a little scholarship help at UC for academics. But he liked baseball and wanted to play. "You're going to have to give it time," Dr. Culver said. "It might be slightly sore when stressed for a few months."

"So much for baseball," he grumbled.

"If you still have trouble in midsummer, we'll contact a specialist. Since you only have moderate pain when you pressure the injury site, I don't suspect any deeper problem. Why don't you cushion the site with a bandage while you play ball, see if that helps."

"I'll try that," he said.

But when he had Maia in his arms, his hand never bothered him. It felt particularly good when he had it full of the warm, sweet flesh of her breast. They did a lot of kissing, touching, bumping and grinding, then one night they unbuttoned each other's jeans. He reached for hers, she reached for his and he thought he might die. All he wanted in life was that they put their hands down each other's pants. They were parked at a turnout on a mountain road, steaming up the windows just as they steamed up each other.

“Okay, whoa now,” Maia said. “Let’s slow this down before we lose control.”

“Okay,” he said obediently. He put his arm around her shoulders, pulled her close and said, “Should we go to prom?”

She laughed softly. “I wondered about that. I wondered if you were ever going to ask me.”

“I’m just an average guy, Maia. I was putting it off, afraid you’d say no. I mean, you could go with anyone.”

“You’re so funny. Who else would I go with? Who else would ask me as long as we’re going together? Of course I’ll go with you! Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re so wonderful.” He kissed her temple.

“I’m not quite ready for sex,” she said.

“That’s okay,” he said.

“Going to prom with you might not make me any more ready. Promise me you won’t expect sex if you take me to prom.”

“I promise. Sex. That’s your call.”

“But I bet you have a condom.”

A short laugh escaped him. “I will always have a condom. Know why? Because we’re not going to get in over our heads. We’re going to be safe and we’re going to be sure.”

“Well, I have something to tell you. I haven’t had sex with anyone. I’m not sure I even know what to do. But I know I’m not quite ready.”

He stroked her soft hair. “Maia, I haven’t, either. But I bet if we do eventually do it, it’ll be all right. No hurry. Your call, like I said.”

“But you’re ready?”

He was quiet for a moment. He sighed. He was such a hustler—not. It had only taken about six months to get to this conversation. “There’s no way I can say the right thing here.”

She giggled. “I know you want to. I want to, too. But you

know what? I'd like to be sure we're going to be together for a while. I want to be sure we both feel like we're with the one we love. But don't say you love me—it won't get you sex."

He laughed. Then he kissed her cheek. "Okay, I get it. I do think I love you, though."

"Seriously?"

"What do I know? I've never been serious with a girl like this. I love every second with you. Everything about us together is good. When we're making out or doing homework. Okay, that's a lie. Making out is better than homework. There is one thing..."

"Yeah?"

"When you start to seriously consider sex, with me or with anyone, you need protection. Like the pill or something. And I think if it's ever with anyone but me I might have to kill him, but don't let that bother you. I'll do it fast and as painlessly as possible and we don't have to ever talk about it."

She laughed. "You'd never kill a fly."

"Hah! I've killed hundreds of flies!"

"I'm already on the pill," she said quietly. She shrugged and didn't look at him. "Terrible cramps. But that doesn't mean I'm ready for sex with you. But I do feel like I love you, too. For all the same reasons."

Finn really thought he might explode on the spot, but not only had his father lectured endlessly on this topic, his aunt Sid had talked with him at length about how to respect women. There was a lot of talk about consent. "Whew," he said. "Okay, you just keep me posted. You should definitely be sure."

After that conversation, spring seemed to literally blast its way onto the land—flowers, bunnies, elk calves and all.

Leigh moved everything off her desk, then put everything back and moved everything off her credenza. She checked her

pockets and dumped the contents of her purse on her desk. She looked under her desk and in each drawer. Then she went to the front of the clinic where Eleanor and Gretchen worked.

"Has anyone seen my cell phone?"

"Did you call it, listen for the ring?" Gretchen asked.

"It's turned off. I swear I just had it."

"You checked desk drawers, purse?"

"Yes. And I emptied my purse completely to be sure."

"Could you have left it in your car?" Eleanor asked.

"No. I sat at my desk and talked to my aunt Helen this morning."

"Trash?"

"I'll look," Leigh said, heading back to her office.

"I took out the trash," Gretchen said.

Leigh and Eleanor both looked at her. She had a reputation for not doing the dirty work until asked. At close of business either Eleanor or Leigh usually handled the trash.

"Don't look at me like that," Gretchen said. "Not the medical waste. Just the paper and kitchen waste."

Leigh sighed. "I'll go get it."

"Let me do that, Dr. Culver," Eleanor said.

"No, it's my phone. I wonder if I could've knocked it in the trash while I was cleaning off my desk this morning. I'll be right back." She took the stethoscope from around her neck and put it on the counter. Then she went out back to the Dumpster.

She could see the white trash bag that came from the clinic but she couldn't quite reach it. If the Dumpster had been almost full, the bag would've been within reach, but it was about a foot too far down. She spotted an old wooden chair and grabbed it, pulling it out. It was a little wobbly but still functional. She pushed the chair up against the Dumpster to steady it, then stood on it and leaned over the edge, reaching

in. Her fingertips grazed the trash bag. All she had to do was get a grip on it and pull—

She teetered on the edge of the Dumpster as she reached and her toe accidentally pushed away the chair. In a frightful moment, she fell. Headfirst.

She froze, sprawled atop the bags of trash. Her first order of concern was whether she had landed on anything sharp. She didn't feel any pain. Her next concern—had she landed on anything really icky? She heard the sound of footsteps—someone was running toward the Dumpster. Her third concern arose—how long was she going to look like a complete idiot?

“Oh Jesus,” Rob Shandon said, peering into the Dumpster. “What the hell happened?”

“Kind of a long story,” she said, still lying across several bags of trash. “Short version, I seem to have lost my phone.”

He grinned at her. “You want to get out of there?”

“Not without my trash,” she said. She moved around and found the one she was after. She tossed it out of the Dumpster. Rob ducked as it flew past. “All right. Can you give me a hand?”

“Yes, Doctor,” he said, reaching for her. He checked the edge of the Dumpster, making sure it wasn't sharp. “Can you stand up? I'm going to lift you out.”

“The chair isn't a good idea,” she advised.

“Yeah, I saw that. Just let me get my hands under your arms. Don't try to help me—I'm going to pull you right over the edge. It's kind of dirty but no sharp edges. Here, hold my hands until you get upright.”

She had to stand on a pile of trash to get high enough for him to get a grip on her. “Ew,” she said, lifting a foot to which a limp and slimy lettuce leaf clung.

He laughed. “If that's the worst you get, you're in good shape. Ready? Here we go.” He pulled her right over the edge

and into his arms. And he just held her there. He didn't even attempt to put her down.

"How did you know I was in there?" she finally asked.

"I was driving by and I saw your legs go over the edge. I knew it was someone from the clinic because of the scrubs but I didn't know which one of you. I hit the jackpot."

"You can go ahead and put me down now."

"I'd rather not," he said. "Brings something to mind I've been thinking about for weeks. We should go out."

"Out?" she asked.

"On a date."

"Where does one go out in Timberlake? There's no movie theater and you have the best restaurant in town."

"Thank you," he said, beaming. "I like to visit lots of different restaurants that are nothing like mine. I started my career working in a five-star restaurant."

"And you want a date with me? Why?"

"Well, let's see," he said, rolling his eyes upward. "You can get out stains, you're good with a needle, various things... Maybe we should get to know each other better. Isn't that why people date?"

"I shouldn't have rubbed your head," she said. "I do that with patients who have a lot of fear or anxiety or look like they might puke. It relaxes them."

"I'm not the only one?" he said. "Damn. I thought I was the only one."

"You want to be the only one?"

He nodded and smiled slyly. "How about Sunday night? The pub is kind of frisky on Friday and Saturday night and I like to stay close. There's this great gourmet restaurant in Aurora—only nine tables. The chef is a friend."

"You can put me down," she said. "I have to go through the trash."

“This feels kind of nice,” he said. “Okay.” He let her legs drop down but, with an arm around her waist, continued to keep her close. “You said yes to Sunday night, right?”

“I didn’t yet. I haven’t had a date in a while.”

“Me, either,” he said. “Maybe we’ll get through it okay. I’m very polite. And helpful.”

“You did drag me out of a Dumpster, so I guess I owe you.”

“Dr. Culver,” Eleanor called, coming toward them, holding Leigh’s phone. “It was in one of the exam rooms.”

“That’s right!” she said. “I took it out to see who was calling me and put it on the counter rather than back in my pocket.” She smiled. “You’ll be happy to know I won yet another free vacation. That’s when I turned it off.”

“Then she fell in the Dumpster,” Rob said. “Headfirst.”

Eleanor gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Then she started to laugh.

“It’s okay,” Rob said. “I saw her go in and pulled her out.”

Then Rob and Eleanor both laughed—hard.

Leigh crossed her arms over her chest. “I could have been killed, you know. Someone could have thrown away a butcher knife and I could have landed on it. Then would you be laughing?”

Rob draped an arm across her shoulders. “Of course not, Dr. Culver. I also wouldn’t have asked you to go out to dinner with me, so I’m glad you weren’t mortally wounded.”

“Oh, that’s so romantic!” Eleanor said. “You plucked her right out of the garbage and asked her out! What a great story!”

“You’re fired!” Leigh said. “And gimme that phone!”

And with that she stomped toward the clinic. She heard them behind her.

“Very good move, Rob!” Eleanor said.

"I hope so," he replied. "A little klutzy, isn't she?" And they both enjoyed a good laugh.

Later that night, her cell phone rang and she saw it was Rob Shandon. She clicked on Accept, but said nothing.

"You gave me your number, remember?" he said.

"Are you done laughing at me?" she asked.

"I should have been laughing with you," he said. "You climbed up on a broken chair and fell headfirst into a Dumpster. You're not even bruised and you were pulled out by a handsome man. Okay, that part's fiction—you were pulled out by me."

"I'm not going to tell you you're handsome."

"Fair enough." He chuckled. "Can I pick you up at six on Sunday night? I'd really love to take you to dinner."

"All right. Is it dressy?"

"Nothing in Colorado is dressy. I'll probably trade my jeans for pants but anything is acceptable. You'll love this place. It's unique, delicious, there's a guy who plays classical guitar and there's always some new creation from the kitchen. It has a cult following—foodies who know what they're doing. So, I'll see you at six on Sunday. I hope the rest of the week is less adventurous for you."

"Thank you," she said. "Yours, too."

Since Leigh spoke to Helen daily, she was well aware that the process of selling the house had been in full swing. The moment Leigh had said, "Let's do it," Helen had hired a team of three women her Realtor had recommended to help her sort through a lifetime of precious junk. She had over a dozen large plastic tubs filled with pictures, Leigh's hand-made Christmas ornaments from childhood, favorite books, special school papers, linens and dishes that had been handed down, everything she couldn't part with. She also kept sev-

eral boxes of her own books, mostly to give away. She was ready to lighten her load.

“I should come and help,” Leigh said.

“As much as I’d enjoy your company, I’m writing a check for this one. If you can think of anything you left here that you can’t live without, now’s the time to speak up. All those medical books are going to the library.”

“Everything I need is online now,” Leigh said. “Those books cost a fortune and will probably never be used again. Even medical records are all stored in the cloud now. We’re paperless. What about the furniture?”

“Is there anything you’re particularly attached to?” Helen asked.

“I brought the old oak dry sink and the two paintings I loved with me,” she said. “I bought a new bedroom set, guest room furniture and some living room pieces and just essential kitchen items for my rental. What are you going to do with the furniture?”

“Sell it or give it away,” Helen said. “It’s more than I need, and if I ever settle down again before the nursing home, I’ll buy what I need. Most of our furniture is deeply loved and quite old. If I decide to settle in San Diego or La Jolla this winter, I’ll rent something furnished. Our keepsakes are all packed up in waterproof tubs and I’ll have them shipped to be stored near you. If you move, it can also move. On lonely Saturday nights you can look at your old kindergarten drawings.”

“That sounds like wonderful fun,” Leigh said with a laugh.

“There’s something you can do, darling. Rent a storage unit—not a large one. Give me the address and I’ll have this stuff shipped. It’s all nicely labeled.”

Three weeks after the work of sorting and tossing had begun, the For Sale sign went up and in forty-eight hours there had been an offer. An excellent offer. Leigh had natu-

rally assumed it would take at least a month to close and finish the moving process but she should have known better. With Helen in charge, delegating, the process moved like greased lightning.

It was only the day after Rob had asked her out when her cell phone rang and it was Helen.

"I'm just leaving work," Leigh said. "Let me call you from home."

"Yes, do," Helen said. "I've finished everything and I'm coming."

Leigh froze. "What?" She sat back down at her desk.

"I've disposed of the furniture, hired the house cleaners and painters, sold my car to one of the packers, signed my end of the paperwork, left the routing numbers for my account with the closing agent and packed my bags. I can be there in three days."

"Helen! How in God's name did you manage all that so fast?"

"I had very efficient help and have moved into a hotel. The buyers are in a hurry, had a walkthrough today and want to close as soon as the title office is ready. If anything is upset in the next couple of weeks I guess I'll fly back here to straighten it out, but I have no business here. I'm going to have to buy a new car when I get there..."

Leigh laughed. "You are amazing. How do you do it?"

"There is no one to do it for me or to argue with me about my process. Therefore, I get it done. I'll be there Saturday afternoon. Is that all right?"

Leigh just laughed. "Of course." And she thought she would either explain to Rob that something came up or she would ask if Helen could be included on their date. "I can't wait to see you."

"Shall I arrange for a rental car?"

“I’m off this weekend. I’ll come to get you. Will you be flying to Denver?”

“Yes, please. I have quite a load this time. I might have to make your house my base, taking over your guest room. How do you feel about that?”

She felt all warm and lovely inside. “Nothing could make me happier, Auntie.”

“Wonderful! I promise not to get underfoot.”

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CHAPTER ONE

DANTE MONCADA JUMPED into the car beside his driver, two of his men clambering in behind him. This was all he needed, someone breaking into the old cottage that had been in the Moncada family's possession for generations.

As his driver navigated Palermo's narrow streets and headed into the rolling countryside, Dante thought back to his earlier conversation with Riccardo D'Amore. The head of the D'Amore family had put the brakes on a deal Dante had been negotiating for the past six months. Riccardo ran a clean, wholesome business and was concerned Dante's reputation would tarnish it.

He muttered a curse under his breath and resisted the urge to punch the dashboard.

What reputation? So he liked the ladies. That was no crime. His business empire was built on legitimate money. He did not play the games many Sicilian men liked to play. He kept his nose clean literally and figuratively. He liked to drink and party, but so what? He didn't touch drugs, never gambled and avoided the circles where arms, drug dealing and people trafficking were considered profitable business enterprises. He worked hard. Building a multi-billion-euro technol-

ogy empire from a modest million-euro inheritance, and with an accountancy trail even the most hardened auditor would fail to find fault with, took dedication. For sure, he cut the odd corner here and there, and his Sicilian heritage meant he did not suffer fools, but every cent he'd earned he'd earned legitimately.

But the legitimacy of his business was not the factor behind Riccardo's foot coming down on the deal that Dante and Alessio, Riccardo's eldest son, had spent months working on. The D'Amores had developed the next-generation safety system for smartphones that had proven itself hack-proof, out-performing all rivals. Alessio and Dante were all set to sign an exclusivity agreement for Dante to install the system in the smartphones and tablets his company was Europe's leader in. This system would give him the tools to penetrate America, the only continent Dante was still to get a decent foothold in.

Riccardo's talk about reputations boiled down to one thing. Dante's parentage. His recently deceased father, Salvatore, had been a heavy gambler and the ultimate playboy. His mother, Immacolata, was known unaffectionately as the Black Widow, a moniker Dante had always thought unfair, as she had never actually killed any of her husbands, merely leeches them for money when she divorced them. His father had been her first husband. She was currently on number five. His mother lived like a queen.

Riccardo, on the other hand, had had one wife, eleven children, thought gambling the work of the devil and sex outside the confines of marriage a sin. Riccardo was concerned Dante was the apple that hadn't fallen far from the tree. Riccardo wanted proof

that Dante was not the mere sum of his parents' parts and would not bring Amore Systems and by extension Riccardo himself into disrepute. Riccardo was now in advanced talks with Dante's biggest rival about contracting the system to them instead.

Damn him. The old fool was supposed to have retired.

He had one chance to prove his respectability before the deal was lost for good, Alessio's forthcoming wedding.

Dante's angry ruminations on his business problems were put to one side when his driver pulled the car to a stop in a small opening amidst the dense woodland that ran along the driveway to the cottage. A few metres away, also cunningly hidden in the woodland, was a much smaller city car...

Dante reached into the footwell for the baseball bat he hoped he wouldn't have to use.

Flanked by his bodyguards, he neared the run-down farmer's cottage through the thick trees that hid their approach from watching eyes and rubbed his arms against the bracing chill under the cloudless night sky. The remnants of what had been an unusually cold winter still lingered in the air.

The small cottage with its peeling whitewashed exterior walls came into view. All the shutters were closed but smoke curled out of the chimney that hadn't been used in two decades, wisping upwards into the still darkness of this early spring Sicilian evening. Marcello, who managed the land, had been correct that someone was there.

Keeping to the shadows, Dante and his men approached it.

The door was locked.

Brow furrowing, he pulled his key out and unlocked it.

He winced as the sounds of the creaking hinges echoed through the walls, and stepped inside for the first time since his teenage years, when he would sneak girls there. It hadn't been his father he'd worried about catching him, it had been the girls' fathers. Sicilian men did not take kindly to their daughters having a sex life before marriage; at least, they hadn't twenty years ago.

The open-plan interior was much smaller than he remembered. The lights already on, he scanned it quickly, looking for damage. The window above the sink had been boarded in cardboard. He guessed that was where the intruder had gained entry, but there was no other visible damage, nothing to suggest his unwelcome visitor had come here intent on vandalising or robbing them. Not that there was anything to take unless the intruder had a penchant for decades-old musty furniture. An air of neglect permeated the walls, mingling with the black smoke billowing from the log fire. A pile of what looked like educational books was stacked on the small table.

He stared at those books, brow furrowed again at their incongruity.

A floorboard creaked above his head.

Adrenaline surged through him.

Keeping a tight hold on the baseball bat, Dante nodded at his men to follow and treaded slowly up the narrow staircase, cursing that each step was received with yet another creak. He could have left his men to deal with the intruder but he wanted to see the face of

the man who'd had the nerve to break into his property before deciding what to do with him.

Like all men with his wealth and power, Dante had enemies. The question he asked himself was if it was one of those enemies hiding behind this door plotting against him or just a cold vagrant chancing his luck.

He nodded at his men one more time and pushed the door open.

His first thought as he entered the empty bedroom was that he was too late and the intruder had escaped. There was no second thought, for a figure suddenly burst through from the *en suite* bathroom and charged at him, screaming, with what looked like a showerhead in hand.

It took a long beat before his brain recognised the screeching figure for what it was—a woman.

Before the showerhead in her hand could connect with Dante's head, Lino, the quicker of his men, grabbed hold of the woman and engulfed her in his meaty arms.

Immediately she started kicking out, hurling a string of obscenities in what sounded like English, but with a strong accent he had trouble placing.

Dante stared with amazement at this struggling intruder dressed only in a thick maroon robe.

Her eyes fell on him. There was a wild terror in the returning stare.

'Let her go,' he ordered.

Lino removed the showerhead from her hand and released her.

As soon as she was free from his hold, she backed away from them, her eyes going from Dante, to Lino, to Vincenzo and back to Dante, the terror still there.

He quite understood her fear. Dante was tall and physically imposing. Lino and Vincenzo were mountains.

'Leave,' he barked at his men. 'Wait downstairs for me.'

Her eyes settled on him.

This woman might be an intruder, her reasons for being there to be revealed but, unless she had a gun hiding beneath that robe, which she would have already used if she'd had one, she posed no danger.

His men were too well trained to argue and left the room. Stealth no longer being needed, they thumped down the stairs like a herd of wildebeest.

Now that he was alone with her, Dante's senses became more attuned. A wonderful scent filled the room, a soft floral smell that clung around the intruder, who had backed herself into the corner of the room. The only sound to be heard was her ragged breathing.

He stepped slowly towards her.

She pressed herself more tightly into the corner of the room and hugged her arms across her seemingly ample chest, strikingly angled eyes ringing with fear at him. If she hadn't broken into his property and made herself at home, he could feel sorry for her.

He guessed her to be in her early twenties, petite yet curvy, snub nose, plump lips, freckles covering a face that was either naturally pale or white from fright. The colour of her long, wet hair was impossible to judge. Whatever the colour, nothing could detract from the fact that this was one beautiful woman.

Under any other circumstance he would be tempted to let a whistle escape his lips.

Her long, swanlike neck moved but she didn't speak. Those strange eyes did not leave his face.

He stopped a foot away from her and asked in English, 'Who are you?'

Her lips tightened and she hugged herself even harder, giving a quick shake of her head.

'Why are you here?'

But still she didn't speak. If he hadn't caught the obscenities she'd screeched when she'd exploded out of the bathroom, he could believe she was mute.

If she hadn't broken into his property, he would feel bad for her obvious fright.

'You know this is private property? *Si?*' he tried again, speaking slowly. Dante's English was fluent but his accent thick. 'This cottage is empty but it belongs to me.'

The strange yet beautiful eyes suddenly narrowed and in that slight movement he realised fear wasn't the primary emotion being thrown at him, it was loathing.

'My backside does it belong to you.' She straightened. Her strong accent registered in his brain as Irish. 'This cottage is part of your father's estate and should be shared with your sister.'

Anger swelled in him.

So that was what this was all about? Another charlatan pretending to be Salvatore Moncada's secret love-child in the hope of grabbing a portion of Dante's inheritance. What did this make? Eight or nine fraudsters since his father's death three months ago? Or was this someone Dante's lawyer had already sent packing but thought they would chance their luck one more time and try and convince Salvatore's legitimate child herself?

As a means of getting his attention this woman had played a master stroke.

What a shame for her that it would end in her arrest and deportation.

'If I had a secret sister I'm sure I would be open to sharing a portion of my father's estate with her, but—'

'There's no *if* about it,' she interrupted. 'You *do* have a sister and I have the proof with me.'

Something in her tone cut the retort from his tongue.

Dante stared even harder at the beautiful face before him as his veins slowly turned to ice.

Did this truculently sexy woman really believe she was his...*sister*?

So *this* was Dante?

Aislin had seen many pictures of the cruel Sicilian intent on denying her sister what was morally hers but nothing could have prepared her for the sculptured reality stood before her.

In the flesh he was much taller than she'd expected, his hair thicker and darker. He had a lean, wiry muscularity she hadn't expected either. Nor had the pictures done justice to the rest of him. His thick, dark beard couldn't hide the chiselled jawline or downplay the firm, sensuous lips resting below a straight nose that could have been carved by a professional sculptor. Thick black brows rested above green eyes that could only be described as beautiful, and those eyes were staring at her with a combination of disgust and disbelief.

It hadn't escaped her attention that Dante was a good-looking man but she had not been prepared in the slightest for the raw sexiness that oozed from him.

His black shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and, while she kept her gaze fixed on his eyes, she'd glimpsed the dark hair poking through at the base of his throat.

Dante Moncada was the sexiest, most handsome man she had ever set eyes on and it thrilled with the same intensity that it repelled.

Despite the warmth she'd managed to inject into the walls from the log fire, a shiver ran up her spine, and she drew her towelling robe more tightly around her, wishing she could glue it to her body. It fell to her ankles but, with that green stare on her, she might as well have forgone it. She felt naked.

Beneath it she *was* naked.

It had been two days since she'd broken into this cottage. Two days she'd been living here, waiting for her presence to be noted and for the certain confrontation with this man to take place. But, seriously, did it have to occur the minute she stepped out of the shower?

So much for the cool, calm, no-nonsense first impression she'd hoped to make. In her head she'd created a scene where he stormed into the cottage and found her sitting serenely at the table studying, preferably wearing her reading glasses. Whenever Aislin wore those glasses, men tended to speak to her as if she had more than a single brain cell floating in her head.

Hearing the creak of the floorboards as Dante and his two goons had climbed the stairs had terrified her. She'd been instantly aware of the vulnerability of her position, thrown her still-wet body into the robe

and wrenched the showerhead off as her only means of defence.

Dante must think he was dealing with a wailing banshee, an impression it was essential she correct immediately.

He took a step back, his left brow rising up and down. 'You believe you are my sister?'

She jutted her chin out to hide her discomfort at her nakedness beneath the robe. 'If you will be good enough to let me get dressed, I will explain everything. The kitchen is stocked with coffee.'

He gave a grunt of surprised laughter. 'You break into my home and want me to make you a drink?'

'I'm asking you to give me some privacy so I can make myself decent before we start arguing about the inheritance you are trying to keep for your greedy self. I'm simply pointing out that there is coffee if you wish to have one while you wait, and that I take mine with milk and one sugar.'

The green eyes flickered over her, taking in every inch of her body, before he blinked, gave the slightest of shudders and took another step back.

'I will leave you to dress,' he said curtly.

He closed the door behind him.

Aislin took a moment to force huge lungfuls of oxygen down her throat but Dante's departure seemed to have taken all the air with him. All that was left were the remnants of his cologne that even her non-perfumer self could tell with one sniff was expensive. Expensive and...sexy, just like the man it adhered to.

Knowing she needed to calm her thoughts or Dante would eat her alive, she pulled a pair of jeans, a silver

jumper and underwear out of the wardrobe and hurried into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She dressed quickly, ran her fingers through her damp hair then took one last fortifying breath before leaving the room to find Dante.

This confrontation was one she had prepared for. In theory, she had prepared for all eventualities, even if those eventualities had been cobbled together in a rush when they had learned Dante had sold the hundred acres in Florence and pocketed the proceeds into his already bulging bank account.

All she had to do was hold her nerve against this physically imposing man. His looks and scent did not count for jack. This man, a billionaire in his own right, had ridden roughshod over her sister's efforts to claim a share of their father's estate.

The stairs led into the cosy open-plan living area, where she found him sat on one of the sagging sofas, flicking through one of her university books. Two steaming mugs of coffee were laid on the table before him. His Goliath-proportioned sidekicks were nowhere to be seen.

His eyes narrowed at her approach and he waited in silence until she had sat herself in the farthest spot from him she could find.

He jabbed a finger onto the opened page of the textbook, the place where she had marked her name, as she had done since her school days. 'Tell me about yourself, Aislin O'Reilly.'

He pronounced her name 'Ass-lin', which under normal circumstances would have made her laugh.

She shook her head. For some reason her tongue struggled to work around this man.

He slammed the book on the table, making her jump. 'You claim to be my sister, so tell me about yourself. Show me your proof.'

She crossed her legs and met the intense green stare head-on. 'I'm not your sister. My sister, Orla, is your sister. I'm here as her representative.'

His brow furrowed. She could see him trying to work out what that made them in relation to each other.

'Orla and I have the same mother,' she supplied. 'You and Orla have the same father.'

Dante's lungs loosened at the confirmation that this intruder was not of his blood. The mere sway of her hips as she'd walked down the stairs had sent his senses springing to life. Dante was not particularly fussy when it came to women. He liked them in all shapes and sizes but to think he could find someone who was possibly his own sister desirable would have been enough to drive him straight to the nearest therapist.

'Where is the proof of this, Aislin?'

The lighting in the cottage against the darkly painted walls left much to be desired but now she sat close enough for him to see that the colour of the eyes ringing their loathing at him was grey. The black outer rim of the eyeballs contrasted starkly, making the grey appear translucent. Along with the angled tilt of her eyes, it gave the most extraordinary effect.

'It's Aislin,' she corrected, pronouncing it 'Ashling'.

'Ashling.' He practised it aloud. 'Aislin... An unusual name.'

The striking eyes held his without blinking. 'Not in Ireland it isn't.'

He shrugged. As unusual and interesting as her name was, there were far more important things to discuss. 'You say you have proof that... Orla? Is that her name?'

She nodded.

'That Orla is my sister. Let me see that proof.'

She got to her feet and walked to the small kitchen area, the curve of her bottom in her tight jeans a momentary distraction. From a small bag on the counter she took out an envelope and opened it on her walk back to him.

Pulling a sheet of paper out of the envelope, she handed it to him with a curt, 'Orla's birth certificate.'

Dante took the sheet from her with blood roaring in his ears. Slowly, he unfolded it.

He blinked a number of times to clear the filmy fog that had developed in his eyes.

The birth certificate was dated twenty-seven years ago. On the box labelled 'father' were the words *Salvatore Moncada*.

He rubbed his temples.

This didn't prove anything. This could be a forgery. Or, more likely, Aislin and Orla's mother—he scanned the certificate again and found Sinead O'Reilly named as the mother—had lied.

From the envelope still in her hand, Aislin plucked out a photograph and held it out to him.

He didn't want to look at it.

He *had* to look at it.

The photo was a headshot of two people, a young woman and a toddler boy.

A violent swell clenched and retracted in his stomach.

Both subjects in the photo had thick, dark-brown hair, the exact shade of Dante's.

The woman had green eyes the exact shade of Dante's.

CHAPTER TWO

AISLIN TOOK IN the ashen hue Dante's olive skin had turned and experienced a stab of sympathy to witness the penny drop in that arrogant head.

She placed the envelope on the table and grabbed the coffee he'd made for her, unable to understand why her hands shook. It felt as if her entire insides were shaking, tiny vibrations quivering through her bones and veins.

She told herself it was because of the situation, her body preparing itself for the biggest fight it had ever undertaken. It was nothing to do with Dante himself.

The value of this cottage and its land were peanuts for a man of Dante's wealth but for her sister it meant the world. It would enable her to buy a home that Finn could live in with the freedom to be as normal a child as his condition allowed. That was all Orla wanted—a decent home in which to raise her son.

Aislin loved her nephew with her whole heart. Finn *was* her heart. For months she'd sat by his side as he'd lain in that awful incubator in the neonatal intensive care nursery, willing his tiny body to grow, for his lungs to work on their own; praying that one day he would be strong enough to go home...to survive.

The little fighter had survived, but not without complications. His entire life would be a fight and Aislin was prepared to do whatever necessary to make that fight more bearable.

Dante's lawyer had blocked her sister's every attempt for recognition. Aislin had flown to Sicily determined to confront Dante in person but, again, had been blocked. The security around him was too tight for her to get a foot through it. Breaking into this cottage had been the last desperate resort.

After a length of time had passed that seemed to be stretched by elastic, Dante finally looked up from the photo.

Her heart made the strangest clenching motion when his green eyes locked onto hers. There was a hardness in his stare.

'I have never heard of this woman. My father had many lovers. Many men and women have come forward since his death claiming to be his secret love-child. You give me a photograph and claim it is my sister...'

His thick Sicilian accent soaked into her skin as if her pores were breathing it in.

'I am claiming nothing—she *is* your sister. You can see the resemblance.'

He gave a tutting sound that was pure Sicilian. 'A convenient resemblance.'

'There is nothing convenient about it!' she retorted hotly, and would have added more had he not raised a palm up.

'If she is my sister, why did she wait until after my father's death to reveal herself?'

'She didn't need to reveal herself. Your father paid maintenance for her upbringing until she was eighteen.'

He sagged slightly at this revelation but it was the briefest of movements, his composure regained in a breath. 'That is something I can discover the truth of for myself.'

'It *is* the truth and, if you hadn't stonewalled her every attempt to speak to you, you would have all the facts at your fingertips.'

'My father acknowledged one child. Me. There was no talk of a secret sister, no death-bed confession.'

'That's not Orla's fault.'

'Would she still claim to be my sister if I were to tell you there is nothing left of his estate?'

'That's because you've sold it all off!'

The look he cast her was full of fake pity. 'My father was a gambling addict. He sold everything he could to fund his debts.'

'I've seen the list of assets.' That was the only thing Orla's useless lawyer had been able to get from Dante's terrifyingly efficient one. 'He was worth millions. Orla isn't being greedy. All she wants is a small share of it. Morally, she's entitled to that, even if you and your lawyer don't agree. I'm prepared to stage a sit-in in this cottage until you either sign it over to her or pay her off.'

Before Dante could laugh at Aislin's nerve, a lock of hair fell onto his forehead and over his eyes. He brushed it back. He needed to get it cut, another thing to add to his ever-long list of things to do.

'The law is on my side. Do you really believe that moving into this cottage—illegally—will get you anywhere?'

Her eyes spat fury at him. 'Possession is nine-tenths of the law.'

‘Maybe in Ireland. But this is Sicily. My country. My property. My land. I can snap my fingers and have you removed from this cottage and expelled from the country.’

‘Try it.’ She jumped back to her feet and snatched the envelope off the table to pull yet another sheet of paper out of it. ‘Try it and I will make sure every media outlet knows what you’ve done. This is not your land, it’s part of your father’s estate. All Orla wants is what she’s entitled to, and this is the authority for me to handle things on her behalf.’

Dante ignored the letter, although he took note of the pretty hand holding it and the buffed, shapely nails. Then he slowly let his gaze drift upwards, over the curvy hips, the slender waist and the large breasts caressed lovingly in a soft, silver sweater. Simple clothing draped over an outstanding body. As her fragrance snaked its way back into his senses, he experienced a thickening in his loins. Disconcerted with this involuntary reaction to this woman, and at this moment in time, he reached for his coffee.

Dante freely admitted his libido was strong but the last time he’d experienced an inappropriate erection like this had been in a maths lesson almost two decades ago when his teacher had leaned over his desk to help him and her top had gaped open, exposing her cleavage.

He made a point of taking a large sip of the coffee, dragging his focus to the matter at hand. For instant coffee, it wasn’t too bad, its heat a welcome respite from the cold that had settled in his spine.

The resemblance between himself and the woman in the photograph was astounding.

‘Has your sister ever lived in Sicily?’

The neat, pretty eyebrows drew together. ‘No.’

‘Say for argument’s sake that your assessment is correct and that my father really was worth millions when he died, what makes you think Orla would be entitled to anything? My father named me as his sole heir. She was not recognised as his child. You have to appreciate that my lawyer and I have been through this many times already.’

When the first fraudster had tried their hand at claiming on the estate, Dante and his lawyer had discussed all the legalities on the off-chance the fraudster was telling the truth.

‘It might have been different if she had lived in my country at any point in her life. I suggest she pays a visit to a Sicilian lawyer and hears for herself that she has no rights.’ He laughed, although humour was the last thing he felt right then. ‘There is nothing for her to have. That list you have is old and dates from my grandfather’s death. My father sold most of the assets on it. The family home never belonged to him and nor did the land in Florence—my grandparents put them in a trust for me to stop my father selling them to feed his gambling addiction.’

That hadn’t stopped one of the fraudsters taking out an injunction to prevent Dante selling those assets, an injunction his lawyer had overturned in ten days. That fraudster was currently rotting in a Sicilian prison, awaiting trial for fraud.

‘This cottage is all he had left and it is not for sale.’ As dilapidated as the cottage was, Dante would never sell it. He wasn’t a man for sentimentality but this was the one place where his childhood memories were

only positive. His mother had loathed the cottage and thus it remained untainted by her long-ago desertion.

'Then pay Orla off. Even if what you say is true, and your grandparents bypassed your father, surely she's entitled to something? She knows she can't expect things to be fifty-fifty between you but morally she's entitled to something. She'll be happy to settle for the value of this cottage.'

He shook his head in a display of sympathy. Her approach was pitch-perfect, reason matched with a seeming lack of greed. The perfect cover for an outrageous act of fraud.

Dante had almost convinced himself she spoke the truth but that was impossible. His father would never have kept such a secret from him.

He was quite sure his lawyer, one of the most feared legal brains across the Mediterranean, would have been taken in too. Aislin clearly had the brains to match her beauty. She was an incredible actress.

'This cottage is worth no more than a hundred thousand euros,' he said, ensuring his voice contained just the right amount of commiseration. 'The land is worth about the same.'

'That might not be a lot of money to you but to Orla it's a fortune.'

'If it's worth so much to her then why is she not here? Why has she sent you to deal with it?'

'Because right now she doesn't want to leave Ireland. I'm portable—'

'Did she not want to face me?' The anger that had been simmering deep inside bubbled to the surface. 'Or did my *sister* think sending a beautiful woman in

her place would blind me? Is that why you're here? To tempt me into giving this cottage to her?'

Her eyes widened, dark spots of angry colour forming again over the high cheekbones. 'Your mind belongs in a sewer.'

'I'm sure it does.' He rose slowly to his feet. 'You were showering when I came to the cottage. Was that deliberate? Were you keeping watch for me? Did my men being with me force you to change your plans? Did you realise then that you had taken on more than you could handle?'

He gave her no time to defend herself.

Stepping to where she had backed herself against the kitchen unit, he continued, 'Admit it, this is all a bag of lies. What do they call it in English, when a person steals another's image and passes it off as their own?'

The colour spread from her cheekbones to suffuse her entire face, the plump lips clamping tightly together as he stared down at her, daring her to tell the truth.

A sudden image came into his head of those plump lips parting for him...

Heat coiled through his loins again and he breathed deeply to drive it away, only to inhale another lungful of her beautiful scent.

Dante gritted his teeth and waved the photograph still in his hand at her. 'How long did you search for the perfect image that you could use to pretend to be my long-lost sister?'

In one sharp but graceful movement, she snatched it from his hand and stabbed a finger at the toddler's face.

‘Did you not even look at the boy Orla’s holding?’ she snarled. ‘That’s your nephew.’

‘Of course it is. What better than a beautiful child to pull on a man’s heartstrings and charm him into giving you money? I have to say, of all the hustlers who have tried to con me, you, *dolcezza*, are by far the best.’

Her foot moved. For a moment Dante thought she was going to kick him.

Instead she spun around, grabbed her handbag and pulled her phone out.

In seconds she had it unlocked and was thrusting it in his face.

‘What am I supposed to be looking at?’ he asked drolly.

For someone who had to be a foot shorter than him, she raised herself magnificently. ‘The photos. There must be a hundred of Finn on it and a load of Orla too.’

The coldness in his veins made a sharp return.

‘Take the phone, damn you, and look!’ She grabbed hold of his hand and pressed the phone into it.

A jolt ran through him at the touch of her skin on his, a charge that flowed through them both and had their eyes locking together in mutual shock.

After a pause that went on a beat too long, she moved her hand and stepped to the side, away from him.

Aislin dropped her eyes to the floor and rubbed her hands together, trying to negate the charge flowing through her veins.

Her heart beat so hard its thrum echoed in her ears.

She had not expected that. It had been like those times when she touched something and received a

surprise charge of static. But those charges had always been unpleasant, something only a masochist would enjoy. The charge she had felt when touching Dante had been...

Not unpleasant at all.

'Please, look at it,' she whispered, summoning the courage to look back at him.

Aislin was not the greatest photographer in the world, and generally managed to chop the top off heads or get a partial thumb over the lens or get a blurry finish. But, however terrible the pictures were in comparison to the one she'd printed off for him, they were documentary proof that she wasn't lying; that she hadn't catfished Orla's identity; that her sister was Dante's half-sister.

Biologically, Orla was Aislin's half-sister too, but she had never thought of her as anything other than her whole sister. They'd been raised together, shared a room until Orla had left for university and been true sisters in every sense of the word. They'd protected each other, fought each other, played, loved and hated. No one could wind Aislin up better than Orla could and she knew it was the same for her sister.

Dante's Adam's apple moved a number of times before he slowly walked to the dining table and sat on the nearest chair, his focus solely on the photos of the two people she loved most in the world.

Her legs suddenly feeling weak too, she took the seat opposite him, close enough that she could hear him breathe, the deep breaths of someone whose life was in the process of being turned upside down.

Aislin knew that feeling. Orla's accident, which had resulted in Finn's premature birth, had turned their

world upside down. Life as they knew it had come to a stop that day, three years ago.

She could not help but feel for Dante, trying to imagine what it would feel like to discover a family secret of this magnitude.

It must be shattering.

Her own dad had fathered two more children after his split with her mum but there had been no deception about it, just an awareness that he'd created a new family unit that Aislin was a part of, if somewhat removed from. Her mother, for all her many faults, was no liar. Sometimes Aislin had wished her mum *was* a liar. It would have saved a lot of angst and heartbreak.

'I'm not a hustler,' she said softly after a good two minutes that felt more like two hours had passed, the only sound Dante's breaths and the swipe of his thumb against the screen of her phone. 'Orla is as much your sister as she is mine and Finn is as much your nephew too. I know she'll be happy to take a DNA test if you think it necessary.'

More silence fell until he came to a photo that made him peer more closely. Then he turned the phone to her. 'Why is he in hospital? What are those things on his head?'

She looked at her darling nephew, smiling in his hospital bed. 'That was taken six months ago when he went for an EEG.'

'What's that?'

'It measures brainwaves. He was born prematurely and has cerebral palsy. One of the side effects of that, which he has since been diagnosed with, is severe epilepsy. It's the reason Orla didn't come to Sicily herself—she's terrified to leave him. Finn's condi-

tion is the reason she wants a share of the inheritance. She honestly is not being greedy. She just wants a home he can be safe in.’ She was silent for a moment before adding, ‘That’s all I want for him too. I’m sorry for breaking into your cottage. Honestly, I’m not normally one for criminal behaviour, but we’re desperate. Please, Dante, Finn is your nephew. We need your help.’

Dante expelled a long breath and put the phone on the table, then dropped his pounding head and kneaded his fingers into the back of his skull.

He felt sick.

If the evidence was to be believed—and, no matter how hard he strove to find a new angle to disprove it, the evidence appeared compelling—he had a sister and a nephew. A sick nephew.

Another wave of nausea ripped through him.

His father had lied to him.

He thought back to Orla’s date of birth. He would have been seven when she’d been born. His mother had divorced his father when he was seven.

Did his mother know he had a sister? Had she conspired to keep it secret too?

So many thoughts crowded in his head but stronger than all of them was the image of the tiny boy, his nephew, lying on that hospital bed, hooked to a machine via a dozen tubes stuck to his head.

‘How old is he?’

‘A month shy of three.’

He didn’t want to hear the sympathy now ringing from the soft Irish brogue. He could feel it too, radiating from her.

This woman felt sorry for *him*?

She didn't know him. All they shared was a sister.
And a sick nephew.

He muttered a curse.

He raised his head and looked Aislin square in the eye.

Yes, there was compassion in the reflected stare, but also a healthy wariness.

He steepled his fingers across the bridge of his nose and thought hard, pushing aside the emotions crowding him, sharpening his wits and clearing his mind.

He had a business deal to salvage with the D'Amores before he could begin to think about this, never mind deal with it. The clock was ticking. Five days to salvage the biggest deal of his life. Unless he could convince Riccardo that his own playboy days were behind him and prove his parents' faults were not his, then the deal for the exclusivity agreement would be lost for good. On Monday Riccardo intended to sign it with Dante's biggest rival.

One lesson he had learned at a young age was that nothing must come before business. His father had allowed emotions and addiction to take first place and had lost everything for it.

Yet still that image of the boy, his nephew, stayed lodged in the forefront of his mind, and as he stared into the grey eyes of this woman who had just told him his entire life had been a lie, the kernel of an idea flared.

He swept his eyes again over the curvy body and imagined it dressed in expensive couture, and the hair whose colour he still couldn't determine beautifully styled.

Aislin was a stranger in his country. No one knew

her. She was clearly intelligent. And she was beautiful enough that no one would think twice to see her on his arm.

Despite her beauty, she was far removed from the women he normally dated...

'I spoke the truth. My father died penniless,' he told her slowly. 'I gave him an allowance and paid his bills but, other than this cottage, he had nothing left to his name. Under Sicilian law, your sister is not even entitled to a share of that.'

Aislin closed her eyes and slumped in her chair.

The tone of his words held the ring of truth.

Defeat loomed so large she lost the strength to correct him, to say loud and proud that Orla was his sister too.

Aislin was a penniless student. Orla was a penniless single mother still fighting the insurance company for compensation for the damage to her son. They'd pooled the spare cash they'd had between them to instruct that rubbish lawyer who hadn't even bothered to read up properly on Sicilian inheritance laws. Her open-ended return flight here and the car hire had left them skint.

If there was a loophole they could exploit to get something, they had no money left with which to do it.

'This cottage and the land it stands on have been in my family for generations and I have no wish to sell,' he continued, breaking through her defeated thoughts. 'But I am prepared to give Orla half the value. Fifty-fifty.'

She snapped her eyes back open and met his unblinking gaze. 'Really?'

He nodded. 'One hundred thousand euros. It will

be conditional on her taking a DNA test, but we can get that arranged soon. If the test comes back as positive, the money is hers.'

The relief that surged through her at that moment was enough to punch all the breath out of her.

She covered her mouth with a trembling hand. 'Thank you. You don't know what that means—'

'I also have an offer for you,' he cut in before she could get carried away with her thanks. 'An offer that is not DNA-conditional.'

'What kind of offer?'

'A mutually beneficial one.' His eyes narrowed and he rocked his head as if he were thinking. Then he gave one final nod and stilled. 'I have a wedding to attend this weekend. I want you to come with me.'

'You want me to come to a wedding with you?'

'Sì. And in return I will pay you one million euros.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘BUT...’ AISLIN COULDN’T form anything more than that one syllable. Dante’s offer had thrown her completely.

His smile was rueful. ‘My offer is simple, *dolcezza*. You come to the wedding with me and I give you a million euros.’

He pronounced it ‘*seemple*’, a quirk she would have found endearing if her brain hadn’t frozen into a stunned snowball.

‘You want to pay me to come to a wedding with you?’

‘Sì.’ He unfolded his arms and spread his hands. ‘The money will be yours. You can give as much or as little of it to your sister.’

‘Won’t your girlfriend mind?’

As soon as the words left her mouth, Aislin wanted to kick herself.

His beautifully thick brown eyebrows rose in perfect timing with the flame of colour she could feel rising over her face. ‘Did you research me?’

‘I saw a picture of you together when I was thinking up ways to get your attention,’ she muttered, dropping her eyes to examine her fingernails, desperately trying to affect nonchalance.

She hadn’t been researching *him*, more trying to get

a handle on the man in the days before she'd set off for Sicily, trying to decide the best way to cut through the minders and hangers-on to grab his attention for long enough to have the conversation they were now having... A conversation that had taken a most bizarre turn that she was struggling to get her head around.

What she had learned was that Dante Moncada was a man any right-thinking woman would steer a million miles away from. His father had been a Lothario who had seduced Aislin's mother when she'd still been a teenager, and all the evidence pointed to Dante being of the same 'love them and leave them' mould. Dante did not need to pay someone to attend a wedding with him. She would hazard a guess that, if he asked a roomful of women if any wanted to go with him, ninety-nine per cent of them would bob their heads up to agree like over-caffeinated meerkats.

Aislin was part of the one per cent who would duck under a table rather than accept. She'd been there, done that, stupidly having fallen for the biggest playboy on campus, believing his declarations of love and respect; believing they'd had a future that involved marriage and babies, only to find him in bed with one of her housemates mere weeks after her sister's accident.

If she was ever stupid enough to get involved with a man again, her preference would be for a boring, gaming-obsessed hermit with zero libido who had an abhorrence of the outside world and would thus never be in a position or have the mind-space to cheat.

Not a man like Dante. Not this man, who was sexier and more handsome than should be legal.

She could practically smell the testosterone and

pheromones wafting from him. They soaked into her pores in the same way his amazing deep voice did, sensitising her skin and settling deep inside her in a way that was, quite frankly, terrifying.

But a million euros...?

'I ended it with Lola a month ago.' He leaned forward, a sudden, unexpected gleam appearing in his eyes.

Her heart thumped, the beat ricocheting through her like a tsunami.

It took a huge amount of effort to keep her voice steady. 'But you must have a heap of women you could take and not have to pay them for it.'

'None of them are suitable.'

'What does that mean?'

'I need to make an impression on someone and having you on my arm will assist in that.'

'A million dollars for one afternoon...?'

'I never said it would be for an afternoon. The celebrations will take place over the coming weekend.'

She tugged at her ponytail. 'Weekend?'

'Aislin, the groom is one of Sicily's richest men. It is a necessity that his wedding be the biggest and flashiest it can be.'

She almost laughed at the deadpan way he explained it.

She didn't need to ask who the richest man in Sicily was.

'If I'm going to accept your offer, what else do I need to know?'

'Nothing... Apart from that I will be introducing you as my fiancée.'

'*What?*' Aislin winced at the squeakiness of her tone.

'I require you to play the role of my fiancée.' His

grin was wide with just a touch of ruefulness. The deadened, shocked look that had rung from his eyes only a few minutes before had gone. Now they sparkled with life and the effect was almost hypnotising.

She blinked the effect away.

‘Why do you need a fiancée?’

‘Because the father of the bride thinks going into business with me will damage his reputation.’

‘How?’

‘I will go through the reasons once I have your agreement on the matter. I appreciate it is a lot to take in so I’m going to leave you to sleep on it. You can give me your answer in the morning. If you’re in agreement then I shall take you home with me and give you more details. We will have a few days to get to know each other and work on putting on a convincing act.’

‘And if I say no?’

He shrugged. ‘If you say no, then no million euros.’

‘What about the hundred thousand you said you would give Orla?’

‘That is a separate matter and dependent on the DNA test. Your decision will not affect that.’

‘Do you promise?’ She knew it was a childish way of asking but she didn’t care. A hundred thousand euros was too great a sum to play games with.

But a million euros... That was a figure she could scarcely comprehend. That was life-changing.

His handsome features fell into seriousness. He inclined his head before rising to his feet. ‘Whatever you decide, and whatever the outcome, that money for Orla will remain separate from it. You have my word.’

She didn’t have the faintest idea why but she believed him.

* * *

Dante greeted the housekeeper, who made an almost convincing job of not acting surprised to see him and at such a late hour, and strolled through his old family home as he had done a thousand times before.

This was the sprawling seafront villa he'd grown up in, just as his father had. A decade ago, to prevent the villa being used as collateral against his son's gambling debts, his grandfather had signed it over to Dante.

Although the villa had been technically his for all these years, as far as he'd been concerned it had remained his father's to do with as he pleased...apart from sell it.

With his father dead, he still didn't know what to do with it. Unspoken had been his grandfather's wish that one day Dante would settle down, marry, start a family and raise them in this home.

Dante liked city life. He liked being single. What good was marriage for? All he had ever seen of it was bitterness, greed and spite. His grandparents had been married for forty-eight years until his grandmother's death. If they were a template for the longevity of marriage, they could forget it. His grandfather had spent the three years from her death until his own celebrating being rid of her. Dante had been quite sure his grandfather's shaking shoulders at her funeral had been through laughter rather than tears.

At the far end of the villa was his father's study. In the days after his death, Dante had holed himself in there, finding comfort in the room that had been quintessentially his father.

He pushed the door open and inhaled the familiar, if now fading, scent of bourbon and cigars.

This was the room Dante had sneaked into as a small boy, the desk he would hide under until his father appeared and he would jump out at him, and his father would pretend to shout in fright every single time.

He sat on the chair his father had called his own, the chair on which his father had sat Dante on his lap, held him tightly and told him his mother had left and that it would be just the two of them from now on.

This was the room his father had given Dante his first drink of bourbon in, the room in which he'd relayed the deaths of family members, the room where he'd confessed his dire financial situation and begged his only son for a loan to pay off his gambling debts. The latter had taken place so many times Dante had lost count.

A lifetime of memories, good and bad, flooded him and it took a few minutes for him to gather himself together and for the fresh wave of grief to pass.

He opened his father's laptop. When he'd opened it the first time after his father's death he'd guessed the password correctly—Dante's name and date of birth. That had been a bittersweet moment.

Keying the password in this time, all he tasted was bitterness.

Had his father really kept a sister secret from him for all these years?

Aislin claimed his father had paid maintenance for Orla. If there was evidence of it, it would be on here somewhere.

He had a sister. His gut told him that and he did not doubt the DNA test would prove a match.

But had his father known or had Sinead O'Reilly kept Orla's existence a secret from him and lied to her daughters about maintenance being paid?

Dante sent a silent prayer that Sinead was a liar and logged onto his father's saved bank statements.

Damn it, they only went back eight years.

He drummed his fingers on the desk. Where would the paper statements be from the years before that? His father had been a terrible hoarder so they would be here somewhere...

The filing cabinet, of course.

An hour later and he was sat on the carpeted floor, paperwork strewn around him. In his hand was the evidence he'd been seeking but praying he wouldn't find.

Until nine years ago, coincidentally the year Orla had turned eighteen, his father had paid the sum of two thousand euros every month to a bank account in Ireland.

Aislin hovered by the front window of the cottage, peering out intermittently while she waited for Dante.

Nerves in the form of butterflies rampaged in her belly.

Her bags were packed and waiting by the front door. She'd spent most of the night fighting the urge to flee to the airport.

A hundred thousand euros was a substantial amount of money but a million was life-changing. Orla could buy a home, modify it to cater to all Finn's needs and have change to spare at the end of it. She could take

him on holiday. She could buy him a high-tech wheelchair. She could buy a car.

So Aislin had stayed in the cold cottage, hardly sleeping, her mind whirling like a dervish, trying to understand why her instinct was to run.

A million euros to attend a wedding! All her family's problems solved in one weekend!

Restless, she paced the living area.

She'd been prepared to break into the cottage and stage a sit-in in defiance of a powerful billionaire; had been prepared to stay there for as long as it took for him to develop a conscience.

She had not expected it to develop so quickly or easily.

His agreement to give Orla half the value of the cottage and its land had proven his conscience. That he was insisting on a DNA test was not surprising and not something she could blame him for. Dante was no fool. No one who reached the heights in business he had got there by taking people at face value.

She had expected an arrogant monster and found, instead, an arrogant man who could be compelled to listen to reason.

So why was she so resistant to spending a few days with him when the reward for doing so was so great?

A loud rap on the front door made her jump and, when Dante strode through the front door, her heart jumped too, right into her throat.

She'd opened the shutters earlier and spring sunlight poured into the cottage. Dante seemed to glow with it.

Dressed in a navy shirt, snug black jeans and an obviously expensive straight leather jacket, his hand-

some features were more pronounced than they'd been the evening before, the texture of his dark hair thicker and smoother, the green eyes that found hers brighter.

But there was something unkempt about his appearance too. He looked like a man who had spent the night at the bottom of a bottle of rum rather than in a bed. The effect only made him sexier. A pulse set off deep inside her, warmth gathering low in the most intimate of places...

Her reason for resistance suddenly became obvious.

This wasn't mere appreciation of a handsome, sexy man. She was attracted to him.

Aislin was attracted to Dante Moncada. Properly, heart-beatingly, swoon-makingly attracted.

'You are still here,' he stated as he closed the door.

'Well spotted, Einstein.'

Okay, so she was attracted to him. That was nothing to panic about. It didn't mean her brain cells had to become goo around him. She had overcome much worse than an unwelcome attraction to a gorgeous man before. If there was one thing Aislin had it was an abundance of self-control. How else could she have sat through all those awful meetings with the patronising social workers and other officials who'd all seemed determined to deny her the right to be Finn's legal guardian, while Orla had recovered from her horrific injuries, and not have punched any of them?

The slightest spark emerged in the green of his bloodshot eyes. 'Einstein would have killed for my IQ.'

Her lips twitched to break into a smile. 'And your modesty, I'm sure.'

He grinned. 'Am I to assume you're going to accept my offer?'

'A million euros to act as your arm candy for a few days? Yep, I can do that.' She could deal with attraction. Deal with it by ignoring it and keeping her wits sharp. 'But, before I accept your deal, I should point out that no one is going to believe we're engaged. You've only just dumped your last girlfriend.'

He winked, sank onto the sofa and stretched his legs out. His legs were so long his feet slid under the coffee table. 'Anyone who knows me knows I'm a fast mover.'

'That's nothing to be proud of,' she said tartly.

'Trust me, I know when to go slow.'

Heated colour spread like wildfire over her cheeks. 'I won't accept any funny business.'

She needed to make that very clear. Just because her body reacted so strongly to him did not mean she had any intention of allowing anything to happen between them. She would not be one of those over-caffeinated bobbing meerkats.

Dante could curse himself. He hadn't meant to make innuendoes but the opportunity had presented itself in irresistible fashion. 'You are speaking of sex?'

Her face now flamed so brightly it was quite possible it could explode.

'You have nothing to fear. This arrangement is strictly business. The bride and groom both come from religious families and will put us in separate rooms for the sake of appearances.'

After a terrible night when his brain had refused to shut down, even after he'd thrown the best part of a bottle of bourbon down his neck to assist it, he'd

come to the conclusion that this deal *had* to be platonic. In any other circumstance he would go all-out to seduce Aislin but seduction would add too many complications. He needed to keep his head focused on salvaging the business deal, and that was before he added the small detail of Aislin being the sister of his father's secret love-child.

If he didn't believe she was the perfect woman to make Riccardo D'Amore believe him to be a changed man he would have called the whole thing off. But she *was* perfect. Not only was she not of their world but she had a working brain in her beautiful head and a firm commitment to family Riccardo would adore.

All Dante had to do was keep his hands off her, which he had a great feeling would be easier said than done.

Promises made in the twilight hours were much harder to keep in daylight when her scent coiled around his senses. In the daylight, Aislin was more than beautiful, her beauty enhanced now her hair was dry and its vibrant colour there for him to glory in, a deep russet that reminded him of fallen autumn leaves. It made him think of a fox, which he thought an apt word to describe her. She'd stolen into his cottage like a fox. An exquisite fox.

Today she'd dressed in black leggings, an oversized khaki jumper fraying on the left sleeve and scuffed black ankle boots. These were clothes designed for comfort, obviously old and worn, yet he found them as sexy as if she were wearing a tight cocktail dress with all her currently hidden cleavage on show.

She rubbed her hands over her arms, inadvertently pushing against those same breasts he'd just been

imagining. 'As long as we're clear on things being platonic then that's grand.'

'Is there anything else you want to bring up? Because we need to get going.'

Those strange eyes were back on him again, penetrating like lasers. It was the strangest of feelings; unnerving yet weirdly erotic. 'I want half the money now.'

'No.'

'I need a guarantee. A form of surety. I don't want to spend a weekend pretending to like you only to have you then refuse to hand the money over.'

'You don't like me?'

'How do I know if I like you? I don't know you, certainly not well enough to trust you.'

Her lack of sycophancy was refreshing. She was direct, her mouth as unfiltered as her inherent sexiness. 'Ten thousand.'

'That's peanuts.'

'How much money do you have in your bank account?'

'The dust of a bag of peanuts.'

He bit back a laugh at her phrasing and spread his hands in a 'there you are' gesture.

She fixed him with a stare that made him think she would make an excellent teacher. It was a look that would shut a classroom full of screaming kids up.

He shook his head and gave an exaggerated sigh. '*Va bene*. I can be reasonable. Fifty thousand up front, in cash or transferred into a bank account of your choice, the remainder on Sunday evening. Deal?'

Her exquisitely beautiful face took on the expression of someone sucking an extra-sour lemon. Then she jerked her head into a nod. 'Yes. Deal.'

He rubbed his hands together and got to his feet. *'Eccellente. Let's get going.'*

'Transfer the money and then we can go.'

'You don't want it in cash?'

'I'd prefer it transferred.'

He sighed and pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. 'Name of the account?'

'Miss Orla O'Reilly.'

He looked up briefly with a frown. 'You don't want it in your own account?'

'The money's not for me. It's for our sister and nephew. Orla's skint and the money you're going to give her once you've had the DNA test could take weeks to come through.'

'You're not going to keep any of the million for yourself?'

'I'll get her to buy me a pizza from it.'

Was she for real? 'Are you looking for a sainthood?'

She threw her schoolteacher stare at him again.

He shrugged. If she wanted to let the entire million slip through her fingers, that was her loss. 'The account details?'

She recited them to him.

He looked up from his phone again. 'You know your sister's bank details by heart?'

'She was in a bad car accident three years ago that left her in a coma. I took care of all her finances and stuff while she was in hospital and recovering from her injuries.'

'Is that why her son was born prematurely?'

A dimness filtered over the grey eyes. She nodded.

Why this information should make his finger hover over the sum he was about to transfer, he did not know.

This time yesterday he hadn't even known of Orla's existence.

Had his father known she'd been injured?

Had his father known he had a grandchild?

A fresh barb sliced through him at the reminder of the secrets and lies his father had kept from him for twenty-seven years.

Dante stared at the beautiful redhead, knowing he had to keep his focus on the primary reason for keeping her in Sicily and paying her such a substantial amount of money. Aislin was the key to convincing Riccardo D'Amore that he was not the sum of his parents' parts. Just because they shared a sister did not mean he could allow himself to be sidetracked. Orla's accident was history...

But the after-effects lived on in her son. His nephew.

They were nothing to do with him, he told himself grimly. They were strangers to him and would remain that way. A shared bloodline did not make them family and, even if it did, Dante had had enough of family.

He'd loved his mother with all his boyish heart and she'd abandoned him. He'd been close to his grandparents but their constant sniping and bad-mouthing of each other, and their respective expectations that he would take sides, had been a drain. His extended family were just as bad. He'd adored his father. Salvatore had been a fantastic if unconventional father when Dante had been small, father and son always there for each other through all the ups and downs life had thrown at them; and now he'd learned that beneath that closeness had been the most monstrous of secrets.

His father had been a gambler and a playboy but Dante would have trusted him with his life.

Turned out his father had been the greatest liar of them all.

Why embrace a sister when every other member of his bloodline had lied, abandoned or emotionally abused him?

No more. He was better on his own.

He hit the confirmation button then went through the additional security needed to transfer such a large sum. Anti-money-laundering regulations were the bane of the honest businessman's life. 'Done.'

He held the phone for her to see. 'The money will credit your sister's account by the end of the work-ing day.'

She peered at it with a furrowed brow. 'You transferred two hundred thousand?'

He nodded tersely. 'I've upheld my end of the deal. Now we can go.'

Want to know what happens next?

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