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**** All characters depicted in this work of fiction are 18 years of age or older. ****

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Chapter 1

Maggie was on her way to answer the pounding at her front door when she hollered, “Who is it?”

“Matt Dillon with the Bangor Police Department, ma’am.”

The police? Maggie peered through the peephole before opening the door.

“Is this your dog?”

Her startled green eyes clashed briefly with the mirror-covered eyes of the police officer, before slowly traveling over his magnificent, uniformed length. Goodness, when did the police start wearing shoulder pads? It looked like his uniform was poured over him, revealing how powerful he was, how well built. She tried not to react to the prominent outline beneath his zipper, but she felt heat flood her face.

Then her gaze landed on the object of his unfriendly inquiry and she forgot all about him as an attractive man. What she saw caused her heart to plummet. She closed her eyes and groaned with disbelief. There at his heel, teeth clamped in a death grip in the black leather of his boot, was her small toy poodle. Under normal circumstances the situation would have been funny. And had the man not been a police officer. But he was, and one clearly not amused by the five-pound furball attached to him. Maggie couldn’t see his eyes, but his tone left no doubt that he was aggravated and found nothing amusing about his current situation.

She kept her gaze lowered and strived for composure. The sight of a two hundred-pound man dragging a tiny poodle behind him caused a smile to flicker on her mouth. However, when her gaze moved up to his again she reined in the amusement threatening to spill over by promptly biting down on her bottom lip. He’d removed his dark sunglasses. And if the icy look he turned on her was any indication, she was in trouble.

“Good idea,” he said, as though knowing she’d been about to smile.

“Dammit, let go!” Maggie knew full well that yelling wouldn’t work, but she gave it a try anyway. Once her loyal protector sank her teeth into something, nothing short of her favorite treat would coax her into letting go of her prize. Maggie’s mind drifted back to the empty box of doggie biscuits in the trashcan. “Dammit, please don’t get me into trouble,” she said half under her breath.
“You’re too late.”

She wondered what that meant, probably a ticket. Ignoring the towering hunk of gorgeous man she bent to her faithful dog. She petted the small black head lovingly and glared into the brown eyes looking up at her, but small canine teeth refused to release the chewy prize in her mouth. As if to back up her stubbornness, she growled.

“Come on, baby,” Maggie pleaded softly, praying that for once Dammit listened to her. “You don’t want that nasty, old, policemen’s boot.” She hoped he didn’t take offense. “I…”

“I have a better idea, why don’t I just take my gun out and shoot him.” His tone was full of sarcasm.

Maggie shot him a furious glare from her kneeling position, not about to call his bluff. She had to look up a long way to meet his hostile, impatient stare. The man had to be six foot five if he was an inch.

Six foot five of solid, sexy muscle.

Apparently, without a sense of humor.

She gave him her best damsel in distress look, even batting her eyelashes. He crossed his arms and raised a brow but she refused to be intimidated by him. “Her,” Maggie said with false sweetness, tightening her mouth with annoyance. “Dammit is a girl.”

He growled something low in his throat, clearly getting more impatient by the minute. “If you’re going to take the time to coax her into letting go at least let’s do it inside your apartment.”

Even as he spoke he slowly ushered Maggie backwards. With every step he took Dammit growled threateningly, giving his heel a vicious tug. The whole thing was ridiculous, and a chuckle escaped Maggie before she could stop it. She lost her balance.

“Go ahead and laugh, lady, but I guarantee I’ll have the last one.” His tone held a mild threat in it.

Really? Did he even know how to smile?

Maggie stared up at him from her undignified position on the floor, biting her bottom lip to keep from snapping something back. She ran her hand gently over Dammit again, speaking to her in a tone she saved especially for her dog, when what she really wanted to do was ring her little neck for getting her into this predicament. The last thing she needed right now was more trouble.

“Has she got pit bull in her or what?” he demanded from above. “I’ve never heard of a vicious toy poodle.”
“It’s your uniform,” Maggie explained in a sugar-coated voice, deciding to ignore his insult about Dammit. “Don’t feel honored because she treats the mailman and the meter reader the same way.” She didn’t add that they were used to Dammit’s ways and usually came prepared with a treat for her.

“In other words, you can’t control your dog,” he growled, Dammit growled, and Maggie rolled her eyes.

Goodness, she’d think he was fighting off a Saint Bernard or something. She glared at Dammit, giving out her own looks that could kill. Finally, as if Dammit understood the building tension in the air she dashed off in the direction of the bedroom.

Releasing a sigh, Maggie leaned back on her knees and thanked God while she was in the position. When she opened her eyes it was with some surprise to see his black boots were still in front of her. He hadn’t moved an inch. She raised her gaze to his silent scrutiny, feeling a rush of heat fill her cheeks when she realized his eyes were focused somewhere beneath her chin. Reaching up, she was mortified to find that her terry robe had parted.

Damn it! Her predicament with him was only getting worse. She clutched the material closed over her breasts with one hand and the other went for the arm of the overstuffed chair. She was halfway to her feet when a loud crash from the bedroom startled them both.

“What the…”

Dammit began barking wildly. They moved in unison, but Maggie had barely taken a step when she was grabbed from behind and pushed out of the way. “Stay put.” Her jaw dropped with surprise. She watched Officer Handsome’s hand slowly move to the weapon at his side, as he approached her bedroom cautiously.

Maybe it was a good thing he was there after all. She didn’t exactly live in a nice neighborhood. The police were called there on a regular basis. Yet Dammit had stopped barking, which prompted Maggie into ignoring the officer’s command. She followed him to her room, and paused in the threshold to take in the scene. Her stomach churned. She had a good idea what had happened and who had caused the mess in her usually tidy bedroom.

David…it had to be.

A rock had been thrown through her window. Dammit was sitting on the bed, staring through the torn fragments of what five minutes ago had been pretty lace sheers. Maggie crossed her arms, realizing David’s childish behavior was beginning to get out of hand. His harassing phone calls had turned to stalking. Maybe it was time to inform his parole officer that he was up to his old tricks again.

“You don’t look very concerned about this.”
Maggie unwillingly met the officer’s eyes, wondering how long he’d been watching her. She was very concerned. David had a mean streak in him. And she’d ended up in the hospital more than once from one of his drunken, drug-induced rages. The last one had ended up in divorce and had sent him to prison.

Movement caused her to snap back into reality. She watched him replace his gun back in the holster and move away from the window. Something on her bed caught his attention and he halted. She followed his gaze and cringed inwardly. There were two things in life Maggie spoiled herself on, good perfume and expensive lingerie. On the bed next to Dammit, laid out in a tiny bit of shiny black satin was her newest piece purchased the day before; something to make her feel sexy and pretty when she had no one to feel sexy and pretty for.

“Some guard dog.” He practically sneered. He pinched the bridge of his nose. An action that revealed he might be tired.

Maggie wondered why he sounded so angry. And she didn’t like the way his eyes were narrowing on her either. She fought the urge to back away. “It’s someone I know.” She could at least admit that much. Just thinking that David was in the area caused a knot of unease to form in her stomach, but she was determined not to expose her fears.

“A good friend?” He came to a halt in front of her. Maggie was forced to tilt her head in order to meet the storm simmering in his eyes. She felt ridiculously small next to him, even for her five foot eight inch stature.

She chose to ignore his question. David had never been a good anything as far as she was concerned. She was hardly going to admit that her ex-husband was the one she suspected had broken her window. Or tell him that he was a junked-up lunatic recently released from prison for good behavior. Good behavior, huh! It was only because she hadn’t reported him that he was still on the street in the first place.

“Well?” It was clear he wanted an answer. He crossed his arms. “Who are you protecting?”

Maggie met his level stare and shrugged. “It’s probably just one of the neighborhood boys out for a good time. Trying to scare little old ladies…”

“Let’s hope breaking windows is the only good time he’s out for…lady.” His eyes darkened with emotion. “That kind of naive thinking can get you killed.”

Maggie reminded herself that she was twenty-eight, not seventeen anymore. “Don’t worry; I’ve lived in this neck of the woods for a long time. I can take care of myself.” Eight years in a rotten marriage had at least shown her that much. She’d survived and was a survivor and she supposed living in one of the roughest neighborhoods in town had taught her a lesson or two. Like how she couldn’t wait to get out of there. In spite of the stand she was taking Maggie felt her chin quiver. She hated the show of weakness, but thinking about David had always had the power to shake her confidence.
It was an action that obviously didn’t go unnoticed by the officer’s sharp eyes. “Is someone harassing you?” His tone was suddenly all business.

Maggie realized with his training he probably didn’t miss much. She was scared, she was vulnerable and she was running. In spite of those things she was taking a stand in something she probably couldn’t win. Not alone anyway. And there was no way she was going to admit to anything.

“Well?” He raised a brow.

Maggie got the impression he’d stand there for as long as it took her to answer him. Eyes the color of warm chocolate carefully scrutinized her, momentarily drawing her into a seductive trap before she caught herself and pulled back. Wow…he certainly knew how to work those sexy eyes to his advantage.

“Look, Officer, do I look frightened?” Maggie knew the second the challenging words left her mouth it was a stupid thing to say. She’d made up her mind that she wasn’t going to back down to anyone again, no matter how frightened she was. Besides, why did he care anyway? It’s not as if she’d called him for help. If it hadn’t been for Dammit, she glared at her dog; they wouldn’t even be having this conversation. “I can take care of my…” She started to repeat.

He moved so fast Maggie didn’t have a chance to blink. His advance forced her to take several quick steps back until she was flush against the wall. She gasped and shrank away from him as he closed the distance between them with blinding speed, but she could only go so far. He continued forward, bracing his hands on the wall on either side of her head. His expression seemed savage, his nostrils flaring as he leaned in close. What had she done to get such a strong reaction out of him?

“Lady, you put on a good show but I’m not buying it. I’ve been a cop long enough to sense something’s going on. I don’t believe the bull you’re feeding me. Your show of bravado can land you in a lot of hot water.”

His warm breath slapped Maggie in the face and she lowered her arms, ignoring the impulse to push him away. He didn’t frighten her, not really. He’d just caught her unaware. David had taught her what physical abuse by a man’s hands was like. For a split second she’d felt unreasoning fear, until reminding herself this man was a cop. He was paid to protect people.

She let her guard down as a wave of relief washed over her. “Is this the best intimidation tactic you have?” Something warned Maggie she was playing with fire baiting him that way. But as usual she spoke before she thought. His eyes narrowed but Maggie held her ground. As the silence stretched between them she began to notice other things. Like how smooth and sensual his lips were, how sexy the five o’clock shadow made his firm jaw look.
Waves of heat rolled off his too close body, enveloping her, making her sweat beneath the heavy robe she was wearing. Maggie felt it run down her neck and between her breasts. He was so close she was afraid to take a deep breath. Unwanted desire uncoiled in her belly and her nipples tingled, catching her by surprise. His intimidation was working all right but in ways she was certain he hadn’t intended.

She couldn’t take the tension building between them any longer and blurted out the first thought that came to her mind. “Are you going to frisk me?” She smiled.

His brows rose at her remark, the slightest twitching on his lips indicated he was holding back his own smile. “What if I tell you I’m not a cop?”

Not a cop? Who is he trying to fool? Her eyes moved over him slowly. He was certainly attired in the appropriate uniform. And he appeared to have all the equipment that went with the profession.

Then a humorous thought struck Maggie. “You’re not a male stripper, are you?” She had the feeling he wasn’t pleased with her mild reaction to his admission.

“Does anything get to you, or are you just a good actress?” he asked softly.

“Some things get to me,” she admitted reluctantly. He was definitely getting to her. She’d never reacted so quickly to a man before. She’d had plenty of opportunities for sexual relationships, too. Maggie wasn’t vain, she knew men found her attractive, but she was the one who always turned away from any entanglements.

So, why all of a sudden did she find herself reacting to this man, and on a purely sexual level? What a time for her body to awaken to long-suppressed yearnings, when she couldn’t pursue them. She’d be leaving for a new life in Summerfield in three days and she wasn’t coming back.

Maggie’s gaze remained locked on his, mesmerized by the glint of humor reflected there. Before she could respond, the phone rang. He stepped back, allowing her enough room to scoot past him. She headed for the kitchen and reached for the phone where it hung on the wall. By the time she turned back toward her bedroom he was walking toward the door. It was just as well. She swung around to shut out the sight of him leaving.

“Hello?”

“Hey, baby.”

Maggie’s heart skipped several beats before sinking to the pit of her stomach. David!

“You there, baby?”
“What do you want, David?” She didn’t bother hiding the contempt in her tone. It went against her nature to dislike anyone but she truly hated her ex-husband. “You have to ask? You know what I want.” He paused as if to make sure his next words had the desired effect. He enjoyed goading her and always had. “You, baby. I miss you.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “That’s too bad, you can’t have me.” She would have hung up if she thought it would do any good. How many times had she changed her number? And somehow David always managed to get the new one.

“Two years is a long time, baby. I need you.” He’d only recently been released from prison. “I’m coming home. Have you been waiting for me?”

He couldn’t come home; she had a restraining order against him. He was breaking it by even calling her. If she was certain he’d been the one who’d thrown the rock through her bedroom window she wouldn’t hesitate to have him picked up. “David…I’m going to hang up.”

“I asked you a question.” His tone was low and dangerous reminding Maggie of all the times he’d put his hands on her and hurt her. She hesitated from hanging up. Even over the phone when he used that hateful tone of voice it had the power to run shivers down her spine and frighten her into doing what he wanted. She swallowed hard, hating him more than she ever thought possible. And hating herself for revealing that weakness. She reminded herself that unless he could reach through the phone he couldn’t touch her now.

“No, I didn’t wait for you,” she hissed at him. Self-preservation made her hesitate from saying more until she finally gave into the need to hurt him anyway she could. “I’ve had dozens of lovers.” It was a lie. That he’d pushed her to admit such a thing made her sick. David was the only man she’d ever been intimate with, but she wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

“You lying bitch!” His tone was hard and gritty, and Maggie could well imagine the ugly sneer on his expression. “I’ve seen you since I got out. I’ve been watching our apartment. If I thought another man had touched you…” He didn’t finish the threat, for which Maggie was thankful. She stiffened and took a deep breath to steady her nerves, her heart picking up speed at his admission. No sooner had she slammed the receiver down when it rang again. She stood there listening to it until she couldn’t take anymore. “David, please leave me alone!”

“You still need me; we were good together…”

“We were never good together!” Her stomach started to hurt. “Please…it’s over now.” Why couldn’t he just leave her alone? “Get on with your life like I’m going to do.”

“No one is going to have you but me, Maggie, till death do us part, remember? You can fix that window but nothing will keep me from you. You…”

“Oh God, David…you’re sick.” Maggie never thought he’d actually admit to breaking the window. And that meant he was close by. She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly in
disbelief. “I’m going to call your parole officer tomorrow. I’m going to tell him everything you’ve been doing. You’re dangerous…”

“Damn right I’m dangerous!” he screamed back at her. “And you know what else? I’m going to have you.” He paused. “Maybe even tonight…”

“I wouldn’t advise it.” She kept her voice steady, determined he wouldn’t hear the fear his words evoked. She felt compelled to issue her own threat. “I have a gun and I’ll use it.” Was that her voice sounding so cool and in control? It was all a sham. She felt sick inside.

“Threatening me, baby? Guess you never learned your lesson. I’ll be seeing you, sooner than you think!”

“David…” But it was too late; he’d already hung up. Damn him. She threw her hands over her face and shuddered visibly. “Oh God!” she whispered sharply.

“Another good…friend?”

Maggie shrieked and spun around, her hand covering her heart. “I thought you’d gone!” She’d turned around so fast that the clip holding her hair came undone, releasing an abundance of long russet hair that fell halfway down her back. She heard the clip hit the floor but didn’t give it a second thought.

Their eyes locked, bright green to intense brown. He had paused in the doorway to her apartment, one hand on the doorknob, and it was obvious he’d heard the whole conversation and had drawn his own conclusions.

“The same friend,” Maggie replied, trying to recall what he might have overheard. Heat ran up her neck when she remembered telling David she’d had dozens of lovers.

“Do you?”

Do I what? Surely he wasn’t asking her if she’d had dozens of lovers. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip, pondering his question for a minute. She was well aware the unthinking words she’d flung at David had been stupid, but as usual he’d managed to get a reaction out of her. Now she was faced with the grim expression on Matt’s handsome face, feeling at a disadvantage. Was he actually worried about her?

“Do…you?” he demanded softly, too softly, his eyes glittering.

Maggie had the feeling it wouldn’t take much to send him over the edge. “Do I have a lot of lovers?”

He closed his eyes, shook his head, and muttered through his teeth. “Do…you…have…a…gun?” Each word was spaced evenly and spoken as though he was in great pain.
“Oh, that! No.” Maggie smiled at the pained expression on his face, until he opened his eyes and caught her. She could tell he was annoyed and for some reason that amused her.

His brows shot up at her comment. “I don’t know if your answer should reassure me or scare me. You’re definitely too dangerous to have a weapon at your disposal.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve…”

“Your friend wouldn’t happen to be an ex-husband, would he?”

“He’s an ex everything,” Maggie admitted with a sigh of disappointment. “But I can handle him.” Since when?

Dammit chose that moment to enter the room. Maggie glanced down at her beloved pet with a tolerant smile, until she saw what was hanging from her mouth. Her eyes widened with a mixture of shock and fear as she saw eighty-five dollars worth of lingerie go down the drain. Before she could react the little traitor pranced straight over to Matt and dropped the delicate satin right at his booted feet.

Maggie bolted forward to get it but she was too late. Moving with a speed she’d think would be hard for a man of his size; he bent and scooped the intimate garment from the floor. She halted, holding her breath as Matt unfolded the garment and held it up for inspection. Then snatched it from him, embarrassed because it still had the price tag on it. She crumbled it into a little ball before forcing it into the pocket of her robe.

This time when the phone broke the silence Matt did leave. Without so much as a goodbye, see you later, or anything. He pivoted sharply and pulled the door behind him.

Maggie reached for the phone, her eyes glued to the door as he slowly closed it. She felt the sting of something hot behind her eyes, and that was ridiculous. They were strangers and would probably never see each other again, so why was she feeling as if someone vitally important just walked out of her life?

“Hello?”

“Hi, hon.” It was her mother. “I called to remind you about tonight.”

Maggie rolled her eyes, wishing she could forget all about that night and the promise she’d made. The thought of dressing up as a call girl and parading down Main Street wasn’t her idea of a way to spend a good time, especially when it was illegal. But once her mother got an idea into her head nothing stopped her, particularly if it had anything to do with research for one of her hot romance novels. She wasn’t known as “The Queen of Steam” for nothing.

“I told you I’d do it,” Maggie said, unable to put any enthusiasm in her tone.
“I know but I thought you might be having second thoughts. If I didn’t need some vital information for my next book…”

Maggie knew what was going to follow. How many times had her mother gotten her involved in some outrageous scheme to attain vital information for one of her books? A plan, Maggie should remind her that often backfired.

She listened patiently as her mother went through the whole familiar lecture, trying to convince her it was a good idea and if there was anyone else she could ask to help her she would. She reminded her how well it paid, which was true, her mother was very generous to her. Maggie loved her mother dearly but honestly sometimes she only heard what she wanted to hear.

“Mom…”

“If you’re worried about what to wear don’t be. I did some shopping on my way here from Summerfield and picked up everything you’re going to need. You know that little shop down on Benson?”

“The Spice of Life? Mother, tell me you didn’t get me something to wear from there!” She couldn’t imagine her mother even going into such a risqué place.

“Well, of course I didn’t go in there! I made Trudy do it.” She let out a hearty chuckle. “I practically had to threaten to fire her to get her in there but in the end she went. And she picked up some pretty racy things, too.”

In spite of herself Maggie couldn’t hold back a smile at the childlike enthusiasm in her mother’s voice. If she could see her mother’s face she knew it would hold the same naive expression her excited tone implied. Her mother might be fifty-eight but she didn’t look her age and she certainly never acted it. “Like what?” She wanted to know what she was in for. She was proud of her body but she didn’t want to go around half naked.

“You’ll see tonight, dear. I’ll see you at seven and don’t be late!”

Before Maggie could get in another word the line went dead. Typical of what her mother liked to do in order to get the last word. She replaced the receiver, mumbling. What in the world had she gotten herself into? Well, she might as well get used to it. In three days she was moving back home and would be subject to her mother’s whims.

She was looking forward to being close to her family. At close to thirty she couldn’t help feeling the eight years married to David were wasted. Who wouldn’t? There were no children, no mortgages, nor any of the nice things married couples usually accumulated through the years. There was nothing. Not even a good memory to hold onto. She wouldn’t miss Bangor and the farther she got away from David the better.

The only thing Maggie was taking with her was her personal items, Dammit, and her ’67 Mustang. Inheriting a small log cabin from Granny Markham couldn’t have come at a better
time, and she was looking forward to the change living in the country would bring. She’d be less than ten miles away from her parents, even less from her sister Sue and the twins. She was moving on with her life and it felt like things were finally falling into place.

She glanced at the clock on the wall over the sofa surprised to see it was almost twelve. Where has the morning gone? There was only seven hours left before she was due at her mother’s hotel room. And plenty of loose ends to tie up between now and Thursday morning, when she left.

* * * *

“Wow!”

“I’m not wearing this.” Maggie felt like she was wearing less than she would be in one of her revealing teddies. A glance in the full-length mirror showed her that it was worse than she thought. Heat spread throughout her whole body when it dawned on her that it would make an obvious statement at what her profession was.

She certainly looked the part of a prostitute but the clothes Trudy had grabbed for her were too small. Perhaps that had been done on purpose, knowing how her mother’s mind worked. She wouldn’t put it past her giving Trudy the wrong size to make sure she looked as slutty as she could. Everything was too short, too tight, and too revealing.

“I won’t have to worry about being arrested for prostitution, Mom; they’ll get me for indecent exposure first.”

“You look wonderful, dear.” Ruth ran a critical eye over Maggie, ignoring her secretary’s snicker behind her. “Well…you look the part,” she compromised.

That was an understatement. She stood passively, staring at the slut in the mirror, while her mother, dressed to perfection in a linen suit and not a hair out of place, made several trips around her to put on the finishing touches. Lord, please don’t let me run into anyone I know! She’d never live it down.

She took in her reflection, from the wild mass of teased hair, the layers of heavy makeup and the gaudy jewelry, right down to the tight blouse that was an ugly shade of orange, a color which Maggie never wore because of her skin coloring and hair. Her eyes lowered, taking in the short black leather skirt and extremely high heels, which put her at the six-foot mark. She’d probably break a leg trying to walk in these things. Her bright red lips turned up in a smile. That would certainly ruin her mother’s well laid out plans.

“You look like the cat that swallowed the canary.” Her mother stopped in front of her, a twinkle of humor gleaming in her green eyes. “What do you think, Trudy?”
Maggie exchanged looks with Trudy, who’d been her mother’s best friend and confidant since before she and her sister, Sue, were born.

“I think she looks like a prostitute,” Trudy said bluntly, her brown eyes running over Maggie with matronly distaste. “I only hope you two know what you’re doing.”


Maggie burst out laughing. “It’s missing a lot!” She winked at Trudy in an effort to reassure her. They’d both been through a lot with her mother. Before Maggie could turn back she was being sprayed down with the heady scent of her mother’s favorite perfume. She held her breath until the mist settled.

“I can’t help but wonder what your father would say if he were here,” Trudy remarked, wrinkling her nose at the strong fragrance in the air.

“Thank goodness he isn’t. He’s an old stick-in-the-mud anyway,” Ruth grated, moving to the dresser to pick up a small beaded handbag.

Maggie kept quiet about her mother’s criticism, only because she knew how much her parents loved one another. She supposed their being separated a lot of the time while her mother was off gathering research for a novel, or at one of her many book signings, kept their relationship strong. That and the fact her father had plenty of patience.

“Am I done?” Maggie avoided looking in the mirror again, before she changed her mind and ran home screaming with her tail tucked between her legs. The evening hadn’t begun yet and she couldn’t wait for it to be over.

Ruth handed her the small bag. “Now you’re done.” She smiled. “Do you think you can do this?” Maggie knew there could only be one answer and nodded affirmatively.

Ruth’s smile grew wider and her eyes became even brighter. “Good! Now here’s the plan…”
Chapter 2

The plan began with Maggie strutting her stuff up and down Rose Pedal Lane like a starlet walking down the red carpet. Rose Pedal was a street well known for its entertaining parade of drug dealers and hookers. The fact that it was located in a fairly decent part of town didn’t make her feel any better. She still felt uncomfortable among the stiletto-heeled ladies of the night, and like them, was subject to the crude remarks tossed out the windows of passing vehicles.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the latest shopper finally pulled away from the curve with his selection for the next hour. Her mother’s brainstorm called for her to spend as much time as she could talking to the girls, while trying to get the answers to the questions she’d been forced to memorize earlier. It wasn’t easy, considering most of the time any conversation she was involved in was cut short.

Of course, Maggie didn’t tell anyone she had a tape recorder in her purse. They might not be as willing to divulge anything if they knew they were being recorded. A few of them were willing to answer her questions, but most of them avoided her. In fact, some were downright hostile in their responses and Maggie was informed later that it was because she was invading what they considered to be their turf. They felt threatened by her presence because, as she found out by one of her more vocal subjects, she was considered new meat, which apparently regular clients would be eager to taste.

She shuddered; glad she was only supposed to spend an hour on the street. But it was the longest hour of her life. Dark now, the temperature was starting to drop and she was wearing little to protect herself from the elements. But then, so were the other girls. Some of them were wearing even less than Maggie and they appeared to be the ones who got most of the business. One platinum blonde in particular was slipping into a car for the third time. And Maggie didn’t even want to think about what was happening in the car that had pulled into the alley behind her, with one of the other girls.

For the right price they were all for sale. Girls with names like Bambi, Candy and Blossom. Maggie had come up with a name of her own the first time a car pulled to the side and the driver asked her to get in. She’d said the first thing that had popped into her head, Tootsie, getting a nasty response from him that he wasn’t interested in her name. Ignoring his rudeness, she’d recited a price too steep to pique anyone’s interest, and smiled inwardly when he spun away with someone else.
Luckily the hour slipped by fast. It was time to move onto the second part of the plan, which was inside the bar. She gave the signal to her mother and Trudy that she was leaving. Knowing they’d been parked across the street watching had kept her from getting really scared. She turned from the roadway and started to walk toward O’Malley’s Pub. Her feet were killing her in the four-inch heels.

“Hey, legs!”

They couldn’t possibly mean her. She decided to keep on going. But once she made the mistake of looking over her shoulder she knew she would have to go through with the whole charade, or give herself away. Sooner or later someone was bound to comment that they’d noticed she hadn’t gone off with any of the Johns. Maggie glanced around, seeing only two other girls. Both were standing beneath a street lamp, chatting, and seemingly oblivious to the driver who’d just screeched to a halt at the curb.

“Yeah, you,” he confirmed when they made eye contact.

He was driving a sports car she couldn’t remember the name of. The driver crooked his finger at Maggie, motioning her over with a wolf grin on his face that said he was about to make her night. Aware she was being quietly observed, she made her way to him reluctantly. The window was rolled down and when she reached the car she leaned down as far as she could, without exposing her fanny to the rest of the world.

“What’s your pleasure, honey?” How many times had she heard that particular line in an hour? But in order to carry it off with any amount of conviction she had to be smacking gum. Which she was, thanks to Bambi.

“You’re my pleasure, legs.” His voice sounded young, too young. Maggie couldn’t see his face in the dark interior of the car but she felt his eyes on her. “I’m a leg man and, baby, you’ve definitely got those!”

She resisted the impulse to roll her eyes, afraid he could see her. “Oh yeah?” Maggie tried for a sexy smile but failed. The man’s breath smelled like he’d eaten a bag of onions for dinner. She backed away a little.

“Name your price,” he said with cool confidence.

He appeared a little on the eager side, Maggie hesitated from naming her going rate. Something warned her, this man might be the one to jump at it. Her eyes squinted against the dark, searching for but not finding her mother’s Lincoln. They’d apparently already left thinking she’d gone inside the bar. They planned to meet up again later.

She stepped back and took a second, longer glance at the car the man was driving. It was a late model Corvette. Swallowing, she bit her bottom lip. She was being eaten up by bugs and had to go to the bathroom. All she could think about was getting inside the bar to take care of both
needs. On top of that the two women under the light were disappearing inside the very bar she’d been heading toward. Suddenly Maggie was all alone.

“Well, lover boy, how about five hundred dollars?” She gave him a wink. That should just about take care of Mr. Onion breath. “Cash,” she added for good measure. How many people carried around that kind of money?

“Five hundred dollars!” he barked loudly. “You must really be good.”

Oh yes. Good and tired of the whole situation. She forced a small, dejected shrug and said softly, “I guess you’ll never know.” She turned away from the car, confident she’d chased him away.

“Give me a few minutes, I’ll be right back!” He put his foot to the pedal and spun away from the curve, almost spraying Maggie with a spatter of loose dirt and gravel from the gutter.

She stood in shock, watching his car weave in and out of traffic for a second before letting his words sink in. If he was coming back she sure as hell wasn’t hanging around there! The number one rule was that she didn’t let herself get into any dangerous situations. Her backup was gone. All she was armed with was a running tape recorder in her purse. Maggie decided it was time to disappear into one of the nearby establishments, even if she blew her cover. She was beginning to feel like a buffet for the mosquitoes. She made a beeline for O’Malley’s with one goal in mind, make it inside where it would offer her some sense of security.

At least the bars in this part of town weren’t anything like the sleazy watering holes that lined the rundown streets where she lived. Rose Pedal Lane’s business district was upscale. The buildings were clean, the businesses legal and the hookers who were brave enough to keep to the shadows on the sidewalks were supposedly the higher class, cream of the crop of their profession. At least they had gone out of their way to try and convince her of that. The door opened and she rushed in, ignoring the startled but appreciative looks on the faces of the two men who were on their way out. They might have even muttered something but right now Maggie had only one thing on her mind, find the restroom. Her eyes scanned the darkened interior of the place until she saw the door she was looking for. A neon light announcing it was the ladies’ room above it. It would have to be at the very back of the bar.

She began making her way in that direction, temporarily forgetting how she was attired until a man sitting at the bar reminded her with an insulting look, followed by an equally rude remark. Her ears burned hot at his insult but she kept her eyes averted and forced herself to keep walking, pretending she didn’t hear him. As her eyes became adjusted to her surroundings she couldn’t help wondering if she would be thrown out.

It was a nicer place than she expected, not that Maggie was an expert at what the inside of a bar looked like. The interior might be dark and intimate but the softly glowing candles on the little tables offered a view of the room that said ordering something from there wouldn’t be cheap. Music poured through the room, soft and low for dancing. Couples were on the small wood dance floor, entwined together while swaying to the sensual beat.
Most of the tables were occupied but Maggie spied one at the back in a corner she could make use of after she was done in the restroom. The second phase of her mother’s plan was to spend time observing the action in the bar between any of the prostitutes and their perspective clients, if they should bring it inside. But after glancing around she didn’t see anything going on…yet. The two girls from the street were at the end of the bar, sipping at drinks while scanning the room for potential clients.

Pretending she didn’t look like a prostitute, Maggie kept her eyes focused in front of her as she weaved in and around people and furniture. If she didn’t look at them maybe they wouldn’t notice her. The restroom door seemed like it was a mile away and she almost reached it when the inevitable happened. Someone a little too drunk and a little too bold reached out and pinched her on the fanny as she scooted by.

“Ouch!” It was too late to ignore the physical insult. She stopped to glare down at the man, her hand flying back to cover the abused area. He was sitting with a group of men. They’d moved two tables together and it was apparent by the clutter of beer bottles, bowls of pretzels and peanuts, cards and gifts that they were celebrating something. Maggie’s scowl moved over their drunk, amused faces before returning her gaze to the one who’d pinched her.

He was clearly a little more than nervous at what he’d done. It was probably out of character for him, an action fueled on by the consumption of too much beer. Maggie understood all too well how alcohol could change a person, make them say and do things they wouldn’t normally. And it appeared the little man in front of her was getting more uncomfortable by the second, obviously realizing what his drunken bravado had made him do.

Still, she didn’t intend to let it go. He needed to be taught a lesson. He might be feeling contrite but Maggie was about to make him feel worse. She watched the nervous movements of his hands as he waited for retaliation. Her first instinct was to slap his pale face, but what she decided to do would put him in his place quick enough.

Sometimes words did the trick. “Well, hello there, handsome.” She ran her hand over the little bit of hair he had left on his sweating head, forcing herself not to make a face at the clammy feeling. His friends threw back their heads and laughed, relieved after what had been a few tense moments of silence. But he was doing anything but laughing, his face was turning red. In fact, it looked like he was about to have a heart attack.

“Did you intend paying me for that little privilege?” Maggie couldn’t have asked for a better reward than seeing him break out in a sweat. It got even better when he attempted to reply and could only stammer helplessly. Then she noticed his wedding ring and picked up his hand with distaste, murmuring seductively, “I guess we’ll have to finish this at my place.”

A chorus of chuckles erupted around them. It served him right being embarrassed in front of his friends. His hand hit the table with a thud when she released it. “My rates are a little steep but I’m worth it.” She smiled and blew him an airborne kiss as she slowly turned away.
Oh! Maggie halted, her eyes meeting and locking onto the man sitting at the very next table. Matt Dillon! He was with a friend, and at the moment both their attention was focused on her. There was no doubt their close proximity had allowed them to overhear the whole exchange. The expressions on their hardened faces warned her they’d drawn their own conclusions. Her first reaction was to smile at the man she’d met in her apartment that morning; until she saw the way his eyes were moving over her, reminding Maggie how she was dressed.

Oh Lord! Could things look any worse? His friend made a movement that drew her attention back to him. Her heart plummeted to the ground as he reached for something in his breast pocket. He started to get up.

“I’ll handle this, Bob.” Matt put a restraining hand on his friend’s arm and forced him back down in his chair. His gaze the whole time was on Maggie.

“You know this hooker?”

Maggie didn’t wait around to hear any more. She was going to jail; she just knew it! There was no question what Bob had been reaching for beneath his suit jacket. She’d watched enough cop movies to know it was a badge. And Matt was a cop. Or had been, she wasn’t sure anymore. Damn! She pivoted sharply between chairs and tables, bumping several people as she made a desperate dash for the ladies’ room. She was just about to push the door in when a firm hand drew her to an abrupt halt.

“Just a minute, sweetheart.” Matt’s voice was hard and unyielding and if she didn’t know better, filled with deep disappointment. His hawklike eyes glared down at her through the gloominess, his mouth tight enough to turn his sensual lips white. His fingers were wrapped around the fleshy part of the arm she’d raised to push the door in. He pulled her back gently.

Maggie met his brown eyes nervously. Lordy, he was a handsome man, even when his face was carved in stone. His raven hair looked like he’d been running his hands through it, where that morning every strand had been combed in place. She liked it better this way, and found herself fighting the sudden unexpected urge to run her own fingers through it. She could only guess what was going through his mind.

Smiling nervously, she forced a lightness in her tone she was far from feeling. “Oh, hi! I thought it was you! If you’ll just excuse me I have to go.” She tried to pry her arm loose without revealing the panic she felt. Even if he let her go what could she do? Spend the night in the bathroom? Maybe she’d get lucky and there was a window in there.

“I’ll just bet you do.” His tone said he didn’t care. “I would never have pegged you for a working girl.”

Maggie swallowed hard but kept her smile in place. “No really, I have to go. Badly.” She’d never been good at lying and realized he could probably read the truth in her eyes. She lowered her gaze to his massive chest. From there she took in the rest of his appearance while he made up his mind whether or not to let her go. He was dressed casually in jeans that looked a hundred
years old and were tight enough not to leave her guessing about anything. They conformed to thick muscular thighs and miles and miles of legs that disappeared into soft snakeskin boots. The wide belt at his waist supported a brass buckle that looked like a sheriff’s badge.

His shirt was stretched to capacity over his sculptured chest; buttons left undone revealed a sprinkle of black hair. His neck and arms looked powerful. He apparently took very good care of himself. She swallowed hard and forced her thoughts elsewhere when it dawned on her now wasn’t the time to be admiring his physique. She should be concerned about going to jail.

Desperate, Maggie crossed her legs and did a little jig to get her meaning across. Finally his fingers uncurled and she was free. She unwillingly glanced into his untrusting eyes.

“You can go but I’ll be right here waiting for you when you come out.” To prove his point he leaned his tall frame against the wall and crossed his arms.

Maggie rushed into the restroom breathing a sigh of relief. Two other women were preening themselves in front of the mirror but she hardly gave them a second glance. Her eyes landed on the small square window over the trash can before she ducked into a stall to kill some time.

“Mother, where are you when I need you?” She realized the women outside her stall could probably hear her and smiled, picturing their faces. They’d think she was crazy. Well, she was crazy. Crazy for letting her mother talk her into doing another stupid stunt.

When she heard the door open, followed by silence, she opened the stall door a crack and peered out. The coast was clear! She rushed over to the trash can as fast as her four-inch heels would permit and turned it upside down so she could stand on it. She was shaking inside at what she was about to do, realizing she was actually running away from the law! How many years could she get for that?

The first time she took a step up onto the can she almost lost her balance and just managed to stop from falling. Swearing under her breath, she slipped her shoes off and tried it again. This time when she was safely on top she tossed her heels out the window, then reached up and hefted herself to the ledge. It was tight but she was determined to escape. She didn’t know how she was going to get home and would worry about that later. The plan was that her mother and Trudy were coming back to pick her up at midnight but there was no way she was going to hang out in an alley until then. Somehow she’d have to get a cab, and then call her mother.

Maggie turned on her bottom and hung her legs out the window, then flipped onto her belly so she could lower her feet to the ground. She dangled by her arms a few seconds while working up the courage to let go, praying the alley was deserted and no one observed her humiliating escape. Taking a deep breath, she reluctantly let go.
The second Matt was certain Maggie’s feet were firmly planted on the ground he took hold of her shoulders andforced her backwards until she was against the stone wall. He ignored her startled gasp. He ignored theway her soft flesh felt beneath his hands, and the teasing allure of her perfume. He ignored his body’s rapidresponse to her closeness. He easily overpowered her initial struggles, madder than a hornet that she’d tried to escape. The alley was dark except for one dim light at the end, close to the street, yet he was able to focus on a pair of frightened, glittering eyes.

“Oh! You scared me half to death!” she cried, her hand flying up to cover her pounding heart.

Matt wished she hadn’t done that. The action drew his attention to her creamy breasts, which were all but spilling out of her top. “Give me one good reason I shouldn’t let Bob run you in,” he growled in a furious undertone. He’d long ago learned how the criminal mind worked. He was glad he decided to follow up on his hunch.

“I’m not a prostitute,” she said simply.

“I don’t believe you.” But he wanted to. Matt didn’t like thinking he was attracted to a woman who made a living by selling her body. Of course, the woman he’d wanted that morning didn’t look anything like the little tramp in front of him now. The only thing that hadn’t changed was her soft, full mouth and those unforgettable eyes. If he wasn’t careful he could easily drown in those beguiling green depths; cat eyes that mesmerized its prey before pouncing in for the kill.

“But… I can explain everything.”

Her soft laugh steeled Matt’s heart and made up his mind for him. He wasn’t in the mood to hear her lies, or put up with her misplaced humor. “Save it. You’re going to jail, honey.” He took her by the arm and began dragging her behind him. He should let Bob handle it and still might. On his way out of the bar he’d told his ex-partner to wait for him in the front.

“But I thought you weren’t a cop.”

“But here.” In a few days he would be starting a new job back home as the local small-town sheriff. He was looking forward to the change to both his professional and personal life.
“Then you can’t arrest me,” she said in a satisfied tone. She tried to pull away from him. “Maybe I’ll have you arrested for assault, or something.”

Matt didn’t bother to correct her assumption. Mainly because it meant he could get rid of her sooner, and the itch in his loins that had never really diminished since that morning. He tried like hell not to remember how quick his body had reacted to her. “I’ll turn you over to my ex-partner.” He continued pulling her easily along, heading for the end of the alley that opened up onto the street.

“But I can explain the whole thing. It’s really kind of funny. You see…ouch!”

Matt swiveled on his feet in time to catch Maggie from falling to the ground. He dragged her up against him. “Another trick, sweetheart?” They were suddenly standing nose to nose.

“No, I swear! I stepped on something.” They were more than nose-to-nose; they were also mouth-to-mouth.

Matt’s eyes glared into hers, every breath he sucked in filled his lungs with her sweet fragrance. In spite of his instincts for self-preservation he continued to hold her against him. His hands were wrapped around the fleshy part of her upper arms and his fingers rested against the exposed sides of her warm, lush breasts. He could feel them crushed against him, feel her nipples harden and poke into him with every breath she took.

Damn! He felt his cock swelling.

This wasn’t good. Mistake number one was getting involved with her at all. Mistake number two had been in touching her, for any reason. It was ironic that he’d wanted her that morning but couldn’t afford to get involved. Now for a price, he could get involved for a couple of hours and not even look back. He couldn’t accept the fact he wanted her no matter what she was. It had been a damn long time since he’d felt any life below the belt, and now twice in one day he’d had the urge to get laid.

They were too damn close and it was hot in the alley.

He was hot.

Pressing his lips together with grim determination he lowered Maggie to her feet and started to pull her after him once more. The second her feet hit the pavement she let out a holler and pulled back. Matt released a reconciled sigh, coming to the conclusion that she wasn’t faking it.

“I’m barefoot,” she explained. Matt glanced down and swore. “My shoes are back there.”

There being back in the alley beneath the window where she’d made her escape. “Which foot?”

“My right one.”
“Let me see it.”

She didn’t move.

“Well?”

With a slight shrug she stepped back and slowly lifted a long, graceful leg toward him.

Matt felt the blood race up his neck but couldn’t force himself to look away. He’d always been a sucker for long, beautiful legs, and Maggie’s were certainly all that. He steeled himself from responding, reminding himself what she was. He reached for her injured foot and examined it blindly in the darkness. “I don’t feel any blood or protruding objects. Maybe you just stepped on a stone and bruised it.” He intended to drop her foot but his hand encircled her ankle instead. He could feel the ankle bracelet she was wearing beneath her black silk stockings.

Hooker stockings. He clenched his teeth in irritation.

“You’re probably right,” she agreed.

Matt noticed the slight tremor in her voice. As she slowly lowered her leg his hand followed along the curve of her smooth calf, behind her knee until it disappeared beneath her short skirt. He heard Maggie’s soft gasp when his fingers caressed her silken thigh above the garter holding her stocking on. He felt her quiver, the action triggering a sharp need of desire in Matt’s blood. Then realizing what he was doing, he jerked his hand away.

About that time the door to the bar opened and Bob walked out, pausing long enough to light a cigar. Their eyes fell on him at the same time and suddenly Maggie’s hand was on his arm. He glanced down into her pleading eyes, drowning in their seductive, deceiving depths.

“Matt, I swear what I said is the truth. I’m not a prostitute. I’m only dressed like this because my mother…”

He raised a brow. “Your mother? This is getting better by the minute, honey.”

“I’m doing research for her,” she said hurriedly. “You see, she’s a writer and…”

“You expect me to believe your own mother asked you to dress up as a hooker for research?” His brows drew together in a frown of total disbelief. Matt couldn’t fathom any mother putting her daughter into such a dangerous situation.

“Exactly! Who would make up such a story anyway?”

“What do you think, I was born yesterday?” He scowled. Bob was moving closer.

“I swear it’s true. Why can’t you believe me?” She bit at her bottom lip.
There was something in her eyes Matt couldn’t ignore, something honest. He faltered from taking her arm and handing her over to Bob, who had finally reached them. What if she was telling him the truth? It would be easy enough to check out.

“Matt, what’s up with the…lady?” Bob’s eyes moved back and forth between Matt and Maggie. “Do I run her in?”

Matt’s gaze clung to Maggie’s softer, pleading one, her vulnerability touching his protective nature and softening him. After careful deliberation he remarked, “I’m not sure what’s going on, Bob. Let me do some checking first and if I find the lady isn’t what she claims I’ll gladly run her in myself and throw the book at her.”

“Thank you!” Maggie breathed in a relieved tone, and then surprised Matt by swinging toward Bob and holding out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Bob.” Her friendly smile was met with a puzzled look from Bob, yet he took her outstretched hand. “I’m Maggie Myers.”

“Bob Smith.” He returned her smile. “I have to admit I thought I’d be taking you to jail tonight.”

“I thought so too,” Maggie agreed, releasing his hand. “Your ex-partner is determined to believe the worst of me. But I’m working tonight.” Bob’s expression changed and his eyebrows rose. Obviously realizing her mistake, she corrected it at once. “What I mean is I’m doing research for my mother. She’s a novelist and working on a project about prostitution. And if you ask me, they don’t get paid enough. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

She didn’t actually think he was going to just let her walk away, did she? Matt exchanged an amused glance with Bob before reaching out and putting his hand upon her shoulder. “Not so fast. I’ll take you home.”

Her mouth dropped and her eyes widened with alarm. “But my mother…”

“You can call her later and tell her what happened.” He still wasn’t ready to buy her story.

“She’ll be worried if I don’t meet her.”

“She’ll go home and wait for your call.”

Maggie looked toward Bob as if he could help her, but all he did was throw up his hands and shake his head, smiling. “You might as well give in, Miss Myers. I learned that lesson a long time ago. You’ll forgive me when I say I hope we won’t be seeing each other before morning.” He walked away, leaving Matt to deal with Maggie on his own.

Matt glanced down at her, recognizing the look of frustration on her face. For a moment it seemed like she didn’t know what to say.

“You’re a stubborn man.”
“So I’ve been told.”

Suddenly a Corvette pulled up to the curb. The driver tooted and rolled down the window. Matt watched Maggie’s eyes widen with alarm and crossed his arms.

“Hey, legs, I told you I’d be back with the money!”

She groaned loudly. “It’s not what you think, I mean…” She glanced back to the driver. “Oh, what’s the use?! Get lost!” she yelled back to the driver. “Can’t you see I’m with someone else?”

“I can wait! I got the full five hundred!” To prove it he waved a handful of money out the window. The music from his car stereo was blaring so loudly that he was practically screaming.

“Forget it, kid. She won’t be through with me for a long time!” Matt pulled Maggie down the sidewalk in the direction of the parking lot. He was clenching his teeth so hard it was a wonder his jaw didn’t crack. The parking lot was dark and almost empty. He reached inside his front pocket for the keys as he led her to his truck. Unlocking the door, he held it open for her. “Get in.”

“But…”

Matt took one look at the high step up and her short, tight skirt and became aware of the dilemma. With an impatient growl he picked her up and deposited her on the leather seat. Her mumbled thank you barely registered as he slammed the door shut with enough violence that it shook the vehicle. He walked around to the other side and jerked the door open.

“Are you taking me to jail?”

Matt was settled behind the wheel with the key in the ignition when Maggie’s soft voice reached him. With a twist he had the powerful truck roaring to life. Releasing a heavy sigh, his eyes searched for hers in the darkness of the cab. “I’m taking you back to your apartment and then I hope to hell I never lay eyes on you again.” He backed the truck up like a mad man, noticing Maggie had to clutch the dashboard to remain seated. “You’re nothing but a lying little tramp, sweetheart.” Matt knew he was being unreasonable but anger drove him on. That and the thought of what she’d be doing with the man in the Corvette if he hadn’t showed up and ruined their plans. And that was ludicrous! He had no claims on her.

“That’s not so.” Her voice was hardly above a whisper.

“Save your breath.” He squealed out of the parking lot. “I’m not interested.”

“I guess that about says it all,” she breathed quietly before sniffling.

He was aware of her opening her small clutch and digging around for something, assuming it was a tissue to wipe her eyes. Matt reached for the glove box, opened it, and pulled out the
handkerchief he kept there for emergencies. “Here.” He thrust it in her face. “I don’t know why you’re crying. I told you I’m not taking you to jail.”

She shook her head negatively at the offered hanky. “I don’t want to contaminate it,” she said huskily, sniffing loudly.

Matt grit his teeth. “Take it.” He didn’t give her a choice, forcing it under her dripping nose. Maybe he’d been a little rough on her but damn it, he’d had enough. From the moment he met her she’d gotten under his skin like no other woman had in a long time. He was damn uncomfortable knowing what she did for a living and still being so strongly attracted to her. In fact, he had a mind to see what five hundred dollars was worth. It would certainly ease his aching flesh.

He glanced at her but couldn’t make out anything but her outline in the dark interior of the truck. She was huddled close to the door, clutching his handkerchief in a tight fist against her mouth. It was probably covered with red lipstick that wouldn’t come out in a hundred washings. He decided the best way to handle the situation was to ignore it. Get her home as soon as possible and out of his life. He sped down the dark, quiet streets, just missing the lights as they turned red and taking corners like they were one-way streets.

Several times he noticed Maggie grab the door handle to keep from being thrown on his side of the seat. But it didn’t matter how far away she was, he could still smell the bewitching seduction of her perfume as it attacked his senses and kept him horny.

At last he pulled into her neighborhood. Maggie lived in a bad section of town. He’d never had to come to Harbor Heights twice in one day before, and the only reason he’d come there that morning was to bring a runaway home. He turned the corner leading into her apartment complex sharply, tires squealing as he pulled into a parking spot close to her door. He didn’t bother cutting the engine off; he wasn’t staying. Turning his head, he was able to see Maggie clearly now that he was parked directly under one of the few remaining lights scattered around the buildings.

She remained staring straight ahead. “Matt…” Her soft voice ran over his sharpened senses like the hands of an eager lover. “I’m not a prostitute. My mother is a novelist and I really was doing research tonight.”

How far was she willing to go and how come it was so damn important to her that he believed her? Okay, maybe she was what she said she was, but didn’t she know how dangerous her so-called research was? Her naive attitude had almost landed her in jail tonight and could have landed her in a situation a lot more unpredictable and violent. He let his eyes run over Maggie once again, slowly this time, wanting to give her the benefit of the doubt. If she was playing a part she was dressed for it to the hilt. The little number she had on left nothing to the imagination.

Sighing deeply, he leaned back against the leather seat with his arms draped over the steering wheel. The apartment building loomed in front of him. Even in the dark he could see how old
and rundown it was. It needed more than just a new paint job; the grounds were unkempt to a point of giving the place an abandoned look. And he could see some of the windows were broken out. In fact, he didn’t notice many lights on anywhere with the exception of a couple buildings located there in the front.

If Maggie’s mother is a novelist, why is Maggie living in a dump like this? It didn’t add up. Matt chuckled as he realized how close he’d come to falling for yet another one of her lies. She was good, damn her. He’d give her credit for that. “How far would you have gone?”

He sensed her turning his way. “I beg your pardon?”

“You say you were gathering information. How accurate can your observations be if you don’t actually go home with any of the Johns?”

“I was never supposed to go home with any of the…ah, clients. Or take their money. I was simply supposed to take down as much verbal information as I could. I have a tape…”

“Then what would you base your research on what really happens between a hooker and her client in bed? Or in the backseat of a car? Or in some back alley?”

“My mother has a very active imagination.”

Matt chuckled deeply in his chest but it had nothing to do with humor. “Imagination? Let me give you a sample to take back to Mom, so she doesn’t have to use her imagination.”

He didn’t understand why he was being so crude. Nothing he’d done that day concerning this woman made any sense to him. He didn’t have time to waste with just two days left to get his affairs in order, so what the hell was he doing? He’d better get a grip on his priorities and forget about her. The only problem was his mind was telling him no, but his body was saying yes.

Well, why not? He could make it with her and finally put out the fire she’d started earlier that day. He had a few extra bucks on him. It might not be enough for her, but the way he was feeling he wouldn’t be taking up much of her time.

“Thanks for the ride.”

Matt heard her hand fumble with the door handle. “The ride’s not over.” He wrapped his hand around her arm and dragged her away from the door before she had the chance to open it.

“You’re a cop!” she reminded him in a desperate tone of voice, trying to pull away from him.

“Between jobs.” She was stronger then she looked and he was exhausted. He’d practically been up forty-eight straight hours with the exception of the catnap he’d grabbed in Bob’s office that afternoon. “Relax…you’ll get paid.”
He heard her inhale sharply. It grew quiet in the cab as they sat staring at each other. Matt relaxed his hand and she snatched her arm free. “For the last time, I am not a hooker!”

Matt saw the slap coming but did nothing to prevent it from reaching his cheek. He figured he deserved it. Maybe it would cool the fire in his loins. Bring him back to reality.

She grappled with the handle until the door flew open. Then exited the truck and hit the ground at a run, stumbling in haste. She didn’t stop until she was inside her apartment and slamming the door behind her. Matt waited until he saw a light through the window before releasing a tired breath and leaning his head back against the seat. He closed his eyes, willing his body under control.

It didn’t help that all he saw was a vixen with taunting green eyes, a luscious mouth, and enough curves to drive a saint mad.
Chapter 4

Dammit came flying from the bedroom the minute Maggie flipped on the light switch and tossed her purse on the couch. The little black bundle was a blur of activity as she ran circles around Maggie’s legs, whining and yapping happily the whole time.

“Hello, baby,” Maggie cooed, reaching down to caress her excited pooch. The moment she did Dammit turned over on her back for a belly rub, making Maggie think how much she would like a belly rub, and a whole lot more. From sexy Matt Dillon. She wondered how far she would have let him go before coming to her senses. Too far. She chuckled, which is why she’d slapped his face and got the heck out of his truck.

She’d have to settle for a shower. She couldn’t wait to wash the layers of makeup off her face and strip off the get up she was wearing. Making sure the door was locked Maggie flipped off the light switch and made her way to the kitchen. Just as she was about to pick up the phone to call her mother, it rang.

“Hello?” If it was David she’d simply hang up on him and leave the phone off the hook. She wasn’t in the mood for any of his crap.

“Where the hell have you been? Do you know how worried we’ve been? We returned to the bar and when you weren’t there we panicked. We were about to call the police when…”

“I’m okay, Mom.” Maggie smiled into the receiver. “I was just picking up the phone to call you.”

“Well, what happened?” Ruth demanded to know, in an unusually snappy tone.

“I promise to give you a blow by blow description tomorrow.” Maggie leaned against the wall and covered a yawn. “But right now I’m really exhausted.” She yawned a second time, this one louder to get her point across. “I have plenty of info for the book. Just let me grab a shower and some sleep before we meet in the morning.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Positive. Goodnight, Mom.” Maggie replaced the receiver with a small smile. For once she got in the last word.
She made her way to the bathroom, stripping her clothes off as she went and letting them fall where they landed. Tomorrow she’d burn them. By the time she emerged from her shower some fifteen minutes later she felt human again. She paused long enough to grab a clean towel for her wet hair before leaving the steamy bathroom for her bedroom.

“Hello, baby.”

She came to a shocked halt in the threshold of her bedroom doorway, her eyes rounding with disbelief at the sight of her ex-husband lying casually on her unmade bed. He was fully dressed, right down to the dirty boots on his feet. She felt at an unfair disadvantage in the short, silk nightgown she’d slipped into, wishing for the protective comfort of her old terry robe. Her eyes shot to the foot of the bed, where it lay.

David laughed, seeing where her eyes went. “Come and get it.” His tone was heavy with sexual undertones.

Afraid to move, Maggie stood rooted to one spot, barely able to breathe. She hadn’t seen David in two years. She was enraged that he was in her apartment, but smart enough not to reveal it to him. He had a short fuse, especially when he’d been drinking, and she could tell just by looking into his mean, glazed eyes that he had.

“David.” She hated the cracking of her voice because it gave away the fear she felt by his presence. “Please leave.” Maggie’s gaze reluctantly fell on the broken window. She was going to pay for her mistake of not getting it fixed right away. How could she have thought that taping a piece of thick cardboard over it would be an effective substitute?

Her mind raced over her options, sadly realizing she didn’t have any. She was forced to stand there and suffer David’s leering eyes while they ran over her in the insulting way she remembered so well. There was no such thing as making love to him, just sex, and pain and humiliation. She felt her stomach churn with revulsion when it became clear he was getting turned on. Her fear and revulsion of him had always done that to him. He got off on her reaction.

“I told you I’d be by, sweet Maggie. Didn’t you believe me?” He began to move slowly, until he was in a sitting position. “My old key didn’t work so I had to improvise.” He glanced meaningfully at the window and smiled.

It was the smile Maggie remembered, and loathed. The evil twist of his face her nightmares were made of. There was no humor in it, he was drunk or high on something, or both, and all she knew was that she had to get out of there. She’d tried fighting him before and had paid for it. The only thing she could do now was run like hell.

She dropped the towel she’d started drying her hair with and turned from the room the same instant David jumped to his feet. He swore. Maggie screamed, and Dammit started barking wildly. Good! The more noise the better, even as the realization hit her that the apartment building was half empty. The only people who lived there wouldn’t care if they heard a woman
scream bloody murder. They’d close their curtains and turn off their lights and pretend nothing was happening.

She grabbed up a lamp and threw it behind her without looking, hearing it hit the floor with a crash.

“Bitch!” She heard David swear behind her.

Maggie ran to the door, her heart in her throat, her fingers fumbling with the security lock. The memory of his last attack flashed through her mind. Something warned her she was going to end up with more than a black eye and cut lip. She let out a bloodcurdling scream when David caught up to her, before she had the chance to undo the chain. He grabbed her by the hair, and jerked her viciously away from the door and into his arms.

“Where’s your gun, baby?” he grated roughly against her ear, his teeth giving her lobe a painful nip. Maggie cried out in pain, which seemed to fuel his desire to hurt her. “The one you threatened me with, huh?” He wrapped both arms around her body, pinning her arms to her sides so she couldn’t fight him, and began dragging her backwards with him toward the bedroom. “Feel my gun?” he taunted crudely, rubbing his hard-on against her.

Maggie felt sick inside, the bile rising in her throat threatened to choke her. She prayed that it did. At least unconsciousness she wouldn’t have to endure what he had in store for her. “David, please! I’m begging you not to do this!” She strained against him with all her might, bringing her heel down on his foot, but he only laughed at her efforts. “You’ll go back to prison!” she warned.

He released a sound of indifference. “I’m going to screw you, Maggie. It’s all I thought about while I was in that hellhole. I was a good boy just so I could get out early.”

Maggie’s arms were useless as David kept a firm grip around her. When he lifted her struggling body until her feet were dangling off the ground she threw her head back with enough force to break his nose. Her actions had the desired results she was hoping for. He released her, his scream deafening in her ear. She spun around in time to see him grab for his nose.

Shock held Maggie motionless. In all their years together she was the one who came away from their battles with bruises and bloody lips. Not once had she ever been able to hurt him. Now there he stood, glaring at her with hatred, while blood poured through his fingers.

“You bitch! I’ll kill you!” His eyes were wild when he pulled his hand back to look at the blood covering it. He drew his lips back in a grimace.

She stared at the crimson tide streaming down his face, too dazed to do anything else. Until his words finally sank in and the meaning behind them. Maggie had no doubt David would do exactly what he threatened. She turned to run, not having anywhere to run to. She didn’t get far before he was upon her again.

She screamed.
“Open the door!”

That sounded like Matt! Her gaze flew to the door and she began to struggle like a mad woman, biting and kicking and clawing like never before, trying desperately to reach the door. David’s brutal hands swung her around just as she reached for the fan on top of the TV. She hit him in the face with it. It gained her enough freedom to make it to the door.

In her haste to let Matt in she forgot about the security chain. She yanked the door open but the chain kept it from opening all the way. Maggie caught a brief glimpse of him on the other side before David slammed the door shut in her face. He grabbed her and threw her halfway across the room. She would have been okay if Dammit hadn’t run underneath her feet, tripping her. Maggie stumbled to the floor, almost crushing the small dog as she screeched out from under her in the nick of time. David made his way to where she landed, and all she could do was lay there and look up at him.

Suddenly the door to the apartment crashed open, slamming against the wall with a noise that vibrated throughout the building. Maggie’s eyes sought Matt’s before returning to her ex-husband. David swung around but he was no match for the enraged giant facing him. One well-aimed punch sent him crashing into the wall and crumbling to the floor. It was over before it began.

Matt’s eyes flew to Maggie, zeroing in on her like a hawk as he took the couple steps to where she lay. “You all right?”

Maggie felt like a sacrificial virgin with Matt towering over her. With feet planted firmly apart and fists hanging clenched at his sides, he was a force to be reckoned with. His nostrils flared with every breath he took and eyes the color of rich, dark chocolate moved over her to answer his own question. His look was impersonal, yet she felt a stirring in her blood.

“Just a little shaky,” she admitted, wondering how she could get to her feet gracefully. “I’ve been through this before,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Here, let me help you.” His rough hand gave Maggie a sense of protection as he easily pulled her to her feet. “I’m going to call the police.”

Maggie wasn’t going to argue with him. She didn’t care if they locked David up for the rest of his miserable life and threw away the key! She sank to the edge of the sofa and glanced at the crumpled form of a man she’d once loved with all her heart. A feeling that had been replaced with fear, hate, and anger that she’d let him treat her so badly all those years. Looking at him now, she added pity to the growing list.

“They’re sending a car over.” Matt glanced at the unconscious man. “Your ex?” Maggie met his eyes when they swung her way again, and nodded. “So, where’s the killer guard dog?”

They simultaneously turned in the direction of her bedroom door. As if on cue Dammit’s small black head peeked around the corner. As soon as she saw Maggie she rushed into the room and
jumped up on the sofa.

“Why did you let him in, Maggie?” There was an edge of steel in Matt’s tone.

Maggie couldn’t help noticing he didn’t let his eyes wander below her throat. “I didn’t let him in! He came in through the window in the bedroom!” He must think her a complete fool. Before he had the chance to pounce on that comment she rushed on quickly, “How come you were still around? I spoke with Mom on the phone and had time to take a shower before David showed up.”

He sank down on the sofa next to her, leaning back into it deeply and stretching his long legs out in front of him. He closed his eyes and at the end of a deep sigh replied, “I’ve been up for the last forty-eight hours. After you left me I turned off the truck and closed my eyes for a minute. I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew I heard you screaming.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Her pulse raced wildly at his nearness. And to make matters worse, her voice had softened considerably.

“No.”

“Tea?” While his eyes were closed she let her gaze roam freely over his relaxed form, taking in his tall, handsome and beautifully proportioned body from head to foot. He was visually stimulating to her senses.

He kept his eyes closed. “No.”

“What would you like?” Her tremulous whisper revealed a lot more than Maggie would have liked.

Matt did open his eyes then. Maggie realized she was much too close to him, she could smell the masculine, arousing scent of him. Along with something spicy she couldn’t identify. She’d noticed it earlier but hadn’t taken the time to fully appreciate it. She didn’t move when he reached up to touch her damp hair, where it rested against her breast. She caught her breath when his knuckles gently scraped over her nipple until it puckered in rapid response. Not to be outdone, her other nipple followed suit. Begging for attention.

Maggie was powerless to move away, watching the desire cloud Matt’s eyes while his gentle caress manipulated a response from her betraying flesh. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out, and closed her eyes. Afraid the moment would end, scared that it wouldn’t. To her mortification warmth pooled where it hadn’t for a long time. She clenched her thighs together, praying Matt didn’t notice her womanly response.

A soft sigh escaped her before she could prevent it.

A low growl moved up Matt’s throat as he leaned toward Maggie. She caught her breath, anticipation of a long-awaited kiss turning her blood hot. Whatever he was about to do, a noise
outside her apartment door broke the sensuous spell weaving around them. Dammit started barking wildly, running to the partially opened door. At the same time David began to come around. They both jumped to their feet when an officer appeared on the other side of the door. Maggie reached down to gather Dammit up in her arms.

“I’ll shut her up in the bathroom,” she explained, turning to leave the room. The last thing she wanted was Dammit attacking another police officer.

“Good idea, and while you’re at it…” When he halted abruptly Maggie glanced back to see why. His eyes were glued to her, but not in the way they had been a few seconds ago. The color of his eyes had darkened, becoming hard again. Replacing the desire that had been there a moment ago. A visible muscle twitched in his lean jaw.

“Is something wrong?”

“You might want to put something on those scratches, before putting on a robe.”

Oh. Maggie didn’t glance back as she made her way to the bathroom, but she felt Matt’s gaze on her backside. She resisted the urge to reach back and tug her gown down to make sure it covered her decently. If she were smart she’d hide in the bathroom until this was all over and everyone was gone. Another shower sounded good but all she did was splash some cold water on her face and run a brush through her hair. She ducked into her bedroom for her robe. About that time she heard David’s loud voice from the other room. He was fully conscious now and obviously giving the officers a hard time.

“Maggie! Get out here! Now!”

Her steps faltered at the demanding tone of her ex-husband’s voice, but she refused to let him see how much he still frightened her when she entered the living room. Her gaze went immediately to the comforting security she felt in Matt’s powerful gaze, before taking in the scene. David had already been handcuffed. Blood from his broken nose flowed freely down his face and onto his shirt. He turned hard, glaring eyes upon her, willing her to do his bidding or else. A silent threat if she didn’t.

“Tell them, Maggie. Tell them we were just having a little domestic spat and that everything’s okay.” His cold stare spoke volumes. It was apparent he was confident of his power over her. “Tell them, Maggie.”

How many times over the years had she backed down to him? David was truly sick; she could see that now. He was dangerous and unpredictable, yet Maggie was finally able to meet his eyes with the knowledge she would not let him control her ever again. Or hurt her without a fight.

She met the eyes of the two officers that flanked him. They were clearly waiting for her response. “David and I were divorced two years ago. If you’ll check his record you’ll find he was just released from prison. I have a restraining order against him and I-I…”
For the first time she stumbled over her words. Her gaze met the quiet strength in Matt’s and she found the courage to continue. “I want to press charges.” She was shaking like a leaf inside, praying they had enough on him to keep him in jail for a long time.

“You bitch!” David cursed viciously.

“You heard the lady,” one of the officers responded, grabbing David by his handcuffed wrists. “Looks like you’re going back to jail for a while, buddy.”

“You’ll be sorry, Maggie! I promise you!” he hollered as he was led out of the apartment. “I’ll get you no matter where you go! You’ll never be safe from me! Maggie! Do you hear me? You’ll never be safe! I’ll get you…”

Maggie could hear him screaming threats all the way to the police car. She shot Matt a nervous smile, pretending David’s taunts didn’t bother her. She’d never heard David so threatening before. Even though he was going back to jail, and possibly prison to finish out his sentence for breaking parole, she believed him when he said he’d get her.

“You’ll come to the station tomorrow and sign a complaint?” the officer who remained behind asked her.

Maggie didn’t get the chance to respond. “She’ll be there.” Her gaze flew to Matt with surprise. It was a harsh promise made to the officer, but she caught the warning being directed at her. “If I have to drag her there.”

What gave him the right to interfere in her life and make decisions for her that she would have to live with? She opened her mouth to argue but snapped it shut again in the very same instant. He was right, but what made her angry was watching the officer leave without even consulting her! He just chose to take Matt’s word on it. She crossed her arms with irritation.

Matt shut the door quietly and turned back to her. He crossed his arms as though prepared to do battle. “Looks like it’s just you and me now, Red.” His eyes gleamed with a mixture of amusement and determination.

Maggie’s mouth dropped. Red? Yes, she was definitely seeing red.

“Have you got an extra blanket?”

“What for?” she all but snapped, still smarting over his highhandedness. Requesting a blanket was the last thing she expected him to ask for. Was he going to spend the night outside her door, in his truck?

“I’m sleeping on the couch,” he said matter-of-factly. His eyes dared her to challenge him.

“Why would you want to do that?” Maggie asked, covering a yawn. Her anger had disappeared as fast as it appeared. She was too tired to put any effort in fighting him.
“Because I doubt you’ll invite me to sleep in your bed.” There was no smile on his face to show he was teasing. There was no denying the seriousness in his compelling eyes.

Maggie wasn’t so sure of that, but she ignored the unexpected thrill his words caused. “I’m not inviting you to sleep on my couch either,” she shot back, beginning to feel nervous inside. Having him under her roof all night was not a good way to get a decent night’s sleep.

“I’m not leaving. You have a busted window in your bedroom and I broke the lock on your door when I crashed through it. No way am I leaving you here to fend for yourself the rest of the night. Not in this neck of the woods.”

She opened her mouth but Matt stepped forward and closed it with a firm flick of his finger. “Tomorrow you’ll get those things repaired. Tonight I don’t want to worry about you.”

“Who asked you to worry?”

For an instant his glare sharpened and he looked every bit like a cop with an agenda. “Look, I’m past the point of exhaustion. I need sleep and I’ll never get any if I leave here tonight knowing your apartment isn’t safe. I doubt I’d even make it home in the state I’m in. You want that on your conscience?”

Her eyes rounded with grudging amusement at his audacity. “That’s blackmail!” she gasped, smiling in spite of herself. The tiniest flicker in his eyes revealed he was fighting his own grin. “Oh you win! But I hope you’re real tired.” She turned to go to the closet in the hallway. “Because that’s a very uncomfortable couch.”

Rummaging through the top shelf of extra blankets and sheets she pulled down a set to make up the couch. She went to her bedroom to get a pillow. By the time she returned to the living room she came to an abrupt halt, amazed to find Matt already asleep.

Lord, he was a big man! He made her full-size sofa look like a love seat. She smiled down at him, feeling a tenderness fill her at the exhaustion etched on his peaceful face. He must really have been worn out. He hadn’t even taken the time to remove his boots, but at least they were dangling off the couch.

Maggie set the stack in her arms on the coffee table and turned back to him. She couldn’t leave him to spend the night like this, it would only add to his discomfort on the lumpy cushions. She moved down to the foot of the sofa where his feet were. His boots came off a lot easier than expected, the hand-tooled leather just slid off his stocking-clad feet.

She held her breath when he moaned in his sleep, but all he did was turn over. Yawning, Maggie unfolded a blanket and draped it over him. She had to smile when she placed the pillow next to his arms. He instinctively clutched it to him. Before she realized what she was doing she bent to give his forehead a butterfly kiss. It might be a motherly kiss but Maggie felt anything but motherly toward Matt. She wanted him.
Chapter 5

The first time Maggie became aware of another presence in her bed was sometime during the early morning hours. It was still dark out, and she was too tired to question it. Besides, whatever it was she welcomed the warmth, curling into the unyielding hardness. She hugged her pillow closer to her chest, ignored whatever it was tickling her nose, and didn’t even make an attempt to open her sleep-laden eyes. Releasing a satisfied sigh she willed herself back into a deeper sleep.

She was just about gone when unexpected movement caused her to frown. Why was her pillow moving? She must be imagining it. She began to smooth her hand over it, expecting to feel the smooth coolness of crisp linen. In her semiconscious state she acknowledged the warmth and hardness beneath her stroking palm. Something that felt like sculptured stone.

The arousing scent of musky, warm skin.

What?

Maggie’s eyes bolted open and her hand halted somewhere in the region of Matt’s lower stomach, close to the belly button. She became instantly awake and fully aware of her surroundings. She held her breath, too afraid to move. How in the world had he ended up in her bed? He was laying flat on his back and she was wrapped around him like gift-wrap on a Christmas present. And what’s more, he appeared to be completely naked. Her mind tried to make sense of that.

She worried that if she so much as swallowed it would wake him, aware at the same time that she was trapped against him. And then she became aware of everything, all at once. Her head was on his shoulder, her arm across his flat stomach, her leg firmly wedged between his and the hard bulge pushing against her inner thigh. He felt huge and strong. Their shallow breaths mingled. The covers entangled them both, creating an inferno. Lord, was that his heartbeat or hers sounding so loud in her ears?

Without thinking Maggie began to drum her fingers against the taut hardness of Matt’s belly, pondering her dilemma. Should she just jump out of bed and demand an explanation, or try to carefully extract herself from him and leave him to sleep it off? He’d been so exhausted the night before; she doubted she’d disturb him much if she decided to do the latter. Or, maybe she could just pretend nothing was out of the ordinary.
Without warning he moved, and suddenly his hand covered her fingers, halting her nervous
movements. He expelled a long, drawn-out groan, arching into her thigh. Maggie caught her
breath and felt an instant reaction in her body. A flood of warmth pooled between her thighs. She
fought to ignore it.

“Matt, why are you in my bed?” she inquired softly, frozen against the length of him. She tried to
ignore his arousal only that was near to impossible. He was hot as a poker, branding her. The
thought of what he’d feel like inside her caused a pleasant tingle in the lower region of her body.
More liquid warmth followed.

“Your couch is lumpy,” he mumbled tiredly. He stretched slightly, as though unaware he was
hard.

“All right.” She struggled to keep her cool. “Then what are you doing in my bed…naked?” Was
that her breathless voice?

“I usually sleep in the buff, Red. I don’t remember undressing and coming in here. The best I can
do is say I must have woken sometime during the night, uncomfortable as hell, and stripped off
my clothes. I recall going to the bathroom once, I guess I came in here without thinking.”

Maggie believed him. Matt didn’t strike her as the kind of man who’d make up a story just to get
into a woman’s bed. Believing what he did about her, he probably didn’t even want to be there.
Now that he was awake there was no reason to fear moving. She meant to move away but
something else happened. She shifted closer, seeking more body contact. Savoring the sharp
desire his erection produced.

He threatened more than her peace of mind. Maggie was feeling things she hadn’t felt in a long
time, yearnings long buried. She wanted to get closer to Matt if that were possible. Her fingers
began to twitch beneath his hand, her palm smoothing against his flesh in an innocent caress. She
shifted her leg cautiously, catching his indrawn hiss when her flesh glided across his penis. She
wanted to feel more of him, so much more. Fire erupted inside her. She broke free of his gentle
restraint and let the caress take her where it would, where he would let it. Knowing she would
only get singed if he didn’t feel the same way.

In a lightning-fast move Matt surprised her by grabbing her wrist and flipping her over. He
moved over her body, pinning her on the bed. She gasped with surprise, powerless to move
against the steely fingers encircling her wrist. The blood coursed through her veins like a
spinning tidal pool, leaving her breathless at the intensity. Their eyes locked, their breaths
becoming one. His expression was fierce, his eyes blazing down at her. He looked savage, like a
hungry animal close to the end of his control.

“Do you know what you’re inviting?” His voice was hoarse with obvious need, almost angry.
His nostrils flared with every breath he took. His gaze dropped to her lips, and Maggie parted
them, running her tongue over them in anticipation of his kiss. “I won’t be gentle, Maggie. I
haven’t been with a woman in a long time.” It came out like a threat.
Did he want to hear her say no? His gaze lowered to her breasts, and then before she could grasp his intentions his mouth was there, loving her through the thin satin of her gown. His hands glided down her sides to her hips, then around to her bottom. Fingers sank deeply into the soft mounds before he pulled her tightly against him and ground his erection against her. Maggie moaned with growing hunger, the tingle becoming a pulsing throb of desire.

“Can you take it rough?”

His comment enflamed Maggie. She made an attempt to respond, but the only sound that came out was a pitiful whimper. She wanted him to kiss her, wanted to feel that firm, masculine mouth on hers as he devoured her lips. But she sensed he was using every ounce of strength he possessed to hold on to his control. There was no disguising the state of arousal he was in. Could she push him over the edge?

Did she want to? The answer was yes. She spread her thighs and arched the lower half of her body against his, shocked at her boldness. They’d only met the day before and she wasn’t in the habit of sleeping around. Yet that didn’t lessen the fierce desire coursing through her. She watched the pupils in his eyes dilate. He thrust back, his erection slicing between Maggie’s thighs and over the swelling bud of her arousal. She cried out, bit down on her bottom lip and clenched her thighs together, entrapping him.

He lowered his face and Maggie was certain he was going to kiss her. She caught her breath, meeting him halfway. As soon as Matt’s mouth touched hers he seemed to lose control. Growling low in his throat, his passion forced her deeper into the bed. The stubble on his face heightened the pleasure of his rough kiss, and Maggie opened her mouth eagerly to his thrusting tongue.

Ohmigod! Fire replaced the blood in her veins. She was aware of nothing, yet of everything at the same time. Her hands began to roam over Matt’s hard muscles with growing ardor, encouraging him to do whatever he wanted. She felt her heart pounding out of control, very attuned to where his hands were slowly roaming. Her breasts swelled in his palms, aching with pleasure. His thumbs flicked over her nipples, causing Maggie’s hips to twist out of control. Her body was demanding he make love to her. And she thought she was going to get her wish when his caresses glided over her body with mounting aggression.

Oh! Before Maggie could brace herself his hands closed over her hips and he began to pull her sharply against his erection. He felt huge and hot sliding over her wet crotch, the friction causing her desire to build to an unbearable level. His mouth left hers to travel down her throat and over her shoulders, leaving a trail of wet heat against her flesh. Moaning with desire, Maggie arched her back when Matt’s mouth burned a searing path down to her breasts, suckling her taut nipples through the material of her thin nightgown. Suddenly it seemed like his hands and mouth were everywhere at once. Demanding, satisfying, hungry for more.

All at once he jerked back. “I want to feel your hand on my cock, Maggie.”
His rough comment set her blood on fire. She worked her hand between them until reaching her prize. Her hand enclosed the satin encased steel, and her eyes widened, meeting his. She’d only guessed at his size before. Oh my! She soon discovered by running her hand up and down his torrid flesh that Matt didn’t lack in length, either.

He lost control for a moment, closing his eyes and groaning deep, thrusting into her hand. A shudder racked his body as Maggie tightened her grasp. She couldn’t remember feeling so hot and hungry. And the flesh pulsing in her hand would more than fill the need in her. Then she pulled him close and ran the tip of his dripping penis over her wet mound. His eyes bolted open.

“Damn!” His hand moved beneath her short gown to her thong, tearing the fragile silk away from her body with an easy tug. Her breath caught, and before Maggie was able to recuperate Matt moved abruptly to his side, dragging her with him. He pulled her close to his body, arranging their position so that his penis was nestled between her thighs. He thrust gently, as though enjoying the friction, but didn’t enter her like Maggie yearned for him to do. Moaning with hunger, she arched her buttocks into him, silently encouraging him to take her. She couldn’t bear the teasing any longer.

“Oh, God…please!”

“Tell me what you want.” He mouthed the words against her neck, his warm breath sending a rivet of pleasure through her. “Tell me where you want me.”

Didn’t he know? Couldn’t he tell? She’d never had to vocalize during lovemaking before. “Make love to me, Matt. It’s been so long…” Maggie let her words trail off, moving suggestively. She could feel his hot flesh at the very gates of her womanhood, teasing her mercilessly with long strokes of pleasure. “Please!” She felt her orgasm building and gasped for air.

Matt shuddered behind her. He moved, and Maggie wasn’t aware of what he was doing until she felt his hand against her backside, moving downward. The next thing she was aware of he was guiding his flesh to the opening between her legs, and then arching forward. In one long stroke his penis parted her pussy lips and sank deeply into her, filling her to capacity. He was so thick and long that the inner walls of Maggie’s body hugged him like a tight sheath. A low, satisfied groan escaped her and she pushed against Matt, welcoming more of him into her hungry body.

“Maggie…”

Maggie felt Matt’s control slipping away as he said her name. He began to move like a man already in the throes of an orgasm. Faster, harder, he thrust into her body with one purpose in mind. It was a mutual goal, and Maggie let her body go where it took her. Explosive heat erupted through her, spiraling rapidly downward.

“Mathew!”

“Let go, baby.” His hands moved beneath her gown until they found her breasts. He caressed them and teased her nipples until Maggie did as he commanded. Her climax signaled his. With a
grunt Matt entered her one last time, and then he was convulsing inside her, filling her body with liquid fire. She cried out with release, and arched her buttocks forcing him even deeper into her womb.

Gradually they collapsed against each other, spent. Their rapid breathing echoed through Maggie’s small bedroom, calming as the minutes crept by. Sweat covered them; Maggie’s gown was clinging to her. With the aftermath came the reality and the awkwardness of making love with someone for the first time. What happened now? What was Matt thinking about a woman who gave herself to a man so soon after just meeting him?

Maggie gasped. Matt’s deflated flesh began to shrink out of her, brushing against her ultrasensitive flesh. She jerked her hips helplessly, and to her surprise she felt Matt’s mouth form into a smile against her shoulder. So, he thought it was funny? Maggie squeezed her inner muscles and was rewarded with a grunt. His hand cupped her breast and gave it a tender squeeze.

The phone began to ring, slicing through the intimate moment like a knife slicing through butter. And when Dammit began to bark it was a sign they both took advantage of. Matt rolled away from Maggie and onto his back, releasing a deep breath. Maggie pulled the covers over herself. Even though she was wearing a nightgown she felt vulnerable. She listened to the phone for a few minutes, taking time to compose herself. Finally it stopped ringing.

After a few tense moments Matt said, “If you don’t mind, I’m going to grab a shower.”

Maggie felt his weight leave the bed but kept her eyes glued to the broken window in front of her. For reasons she couldn’t explain tears filled her eyes. Emotions coursed through her that didn’t make any sense. It wasn’t until she heard the shower running that she moved. She glanced down on the bed and tangle of covers for a moment. It looked like a battle had gone on there. Deciding it would be better to be dressed when Matt came out of the shower she walked to the closet and slipped into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt.

A chuckle escaped her when she went into the living room and looked in the direction of the sofa. Matt’s clothes where there, and they hadn’t been taken off and folded neatly either. They looked like they’d been struggled out of and left where they fell. She gathered them up and hung them on the bathroom doorknob so that when he opened the door they would be there for him.

She supposed once he was dressed he would leave.

* * * *

“Maggie! Maggie…what in the world! Did you know the lock on your door is broken?”

Rolling her eyes, Maggie mopped up the coffee she spilled when she heard the unexpected shriek of her mother. She left the kitchen, taking a cautious sip of her drink to see her mother standing
at the doorway, examining the lock as if she knew how to fix it. A deep frown marred her face
while she gave it her full attention.

“Maggie!”

“Mom, I’m right here.”

Her mother jumped and spun around to face her. “Dear, what happened? Are you all right?”
While she talked her shrewd eyes ran over every inch of Maggie.

“Can’t you see that I’m okay?” Maggie smiled. “I had a little run in with David last night.” She
decided to get right to the point, knowing her mother would hound her for the truth until she was
satisfied she got the whole story. “He…” She didn’t get the chance to finish.

“That bastard! I never liked that man. I hope you called the police.” She headed straight for the
kitchen and the coffeepot. “The best thing you ever did was divorce him. Every time he…”
Maggie’s mother was rarely at a loss for words. But suddenly she stopped talking in mid
sentence, and her eyes widened with shock. They moved beyond Maggie to something behind
her.

Maggie turned to see what had captured her mother’s attention. Seeing Matt where he’d stopped
in the small archway that leads to the bathroom. She opened her mouth to make introductions.
“Mom…”

“Dear, oh dear, oh dear!” Ruth began, shaking her head in total disbelief. “Maggie, tell me you
didn’t bring home one of your Johns!” her tone pleaded.

Maggie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. Her gaze swung to Matt, then back to her mother.
“Mom!” she exploded with shocked disbelief.

“Well, I can’t blame you. He is a good-looking specimen.” Maggie watched her mother walk to
Matt and offer him her hand. Smiling that charming smile she knew so well. “I’m Ruth Marsh.
Did my daughter tell you I’m a novelist?”

Matt’s brown eyes moved over Ruth’s head to look at Maggie, his expression suddenly guarded.
“Yes, she did.” He ran his hands through his damp hair.

“Mom, this is Matt…Matt…” Maggie colored fiercely when it occurred to her that she forgot his
last name. She was humiliatingly conscious of his amused scrutiny over the situation. She was
humiliatingly conscious of what they’d been doing a few short minutes ago.

“Matt Dillon, Mrs. Marsh.” He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Mom, Mr. Dillon,” Maggie ignored the raised brows on his face, “was here last night when
David decided to pull one of his stunts. And before you ask, the police were called and he’s back
in jail.”
“Where he belongs, thank God! And thank God you were here to help my daughter last night, Matt. She’s been through some real bad times because of that…slimeball.”

Maggie prayed her mother didn’t go into detail. She didn’t want anyone knowing the things she’d subjected herself to during her marriage to David. “Mom, please explain to Matt what I was doing last night.” Now was her chance to prove her innocence.

Her mother burst out laughing, her eyes filled with mischievous delight. “So, you are one of her Johns! This is…”

“No explanations necessary…” Matt began in a deep tone, only to be cut off.

“Mom!” Maggie pleaded. “Matt almost arrested me last night for prostitution! Why do you think I wasn’t waiting for you at the bar?”

“You’re a cop? Oh, this is too good! Just the kind of thing I can use in my next book.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “And I suppose if I had been arrested you could have used that, too.” She looked at Matt, wondering how he was taking in the information. Surely by now he’d heard enough to know she wasn’t what he thought she was, but it was hard to tell by his closed expression.

“You didn’t arrest my baby, did you, Matt?” There was no hiding the mirth in her hazel eyes as they shot to where he was sitting on the couch, pulling on his boots. Maggie wanted to scream with frustration. Wasn’t her Mom listening to a word she said?

For a moment he glanced up from what he was doing, his frank brown eyes shooting back and forth between Maggie and her mother. “Well, ma’am, does it look like I arrested your daughter?”

“It looks like you spent the night with her.” She smiled knowingly.

Matt stood, towering a couple feet over Maggie’s petite mother. He worked his belt through the belt loops, their eyes meeting. Maggie brought her cup up and casually sipped at her coffee, a heat spreading through her body that had nothing to do with the hot liquid. It was useless trying to hide her instant reaction from Matt, with his all-seeing eyes. He knew what he was doing to her. She made the mistake of glancing at her mother, catching the look of speculation on her face.

Maggie was sorry she was so transparent. She knew her mother had been waiting a long time for a man to come around who would get a womanly response out of her. A man like Matt Dillon. Her comment about Matt spending the night had been personal and outrageous and didn’t deserve a response.

All at once Matt moved. Maggie sensed he was leaving. She straightened from the table and took a step toward him, until she realized what she was doing. She couldn’t stop him from leaving.
They both had lives to live and it wouldn’t be fair to either one of them to try and hold on to whatever it was developing between them. Still, she would have liked at least one more kiss from those sensual lips before they parted ways.

“Maggie, where are your manners, dear? Offer Matt a cup of coffee.”

“Sorry, ma’am, I need to be leaving.”

Maggie couldn’t move, but her gaze followed him as he walked to the door. She felt like they should be exchanging something like phone numbers or addresses. But instead they were exchanging silent goodbyes.

Matt did stop and look at her one last time. “You’ll sign that complaint on your ex?” Maggie wondered what he’d do if she said no. She took a deep breath and nodded reluctantly. Then he turned and walked away.

“I can’t believe you let that handsome hunk get away! He was hot for you!”

Maggie chuckled sadly. “Mom, have you forgotten I’m moving to Summerfield in two short days?” She poured the remaining coffee in her cup before taking the pot to the sink to rinse it out. “I’m not stupid enough to start a relationship with a man when I know it won’t go anywhere.”

“Why not? Sometimes those are the best kind. Summerfield’s only two hours away, not the end of the world.”

Maggie stepped from the sink and turned to open the fridge. “I can’t believe my own mom would give me advice like that. This isn’t one of your romance novels.”

Pretending she was searching for something, she buried her head in the fridge so her mother couldn’t see the tears filling her eyes. How could she explain to her mom what she was feeling when she couldn’t explain it to herself? Dammit appeared at her feet, attuned to Maggie’s emotions. It was just the two of them and would probably stay that way for a while.

“Maggie, dear, what are you looking for?” Her mother’s impatient voice penetrated the refrigerator walls.

“Something for breakfast.”

She realized she couldn’t avoid her mother forever and reached for a jar in the back. She stood up and placed it on the counter. It was a jar of pickles that looked like they’d been in there since she moved into the apartment years before. She made a resigned sound, finally facing her mother.

“Oh, Maggie. You really liked that man, didn’t you, dear?”
There was no use trying to cover it up. Her mother had always been able to read her like a book. A broken sound erupted from Maggie before she could stop it, half sob, and half chuckle. She wiped at her eyes, furious with herself for losing control. She accepted her mother’s arms around her, remembering the many times through the years that her warm, loving embrace had been just what she needed to get through a crisis and go on.
“Well, Dammit, here we are.”

Maggie opened the door to her Mustang and jumped out, with Dammit on her heels. Granny Markham’s small log cabin stood before them. Not looking any different from the last time she saw it a few months ago, when she’d come up for a visit. Granny had still been alive then and getting around pretty good for a woman in her nineties.

She paused and leaned against the front of her car, looking at the two-story structure that had been the source of so many fond memories for her. Her eyes lingered on the old rocking chair on the small front porch, a smile covering her face as she recalled the many times Granny had sat there peeling apples for one of her famous pies, while she and her sister Sue had played about the yard. Closing her eyes, she let her thoughts drift back to the days of making mud pies in the old barn, swinging in the makeshift swings hanging between the old oak trees, and playing in the woods behind the house.

The barn had long since been gone. The ground it stood on now overgrown with tall grass, wildflowers and a small crab apple tree. Maggie knew by today’s standards the swings were crude but they still worked as she found out when she tested one. The seat was nothing but a rectangle board with notches cut out on either end for the rope to slip through.

She kicked her feet gently, swaying against the cool summer breeze dancing through the trees. “This is our new home.” She looked down at the small dog at her feet. “I think we’re going to be happy here,” she said wistfully.

A honking car horn broke the tranquil silence and Maggie glanced up, not surprised to see a blue and white van barreling down the dirt driveway to her place. It hadn’t taken her sister long before showing up for a visit. Smiling, she walked around to the driver’s side to meet Sue as her sister opened the door and jumped out.

“It’s about time you got here!” Sue rushed out with a wide smile, giving Maggie a brief hug.

“I only just arrived. I haven’t even been inside yet.”

“Did you manage to leave Mom in Portland?” They began walking toward the cabin.
Maggie chuckled. “Yes, I guess Summerfield doesn’t offer much in the way of resources for the kind of material she needs for her books. She should be home in a few days, though. Where are the girls?”

“Swimming down at Dad’s. Even though we live on the lake too they practically live at his place during the summer months. They keep him company.”

Neither one questioned the fact that they hadn’t needed a key to open the front door. They walked into a large spacious room that was actually the whole bottom floor of the cabin, sectioned off into three separate areas by the skillful arrangement of Granny Markham’s antiques. The only bedroom was a small upstairs loft. The bath, which had been added on just before Granny’s death, was behind the kitchen taking up half of what once had been a mudroom.

Everywhere Maggie looked she saw old linens and brightly colored handmade quilts, created by the woman who used to live there. Some handed down by her own mother. She felt a hospitable warmth envelope her and knew Granny Markham was welcoming her home. “Nothing’s changed.”

“When’s the last time you were here?” Sue asked.

“About six months ago. Granny never mentioned she was leaving me this place.”

They moved slowly through the room, touching items that had meant a lot to their grandmother, things that carried happy memories for them both. While growing up they’d spent a lot of their summers there, but rarely had been there together since reaching adulthood. Sue devoted her time to being a wife and mother and spent some of her free time volunteering at the school clinic or taking the girls to dance or piano lessons. Maggie’s brief visits over the years had been unplanned and usually a result of trying to escape a situation she could no longer bear. When they were able to get together it had been at Sue’s or their parents’ house.

“Remember this?” Maggie picked up a frame with a picture of the three of them in it. Granny Markham was wearing a floral dress that nearly reached her ankles; a big floppy straw hat was perched on her graying head; a smile as wide as the Grand Canyon on her wrinkled face. Her arms were around her only two granddaughters. Even now it was hard to believe that she was gone. She’d been so full of life, right up to the very end.

Sue was examining a piece of unfinished embroidery and walked to where Maggie was. She glanced down at the picture and smiled. “I have one at home like this. What were we, ten and thirteen?” Her eyes moved over the two scrawny girls in the photo, with their identical haircuts and similar features.

Maggie nodded. “I remember what a grouch you were all summer. You barely smiled in this picture.”

“Well, if you recall, sister dear, that was the summer I became a woman.” Sue ignored Maggie’s amused snort and continued to look at the linen in her hands. “Granny must have been working
on this when she died. I’d like to finish it.” Her blue eyes darted about the room. “It doesn’t appear that anything’s been disturbed since her death “I should hope not.” Maggie remembered the unlocked door.

The picture went back to its spot and she moved on to the Singer treadle machine against the wall. It was easy visualizing Granny sitting there, working her foot on the pedal.

“Looks like you just have to do a little general cleaning and you’re in business. Did you think to stop for groceries?” Sue’s expression clearly revealed she thought she already knew the answer to that.

“Didn’t even think about it,” Maggie admitted, grinning. She walked into the kitchen area and opened a refrigerator that had to come out of the fifties. It had probably been white once but now it was a bright pink. She knew she could thank her grandmother for that. She’d hated anything that was white. “It’s empty.”

Sue burst out laughing. “What did you think? That you might find some homemade canned goods lying around?”

“Granny Markham had a small garden every year and you know she never wasted anything. I loved her pickled beets,” Maggie reminisced.

They both began opening cupboard doors out of curiosity more than anything else. What they found were dishes, pots and pans and other kitchen items that all looked as old as their grandmother had been when she’d died at ninety-two. They found a stack of wonderful old linens in a drawer that boasted her handiwork. Maggie glanced at the old pine dining room table, bare of anything except a dried flower arrangement.

“These linens will make up a beautiful table, they should be out.” Maggie took the stack out and placed them on the table. She’d go through them later.

“I found food!” Sue had opened a door wide enough for Maggie to see that it was jam-packed with an assortment of homemade canned goods. She pulled out a few that looked interesting.

“I hope Granny dated them so we’ll know if they’re still good.” She picked up a mason jar with the label of pickled beets on it. A huge grin broke out on her face. According to the date they were still good.

Sue opened up a jar that said peach preserves on the side. “These were always my favorite.” She sounded like she’d discovered gold, dipping her finger in the jam before bringing it to her mouth.

“Still good?”

“Great!” Sue’s eyes closed and she made a smacking sound with her lips. “Come home with me tonight and have dinner with us.” She screwed the lid back on and placed it in the fridge. “We’re having a cookout.”
“Who’s we’re?” Maggie wanted to know, slightly suspicious. She opened the door to the Majestic cast iron stove. For an antique it was as clean as a whistle. She’d have to try and find a handbook on it somewhere so she could learn how to cook on it.

“Don’t worry, sis, I’m not stupid enough to try any of my matchmaking skills on you this early. I thought I’d let you get good and settled first.”

“Thanks,” Maggie said dryly, scowling at her. Suddenly Matt’s face flashed before her eyes, but she quickly shook the vision away. Reminding herself about him wasn’t going to do any good. It was too bad she couldn’t control her dreams that way. More than once she’d awakened aroused and yearning for him, reliving that morning in her bed. “What time is dinner?”

“Why don’t you come now? I have to swing by Dad’s to pick up the girls. He’ll be glad to see you.” She was shifting through the jars, obviously looking to see what else was there.

“Thanks, but I think I better stay here and at least empty out my car. Besides, I’d kind of like to familiarize myself with everything. Do you mind?”

“’Course not.” Sue closed the cupboard door hording the stash of homemade goodies and turned to Maggie with a sisterly smile.

They began walking toward the door and as they moved past the table Maggie grabbed up the embroidery Sue had been looking at earlier. The little bit completed was beautiful. “Don’t forget this.” She handed it to Sue. “Would you like me to pick something up at the store on my way over?” She could do some shopping for herself as well.

“You won’t get in. This is Friday and Mr. Winters closes up at noon, remember? He won’t be back till Monday morning. You’ll have to make a run into Waterville for whatever you need to get you through the weekend.”

“Great.” Maggie’s mouth turned down at the discouraging news. She had enough to do as it was. Now she’d have to make a trip into Waterville or go hungry all weekend.

“I’m sure I have some things at the house that will tide you over.” Sue opened the van door and slid behind the wheel.

“I’ll see what I need.” Maggie stepped away and snapped her fingers for Dammit to come to her.

“See you around five then.” She turned the engine over and Maggie stood back for a minute, watching her sister disappear down the drive before going to her car to get the first load.

She didn’t bring much with her, knowing the log cabin was already furnished. The few pieces of furniture she’d acquired during her marriage had been junk to start with, and she hadn’t wanted anything around to remind her of how rotten the last eight years of her life had been. She was starting over, and as far as Maggie was concerned, this was the first day of her new life.
At precisely five o’clock Maggie parked her Mustang next to her brother-in-law’s battered blue pickup, which Bob had for as long as she could remember. She guessed he planned to take it with him to his grave. Sue’s van was parked further up the driveway, next to a new Jeep. Her curious eyes moved over it, worry starting to set in the pit of her stomach. Something told her they had company.

A cookout meant everyone would be outside behind the house by the lake, so Maggie went around the back way. She could hear the twins splashing and laughing playfully in the lake before she even saw them. The first one her eyes lit on was Bob, who was coughing and fanning at the black smoke curling up in his red face. Using a long-handled spatula, he reached blindly for the hamburgers.

When her eyes fell on Sue, the smile on her face rapidly disappeared. She was sitting at the picnic table, facing Maggie, while chatting to a man who had his back to her. Maggie halted in stunned shock, taking in his muscular build and shaggy black hair. Matt? No, it couldn’t be! She halted. Could it? Before she could open her mouth or take another step, Sue noticed her, misinterpreted the look on her face and jumped up from the table.

“Maggie, it’s not what you think!” Maggie let Sue grab her arm and whirl her around toward the house. “I swear, I didn’t know Bob invited Steve over too, until he showed up. I promise this isn’t a set up. Steve’s a nice man but he has a girlfriend. The only reason she isn’t here is because she’s working.” She had to stop to catch her breath. Maggie let Sue lead her through the back door into the kitchen. “Maggie…”

“Steve?” Maggie finally found her voice, meeting Sue’s eyes.

“Yes, he’s a friend of ours. He volunteers with Bob at the fire station. You believe me, don’t you?”

Maggie went to the window and peered outside. She acknowledged the girls coming out of the water and grabbing their towels on the picnic table bench, before returning her gaze to the man in question. He was helping Bob with the burgers now, the smoke finally under control. If she thought he resembled Matt from behind Maggie was even more astonished now that she could see his face. They could be brothers! But she knew that was too much of a coincidence to be considered.

“Are you all right, sis?” There was concern in Sue’s voice.

Maggie forced a chuckle and turned back to her. “Relax, I believe you.”

“But you looked so…so…”
Maggie shrugged picking up the large bowl of salad she instinctively knew was part of dinner. “He caught me by surprise, that’s all. For a second he reminded me of someone else.” She left the kitchen before Sue got nosey and started questioning her.

“Hello, Bob!” Maggie’s gaze shifted back and forth between him and Steve, trying not to stare at Steve as she moved closer. Bob glanced up from the grill and wiped the tears from his eyes with the corner of his stained apron. “Are you that happy to see me?” she teased, setting the salad down on the picnic table.

“Hey, girl, Sue said you got in early this morning. Can’t believe after all these years you’ve finally decided to move back.”

“Where did you move back from?” Steve asked. His face was a little red from the smoke but he wasn’t anywhere near tears yet.

“Steve, this is my sister-in-law Maggie. She just moved back from Bangor. She inherited Granny Markham’s old cabin down on the Mill Pond Road.”

“Nice to meet you, Steve.” Maggie smiled, meeting brown eyes that seemed so achingly familiar that a knot twisted in her belly. Was she destined to see Matt in every pair of brown eyes she peered into?

“Same here.” He wiped his hands on his jeans before taking Maggie’s offered hand.

“Aunt Maggie! Where’s Dammit?”

Both little girls stood before Maggie, each wrapped in a large bright beach towel. They were identical in every way, with personalities as different as night and day. Tammy was energetic and inquisitive, while Patty was quiet and watchful, remaining behind her older-by-twenty-minutes sister.

Tammy had her hands full of chips and was munching a mile a minute. Maggie shot the girl’s father a look out of the corner of her eye. It was just a matter of time before Bob said something. He always did.

“Dammit stayed home to rest. She was very tired from our long trip here but I’ll bring her next time, okay?” She took the offered chip and popped it in her mouth.

“Girls, come here and fix your plates.”

“I wish you’d rename that mutt,” Bob grumbled after his daughters scampered away to do their mother’s bidding. He put the last hamburger on a platter and turned to head to the table.

Maggie had to chomp down on her bottom lip to keep from smiling, purposely falling a step behind him. Her gaze met the amusement flickering in Steve’s eyes. It was on the tip of her
tongue to ask him if he had relatives in Bangor but the moment was lost when they joined Sue and the girls at the table.

“Remind me to fill you in about the church car wash this weekend, before you leave. It will give you a chance to get acclimated in the community and let the locals know you’ve moved back.”

Sue turned back to her girls before Maggie had a chance to comment. A church car wash? She couldn’t recall the last time she’d gone to one, but she welcomed the prospect of getting together with the locals and becoming part of the community. She yearned for the friendships that promised lasting relationships. And most of all she wanted to meet a good man and start a family. She wouldn’t have to look hard either. Left up to Sue she’d be meeting a lot of eligible men in no time.

Thinking about men made her think about Matt again. What a future with him might have been like. She’d have to forget about him now and prayed she didn’t compare him to every man she met.

She wondered how many years that would take.
Chapter 7

“Where are you?!”

Maggie jerked the phone away from her ear, unprepared for the sharp tone of Sue’s voice. She’d been in the middle of planting wildflower seeds around two oak trees when the phone rang for the third time that morning. Muttering an unladylike curse at the interruption, she’d jumped up from digging in the dirt and raced into the cabin, certain whoever it was would hang up the second she picked up the receiver, as they had two other times.

“I was…”

“It’s about time you answered the phone. I was about to send out the cavalry.”

“But…”

“I thought now would be a good time to remind you about the car wash, since you’re not here,” Sue teased, sucking in a breath to continue. “I’m calling from church in case you didn’t know. A lot of locals have turned up for it.”

Maggie could hear the commotion in the background. She’d forgotten all about the car wash! It sounded like she was missing out on a good time. Music filtered through the phone and she could make out laughter. It sounded like more than just a car wash going on.

She smiled at Sue’s aggravation. “Can I talk now?”

“Do.”

“I confess, I forgot. I found some flower seeds and I’m elbow deep in dirt.”

“Well plant them some other time and get your butt over here. Everyone is looking forward to seeing you again,” Sue demanded, her voice too soft to be threatening.

Maggie didn’t bother pointing out that it had only been six months since she’d last been home. And if memory served her correctly, she’d attended a small holiday party at that time. “But I’m filthy! I don’t have time for a…”
“Maggie, this is a car wash, girl. By the time you’ve washed your first vehicle you won’t need a bath.”

Releasing a resigned sigh, Maggie glanced down at herself and guessed Sue had a point. She looked like a hillbilly, though. She glanced in the mirror over the buffet. It was worse than she thought. Her hair looked like birds were nesting in it. “I look like something the cat dragged in.” She tried without success to pull her cutoffs further down the backs of her thighs.

“Take my word for it, no one will care. Half of us are soaked all ready; others are stained from dishing out barbeque. Plus there’s a softball game going on behind the church. Most of them are covered in mud.”

“If you’re sure…”

“I am. If you’re not here in ten minutes I’m sending the new sheriff down to get you.”

Maggie could tell Sue was in a hurry. “You’re at the Summer-field church, right? The little one down by China Lake?”

“Yes. Now get a move on!”

Maggie flinched at the sound of the phone slamming down in her ear. She glanced one more time at her reflection. Well, folks around here might as well see the real her. They were either going to like her or dislike her and it wouldn’t have much to do with the way she looked. But at least she could wash the dirt off her hands and run a brush through her hair.

Ten minutes later she pulled into the churchyard and parked her car between two sparkling clean vehicles. She was amazed at the amount of people there. It was apparent small-town folk could turn anything into an occasion to get together. Her gaze moved over the crowd, searching for anyone she knew, recognizing a few faces and returning waves. Her gaze fell on the tall, familiar form of Steve, who had his back to her. She smiled wistfully. She wasn’t falling for that again.

He was engrossed in a serious conversation with a group of teenagers. The boys, the way they were dressed and how they held themselves, reminded her of the gangs in her old neighborhood. Even from where she was Maggie was able to read the rebellious looks on their faces and sensed the air mounting with tension. The odds were seven to one with Steve at a terrible disadvantage, should they decide to try anything stupid like jumping him. She wondered where the new sheriff, Sue mentioned earlier, was.

She took a step in his direction. “Steve!” She hoped the smile plastered on her face would break the mood building between him and the boys.

“Maggie! We’ve been waiting for you! Sue’s already on the softball field…”

Maggie didn’t hear the rest of what Steve had to say. Her disbelieving gaze was still focused on the muscular back of the man who had yet to turn around and face her. She stopped short.
Steve’s voice had come from another direction, the direction of the car wash. She glanced that way to see him polishing a truck.
A big, black truck.

It can’t be.

Her gaze moved over the clean, shiny surface. It had been dark that night but…against her will her gaze swung back to the man she’d first thought was Steve. He was no longer caught up in conversation with the boys. He’d turned around and was staring directly at her.

She caught her breath, suddenly oblivious to everything and everyone but him. When his brown eyes met hers for the first time she felt a rushing heat of awareness explode through her body, making her dizzy. Heart missed a beat, her lips parted in an effort just to breathe normally. It can’t be him! Surprise held her glued to the spot. Shock seemed to hold him to his.

Maggie’s astonished gaze ran over Matt hungrily, afraid that if she glanced away he’d disappear. He was as big and as handsome as ever. Had it only been a week since they last saw each other? It seemed like a lifetime. Fate had certainly dealt them a surprising hand when just a few days ago they’d both been living in Bangor. She wasn’t a big believer of coincidences but here was proof that they did happen.

His gaze flickered, moving over her leisurely. The look leaping in his eyes was her undoing. Blind, unreasoning panic flowed through Maggie and she knew she’d make a fool of herself if she didn’t leave there immediately. She needed time to get a grip on her churning emotions. And being in the midst of a small community of people she barely knew was the last place she wanted to be right now. Thank goodness her cabin wasn’t far. She swung back to her car.

“Maggie, where are you going?” Sue’s…”

“I have to go, Steve. Tell her I…” Looking back at Matt was a mistake. He was walking toward her, his long strides bringing him rapidly closer. Maggie picked up speed, digging in her front pocket for her keys. She forgot about Steve and ran the rest of the way to her car, slid behind the wheel and locked the door. Refusing to glance back to see where Matt was, Maggie started the car and tore out of the churchyard, leaving a spray of dirt and gravel behind her.

She raced down the pothole-filled country road that led to her place as though she’d been driving it for years. Every second or two her eyes darted to her rearview mirror, certain she’d see Matt’s truck barreling down behind her. She didn’t know why she was running from him. She was attracted to the blasted man! And what’s more, she sensed he was just as attracted to her. So many times over the last few days she relived waking with him in her bed, the caresses and steamy kisses they’d shared, the blistering passion.

The turn to her property came up so quickly that Maggie missed it. She slammed on the breaks, put the car in reverse, and was about to back up when she glanced in the mirror to see a truck coming over the hill. The breath locked in her throat and her hand flew to her fiercely pounding heart, but it wasn’t Matt’s truck coming up behind her and continuing past.
Maggie released a deep sigh of relief. She started to back up but before she had a chance to turn
down her drive another vehicle appeared in her rearview mirror. It didn’t take long to recognize
Matt’s big black truck.

Damn! Her luck had run out.

* * * *

Matt knew a coward when he saw one. And the expression on Maggie’s beautiful face when
she’d first seen him back at the church warned him she was going to bolt. Where was the gutsy,
outspoken spitfire he’d met in Bangor? He’d watched her turn tail and run. If he was smart he’d
let her go. But the problem was he wanted her. And Matt was fairly sure the lady wanted him
too, even though she was running from him at the moment.

He’d barely mumbled an explanation to his brother before jumping into his newly washed truck
and taking off after her. He noticed which way she’d gone when she tore out of the church
driveway. It would serve her right if he gave her a ticket for the careless way she’d exited the
parking lot. But now, as he watched her jump from her car, all he could think about was how
sexy she looked in those sinfully tight, cut-off jeans.

He pulled to a screeching halt next to her Mustang. His door slammed shut but she didn’t stop to
see how fast he was gaining on her. She sprinted toward the front door of her cabin. Just as she
reached for the doorknob Matt closed his hand over her shoulder. He ignored her gasp and forced
her back against the very door she’d been trying to escape through.

Her startled eyes moved up to his. “Oh, hi!” she said in a soft and breathless tone.

Matt’s raised a brow. That’s all she has to say? “Why are you running?” Except for the hand on
Maggie’s shoulder he was careful not to touch any part of her, though he was close. He wanted
to kiss the daylights out of her and wondered what she’d do if he acted on the impulse. But first,
he wanted some answers.

Maggie’s eyes widened more. “Me, running? What from?”

“Me, maybe?” His gaze dropped to her lips, watching as she moistened them with the tip of her
tongue. He wasn’t sure her action was all that innocent, once he met the teasing sparkle in her
lovely eyes. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I live here now,” she admitted softly.

Matt felt her slight tremble beneath his hand, which was still on her shoulder. “What do you
mean, you live here?” he demanded, his gaze lowering once again to the parted softness of her
pretty mouth.
A need to taste those lips shot through him, so overwhelmingly that Matt clenched his teeth to hold down a groan. His body tightened with desire, a feeling that had never truly extinguished since meeting her. Something about Maggie had gotten to him. He’d even gone back to her apartment before leaving Bangor, only to find her gone. Tracking her down had proved futile, since she’d left without leaving a return address. He supposed he could have found her if he’d pursued it.

“You know, as in, I moved here. Just a few days ago as a matter of fact. I have family in this area and this cabin belonged to my grandmother. What are you doing here?”

“I was born here. I spent the last five years in Bangor but decided I didn’t like it.” He wasn’t about to go into the details because they would include Janey’s death.

“A good ole country boy at heart, huh?” She smiled up at him, those beautiful eyes sparkling with good humor and mischief. Matt could hear Dammit barking and scratching at the door to get out. He felt Maggie reach behind her for the old porcelain knob.

His hand closed over hers, preventing Maggie from opening the door. He leaned in close, grinning. “You’re not thinking of unleashing that mean little terror on me, are you, Red?” Another couple of inches and he’d be leaning full-length against her. And if he did that, God help her.

Her gaze went from his eyes to his mouth and back again. “Why would you think that?” she whispered, catching her breath as he started to lower his face.

“You were running from me,” Matt reminded her. He stopped just inches away from her lush mouth, breathing in deeply, stealing her breath as she released it through trembling lips.

A husky laugh rushed from Maggie. “You’re not wearing a uniform now. You’re probably safe this time.”

Matt wanted to ask, Safe from what?

He didn’t realize he’d spoken the words out loud until Maggie replied, “Surely you’re not afraid of little ole me?” she teased, tilting her head back as far as the door would allow so she could meet his eyes. She followed her comment with an outrageous batting of her long eyelashes.

The lady was dangerous and Matt knew he was in trouble. Big trouble. He should take a step away from her but took one closer instead. Was he crazy? Another inch and he’d have that devil-may-care Maggie Myers sandwiched between the hard door and his hard body. He bet that would wipe the smile off her face. His cock jumped as though to say, what was he waiting for?

An image flashed through his mind, of the two of them making love, here and now, standing up against the door. Out in the open with no one but Mother Nature around to witness the fireworks.
Matt shook his head to clear it, forcing himself back to the present before he made his dream into a reality.

His gaze focused on the woman in front of him and he growled between his teeth. “I don’t think Summerfield’s going to be big enough for the both of us.” Why couldn’t he be attracted to a normal woman, instead of the impish baggage of trouble in front of him?

His comment, meant to wipe the smile off Maggie’s beautiful face, only made her grin wider and her eyes glitter. “If you’re worried about it, then why are you here?”

Why indeed? Matt supposed if he’d had time to think about it he wouldn’t be there. But he never could back down from a challenge. If she hadn’t run away from him he’d probably still be back at the church, trying to coach a team of youths determined to get into trouble. He’d reacted without thinking. Dangerous for a lawman.

“Well?”

Matt scowled at her knowing tone. He leaned in closer, crowding her against the door. Hoping to wipe that smug smile off her face. But instead of distinguishing the glitter of victory in her eyes, his move heightened the color in her cheeks. Maybe she wanted him to kiss her as much as he wanted to. Maybe he needed to back up his scowl with a growl. Maybe Matt needed to quit playing games and just do what he wanted to do. What they both obviously wanted. The only trouble was, Matt wasn’t sure he could stop with a kiss. And he’d convinced himself that making love to her had been a mistake.

He watched her eyes widen. The breath escaped her in tiny little puffs as she parted her lips in readiness. Her tongue moved over them so they would be moist for him. She seemed eager. Matt’s heartbeat picked up speed and his body began to fill with the sharp need of hunger. She raised her head as though to meet him halfway. He lowered his face…

Suddenly Matt reared back his head and swore sharply. “Dammit!”

Maggie jumped back, bumping her head against the door. Her curious expression followed him as he moved away. She must have opened the door without either of them realizing it.

“It’s not safe being around you unless I’m wearing boots,” Matt barked. They both looked down at his boots, and Dammit. Maggie glanced back up at him. He crossed his arms over his chest. The sensual spell weaving around them had definitely been broken. “I thought you said I was safe.”

“She must have thought you were, ah, attacking me.” Her mouth twitched with humor.

“Well, I’m the one being attacked now. So unless you have a doggy treat in your pocket I suggest you start sweet-talking her into letting go.”
Without warning, Dammit lost interest in them and raced off. She apparently found something else to torment, if her frantic yelping was anything to go by. Maggie’s curious gaze moved past Matt in the direction her dog disappeared. Almost immediately her eyes widened with alarm. “Snake!” she shrieked, throwing herself at Matt.

A surprised grunt escaped him and his arms automatically closed around her. Before he knew it Maggie’s legs were wrapped around his waist and her arms around his neck in a vice-like grip.

“Do something! Quick!” Fear, stark and vivid, glittered in her eyes as they focused on the shiny, black reptile on the ground behind Matt.

She was suffocating him but Matt decided there couldn’t be a better way to go. He turned his head from the soft cushion of her breasts, and glanced at Dammit and the small snake Maggie was making such a fuss over. It was hardly bigger than a large night crawler.

He chuckled. “It’s harmless, honey. We have worms bigger than that. It’s nothing more than a garden…”

“I don’t care!” she interrupted with a shudder. “It’s a snake! Do something before it hurts Dammit!”

Dammit would probably hurt the snake first but Matt wisely kept his thoughts to himself. In fact, it looked like the dog was playing with it. “Dammit looks like she’s having fun.” Matt pointed out, trying to ignore Maggie’s squirming.

Her wiggling made him think of more intimate things. She had to know what she was doing to him. His cock was as hard as a rock, throbbing between the apex of her legs. Her wiggling wasn’t helping. If they weren’t wearing clothes he’d be buried deep inside her body and screwing the hell out of her. “Maggie…” His groan was low and tortured.

“Don’t you dare put me down!” she gasped, seeming to know where his mind was heading. Her terrified eyes were glued to the wiggling snake in the grass and her legs tightened around him with fright. She was trembling uncontrollably and Matt realized she was really afraid. It didn’t diminish his hard-on, though.

“What do you want me to do?” His pounding heart beat a rhythm in his chest that kept in tempo to the blood pumping through his veins.

“Get rid of it,” she begged, her eyes holding his as she moistened her lips. “Please.” She ended in a husky whisper.

Matt sighed deeply. He could no more control his response than ignore the hunger to devour that wet mouth of hers. If he didn’t give in to that hunger soon they might as well send him to the nuthouse, because he was nearing the end of his sanity. He’d been thinking about her since leaving her apartment that morning. Day and night! His hands left Maggie’s waist to roam over
the curves of her denim-clad bottom, stopping when his fingers encountered the smooth flesh of her thighs where her shorts came to an end. He clenched his hands into her buttocks and held her tightly against him. Oh hell!

He felt like a firecracker ready to explode.

She gasped sharply.

“I’ll have to put you down,” he warned her hoarsely, his eyes locking on to the awareness flaring in hers. The incident with Dammit and the snake no longer seemed important, pushed to the backs of their minds and replaced with something hot and needy. Demanding to be satisfied. “I’m not going to stop with a kiss,” he warned in a low tone.

“I’m counting on that,” Maggie breathed softly.

A distant sound penetrated Matt’s slightly dull senses. He pulled back, and tilted his head at an angle as he listened for something. The phone was ringing inside the cabin. But it wasn’t the phone that had captured Matt’s attention. He’d distinctly heard the faint crackling of his truck radio. Sighing, he let Maggie slowly glide down his body until her feet were on the ground.

“The phone…”

“My radio…”

They went in the opposite directions from each other. As the local sheriff of a small town Matt accepted the fact that he was on call twenty-four hours a day. As he opened the door to his truck, he glanced back but Maggie had already disappeared inside her house. He didn’t know if it was a godsend that they’d been interrupted. The ache in his loins told him no, but his heart thanked God. What had just happened was pure madness.

He didn’t need a complication like Maggie in his life. Only what he needed and what he wanted didn’t seem to matter. But one thing was certain, sooner or later he was going to have her again.

Reaching for his radio, he slid behind the wheel and turned the key. He was getting the hell out of there.
Chapter 8

William Marsh was still a handsome man. At the age of sixty he’d managed to hold on to his healthy appearance with plenty of exercise and good country living. Retirement agreed with him. Maggie was glad to see the happy shimmer of life in her father’s ageless green eyes. Eyes she’d inherited, much to the chagrin of her brown-eyed sister.

She could see him sitting on the screened-in porch as she drove up his driveway. Returning his wave, she got out of the car and headed in his direction.

“I’ve been waiting for you to finally come by and see me,” he said as she neared the steps to the porch.

Guilt for not doing so earlier filled her. “I would have days ago but Sue told me you were on a fishing trip down South, with some of your old cronies. Then I got busy with things at the cabin and time just got away from me.” It was a poor excuse, even if it was the truth. She opened the door and entered the porch, plopping down into the wicker chair next to his. “Are you trying to make me feel bad?”

He chuckled. “Yes.” But when Maggie didn’t take the bait he continued, “I know you have your own life. Now, if I could only get your mother to stay put. She travels a lot.”

It was clear in his tone that he missed her. Maggie often wondered why he didn’t go with her sometimes but knew with her mother it would be all work and no play, which was why she took Trudy with her. Besides, her father had done enough traveling over the years. As a troubleshooter for conglomerate companies he’d traveled all over the world.

“She’ll get tired of it and settle down some day, Dad, enjoy the peace while you can.” He should count himself lucky that he wasn’t coerced into the various schemes her mother came up with, for the sake of research. He acknowledged her comment with a smile, reaching for the glass of ice tea on the arm of his chair. “How do you like living out at the old cabin?”

“I love it. I never realized what a country girl I was. It’s pretty quiet though. Thank goodness I have Dammit around to talk to or I’d go nuts.”

“And for protection,” he added teasingly. He gave her a wink of affection. “Speaking of the little devil, where is she?”
“Home. I’m really on my way back from town.” Her car was full of grocery items that didn’t need refrigeration and a cooler she’d filled with the important stuff like ice cream.

“Oh, so I was a last-minute thought, huh?” he said with a significant lifting of his brows.

“You know you weren’t.” Maggie reached for his hand, which was dangling off the arm of his chair. She gave it a brief squeeze before releasing it, knowing her father was uncomfortable with long shows of affection.

“I was just about to fire up the grill and throw on a couple steaks. Stay and have dinner with me. It’s lonely with your mother gone.”

“She’s doing research for her next novel,” Maggie reminded him, not going into detail about the subject matter. If her father knew she’d attempted to help by dressing up as a call girl he’d blow his top.

“So she says,” William sighed. “But face it, kiddo, your mother goes to some pretty far out places, when all she has to do is stop at the public library in town.” He rose to his feet and Maggie followed suit. “You know how Mom is; she likes to do her research the hard way. That’s what makes writing fun for her.”

They walked together through a connecting doorway that brought them into a spacious kitchen. “I’ll cook the steaks. You can do the potatoes in the microwave.”

Smiling, Maggie didn’t waste her breath declining his invitation. They both knew she never turned down a steak cooked on the grill. Besides, she had time to enjoy a nice dinner with her father. It’s not as if she had anything to rush home to. Matt’s face flashed before her eyes and she released a reflective sigh, wondering what he was doing. She hadn’t seen or heard from him since the day of the car wash. She supposed she wasn’t on his mind.

She pushed thoughts of him aside, wishing it were that easy in her dreams. “That sounds good. Want me to cook the steaks for you, too?” she asked, knowing he’d never take her up on it.

“It would be a crime turning those thick, juicy steaks over to your culinary talents.” He gave her a wink. “You can’t get into much trouble nuking the potatoes. Fix three.”

Maggie didn’t question him on the number, turning to the fridge to get them. “Did you know I was coming over?” She couldn’t contain her surprise when her eyes landed on the platter of two steaks, marinating in her father’s special sauce.

William chuckled. “After you’ve been living in the country long enough you’ll come to realize that people around here don’t know what a phone is used for. They stop in at the drop of a hat. And the smell of cooking on the grill always seems to draw somebody. I’ve had it happen often enough that I’ve learned to be prepared.” He reached around her for the platter.
“That’s a good idea, Dad. Maybe I’ll drop in more often.” Maggie tossed him a smile as he left the kitchen. She took the potatoes to the sink to wash them and set them on a paper towel to dry. Then cut up an onion and some fresh mushrooms to sauté later. By the time she joined her dad he had a fire started in the grill. No fancy gas grill for him, he liked using charcoal and lighter fluid. Said everything tasted better.

“You know, it will take a while before these coals are ready. Why don’t you take the boat out?” He reached for a handkerchief in his back pocket and wiped his brow.

Maggie’s gaze wandered beyond her father to the lake at the end of his property, taking in the skiers and boaters on the glistening water. She’d been a gawky teenager the last time she took a boat out by herself. And that had turned into a small disaster. She could still hear her father screaming at her for losing the motor, and as far as she knew it was still at the bottom of China Lake. Either he’d forgotten the episode or the boat in question didn’t have a motor.

She glanced back at him. He’d already settled himself in a lawn chair next to the grill. Beneath the shade tree he usually lounged under in the afternoons, when he wanted to nap.

He grinned, waving her off. “It’s the only boat tied up at the pier.”

Before Maggie knew it she was walking in the direction of the wharf, noticing how warped and tilted it was after so many years. She got the answer to her thoughts about the motor when she reached the dock and glanced down at the small canoe bobbing alongside it. It was minus a motor but well equipped with wooden oars. A smile broke out on her face. This would be a piece of cake!

How much trouble could she get into with a canoe? She wasn’t on the water long when the answer became crystal clear. She was definitely out of her element. No sooner had she rowed to the middle of the lake that she began to question her wisdom and capabilities. It suddenly seemed she became a target for every watercraft out there, and it was all she could do to keep from capsizing from the waves created by thoughtless speeders.

“Hi there!”

Glancing up with a start, Maggie smiled at the occupants in the brightly colored sailboat breezing by. After waving in their direction she returned her death grip on the wood paddle just as it was about to slip over the side. She wondered how much screaming her father would do over lost oars.

“Having trouble?” a woman on the boat called out as she passed.

“No!” Maggie laughed, shaking her head at the bikini-clad woman. “It’s just those darn speeders!” Maggie released a small shriek as the boat rocked precariously. The woman laughed in return before the wind carried her away. Maggie envied the ease in which the other woman made sailing appear. Chuckling at her shortcomings, she realized she’d better head back before the lake swallowed her up.
She was halfway home before disaster struck in the form of a careless boater pulling a skier behind him. Maggie’s mistake was in letting go of the oar to wave at him in an attempt to get his attention but instead of slowing down, the fool on board only sped up. He cut through the water dangerously close to her small craft, totally oblivious to her. The skier sliced through the water on the other side of her. The force of the waves nearly capsized her and with a small cry she fumbled for the oar, just as it disappeared over the side.

“Damn!”

“Don’t stand up!”

But the loud warning came too late. In a desperate dive to grasp the tail end of the oar Maggie jumped to her feet and leaned over the side of the boat. By the time she realized her mistake it was too late to do anything about it. With a cry she went over the side headfirst. The water was cold and she surfaced with a gasp. Kicking her feet to stay afloat, she brushed strands of clinging hair out of her face so she could see, cursing the stupid boat, which had managed to float several feet away from her.

“Give me your hand.”

Maggie twisted toward the masculine voice behind her, her gaze falling on the hand near her face. Her gaze followed the path up a strong, muscular arm until her eyes locked onto all too familiar brown ones. She groaned and glanced around, half expecting to see lightning in the air. Even though her heart gave a little start she muttered miserably, “Go away.” She turned around, fully intending to ignore Matt. Why should he always see her at her worst?

“Give me your hand,” he insisted in a tone that revealed he was trying not to laugh. She reluctantly raised her hand and with a sharp pull he had her onboard his boat in no time. “Out for a little afternoon dip?” He stepped away from her dripping body and crossed his arms, his gaze moving over Maggie as though to make sure she was alright. There was amusement in his voice when he said, “I’ve seen you looking better.”

“Really?” Her tone was thick with sarcasm as she tugged at the hem of her shorts. She couldn’t look him in the eyes, embarrassed he’d witnessed her ungraceful plunge into the lake. And she didn’t need or want his misplaced humor, either. She peered down at herself and groaned noticing the wet material of her tee shirt revealed she wasn’t wearing a bra. Heat crawled up her neck into her cheeks. Her nipples were clearly visible and taut. She plucked the clinging material away from her breasts. “Do you have a towel or something?”

“Why, I like the view.”

Maggie felt a slow burn spread through her body when Matt’s eyes lingered on her breasts. His slow smile was sexy. His gaze revealed growing awareness. “Really?” She smiled in return, while quaking with unusual nervousness inside. “You’re not the one freezing.”

It was a warm, sunny day.
Matt’s eyes shot back up to hers. “You’re cold? There’s a remedy for that.”

Maggie wondered what that meant. His hands went to the white shirt he was wearing. Suddenly buttons were flying everywhere when he ripped it open, exposing his masculine chest and washboard abdomen. She caught her breath and stepped back, coming into bruising contact with the side of the boat. “And what would that be?” Thank God it was a bigger boat than hers or she might find herself treading water a second time. On second thought, the way Matt was staring at her, eating her up with his eyes, she might stand a better chance in the lake.

“Body heat.”

Oh! Instant desire erupted inside Maggie. Matt was appealing when he wasn’t being all serious and matter of fact. She recalled the body heat between them the other morning. How could she not? It had equaled nothing she’d ever experienced before. But here on the lake, in the open, did she dare give in to the hunger simmering between them? She cast a glance back to shore, chagrined to find she couldn’t even see her father. She looked back at Matt.

The truth hit Maggie like a ton of bricks. It didn’t matter where they were. She wanted him. And the gleam in his devilish eyes said he was hungry for her, too. The longer they stood there, staring at each other, the stronger the urge became to tempt fate. Still, Maggie wasn’t ready to give in so easily. She enjoyed the cat-and-mouse game they were playing. She held out her hands as if to ward him off. “I’ll scream.” With pleasure, she didn’t add.

Matt paused long enough to look around. “Go ahead,” he said with a significant lifting of his brows.

The lake was suddenly empty of boaters, swimmers and anything else in their immediate vicinity. Matt whipped off his shirt and Maggie jumped at the unexpected action. “Why so jumpy?” He handed it to her. She clutched it to the front of her. He was close, too close for her peace of mind. Maggie held out her hand. “I hope we can be friends.” She tried not to smile, aware her comment was outrageous after what they’d shared.

“Friends?” His eyes gleamed like polished mahogany, holding hers captive for a long minute, before his gaze dropped to her hand. “I think we’re past that.” Ignoring her offer of a handshake, he gave a slight nod. Then his gaze moved past her, “I think we’d better retrieve your boat before it floats further away.”

She turned her head in the direction Matt indicated, seeing her father’s little canoe had floated quite a distance from them. While Matt started the engine she gratefully slipped into his shirt. She could smell the scent of him on it, accepting the welcoming warmth where his body had been only moments ago.

“Can you reach the towline?”
She glanced down at the rope trailing in the water and bent over the side to reach for it. It was farther than she thought. The rope remained just beyond her fingertips. She stretched as far as she could, until the muscles at the back of her legs tightened as she balanced on the very tips of her toes. Oh no! Her eyes rounded when her feet slipped on the deck and she felt herself going over the side headfirst.

“Matt!” She tried to straighten.

“I’ve got you.” Maggie felt his body flush against her backside. His hands took hold of her waist and he pulled her back and held her against him. “Now try,” he said against her ear.

A delicious shiver traveled down her spine. Instant heat enveloped Maggie at their close proximity. She tried to ignore their intimate position and focus on the towline but that was impossible. Matt was too virile and she wanted him too much. All she could think about was her bottom being flush against the front of him.

She was finally able to clutch the rope and stood up to find she was trapped between Matt and the boat, and he wasn’t moving. His large hands slid down to her hips in a slow caress. Maggie sucked in her breath and closed her eyes, feeling his arousal strengthen. For a moment they seemed frozen, attuned to each other and nothing else. Matt’s breath was hot against the back of her neck, teasing the fine hairs there.

“Mathew…” The gentle breeze carried his name away, over the water and beyond. Maggie was ready to make love to him there and now, in the bottom of the boat or standing up for anyone to see. Thinking about him day and night had primed her for loving.

The breeze nearly blew Matt’s low groan away before she heard it. Suddenly, and without warning, he leaned forward and began to nibble the skin beneath Maggie’s ear. She shivered violently, arching against him with reaction. His open mouth traveled over her neck and collarbone where he’d nudged her shirt aside.

“You know what it does to me when you say my name like that?” he rasped against her flesh, forcing her against the boat. His hands slowly moved away from her hips, gliding up beneath his shirt, his intentions obvious. Maggie held her breath as they paused beneath her breasts, before he turned the palms up and cupped them. A burst of liquid fire pooled between her legs. A soft cry escaped through her parted lips.

“Mathew,” she whispered again, smiling. Tempting him to lose control if she could.

He shuddered against her. “God. you feel good. I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind, Maggie.” He moved his body in a way that wasn’t obvious except to her. “I haven’t been able to forget how good you feel when I’m sliding into your body. How good it feels when your muscles tighten around me with wet heat. I think you’ve put a spell on me. I don’t want this, yet I’ve never wanted anything more.”

Maggie grinned. It didn’t feel that way to her. “No willpower?”
“Apparently not where you’re concerned.”

Maggie twisted her head to look at him; without warning he swooped down and covered her mouth with his. His kiss was intense and passionate, causing her to moan deeply with pleasure. Her senses became enflamed and she wanted satisfaction, stimulated by Matt’s fierce need. As he ground his lips over hers, she opened her mouth so their tongues could join in a sensuous dance of exploration. He groaned, and caressed her breasts with more vigor.

“If you were wearing a swimsuit, I’d slide it aside and bury my aching flesh inside you and no one would be the wiser.” His passionate words conjured up a picture that caused a ripple through her blood.

“You don’t play fair,” Maggie said shakily. She closed her eyes to savor the moment. Their lips met again.

It was over before it began. Voices and laughter carried to them from a passing boat. Matt tore away from Maggie as if he’d been burned. “Why is it that within five minutes of running into you I’m practically making love to you?” he growled.

Maggie turned to face him, out of breath yet managing a smile anyway. She met the emotion churning in his dark eyes. “Does that make you angry, wanting me, or are you frustrated because the timing is never right?”

Matt stared at her for a long minute, before the ghost of a smile crossed his sensual mouth. “The timing was right that morning in your apartment. And God help you, Maggie, when it’s right again.” He turned from her and started the engine. “Where to?” His voice was hard, revealing how close he was to the edge.

“I was at my dad’s place.” In spite of being wet, the breeze felt good against Maggie’s overheated skin. She could still feel Matt’s hands against her breasts and a glance at him revealed he was still hard as stone against his zipper. She pretended interest in something on the shoreline.

“I know where it is.”

Maggie was thankful she had a few minutes to regain her composure. It didn’t take them long to reach the crooked wharf at the end of her dad’s property. She cautiously stepped over the side of Matt’s boat and onto the pier, before bending to secure the line to the canoe. Surprise filled her when she stood and saw Matt securing his own line. She hadn’t heard him jump on the pier.

“Thank you for the rescue and the lift back but it’s not necessary for you to see me to the door.” She turned to walk away. “I’ll return your shirt later.”

“That’s okay.” His voice was close and there was something in it that caused Maggie to stop and spin around. “About walking you to the door,” he explained. “I was on my way here when I ran into you.”
“Oh.” What else could she say? She turned and continued up the grassy embankment, her sneakers making a squishing sound with every step. She sensed Matt’s eyes on her but refused to look back. She could see a stream of smoke curling around the corner of the house, followed by the mouth-watering aroma of barbeque.

“What in the world happened to you?” William asked the second his eyes fell on her. There was no denying the teasing glint in his curious gaze. It was obvious what had happened and he chuckled before his attention moved beyond her. “Hi, Matt.”

Maggie didn’t give Matt a chance to respond, deciding to get right to the point. “Dad, I’m sorry but I, ah, had a little accident. I kind of lost the oars.”

“Kind of? I take it you capsized?” His eyes crinkled at the corners.

Maggie watched him turn the steaks over before noticing one had already been cut in half. It dawned on her then that her father had been expecting company all along. And that company had been Matt. “Not exactly,” she unwillingly admitted. “I kind of fell in trying to save those stupid oars from going to the bottom of the lake.”

“And I kind of saved your daughter from going to the bottom of the lake,” Matt added in a humorous tone.

“I guess I owe you, son.” William gave Matt a wink. “I wish you’d saved my oars, too.”

Maggie rolled her eyes and turned toward the house. “How much time do I have before the steaks are done?”

“About five minutes.”

“Good. I’m going to rinse off and get into some dry clothes.” She dashed toward the steps and forced herself not to glance back at Matt.

“Turn the mushrooms and onions on when you’re done,” she heard her dad call out right before the door closed behind her.

It didn’t take Maggie long to shower and change into a pair of faded jeans and a peasant style blouse that had looked cute on her in high school, but slightly slutty now. She emerged from the bathroom in record time. She got a surprise when she entered the kitchen to find Matt at the stove, stirring the mushrooms and onions she’d turned on before going to the bathroom. The room was filled with smoke and Maggie glanced down into the pan as he turned off the burner and took it off the stove.

“They’re burned.”

“Brilliant observation,” he returned dryly. “I was on my way in for a beer when I noticed smoke pouring out onto the porch.”
“Oh.” What could she say? She was the one who turned them on and then left the room, believing she’d have time to get to them before anything happened. Now they were black and sticking to the pan.

Matt continued to the fridge. Well. Maggie watched him move about the kitchen. He was certainly making himself at home. He pulled a beer from the fridge and popped the top before taking a long swallow, all the while keeping his eyes trained on her.

The silence began to unnerve her. “How do you know my dad?” She crossed her arms and leaned her hip against the counter. She had to get a grip on her emotions or she wasn’t going to make it through the next five minutes. The look in Matt’s eyes had a way of turning her to mush. Never mind what his mouth and hands on her did.

“You forget, I was born here. I know just about everyone in these parts.”

“He’s never spoken of you.”

“Should he have?” Matt took another swallow of beer. “I’ve been gone five years. I hadn’t planned on coming back.”

“But my mother didn’t know you.” Maggie thought out loud, recalling the morning in her apartment.

“Our paths never crossed; she doesn’t spend much time here.”

He didn’t have to remind her of that. She pushed away from the counter and went to the microwave, opening it to pull out three shriveled up potatoes that indicated they’d been nuked to death. When she placed them on the counter Matt burst out laughing.

“Do you ever do anything right?” Summer lightning flashed in his amused eyes.

Instantly annoyed, Maggie picked up the biggest potato and threw it at him, but he skillfully caught it with one hand. She picked up a second one. Since he was holding a beer in his other hand she’d like to see him do that again. She tossed it, hard.

It hit Matt square in the chest, which was still bare. Of course it didn’t hurt him, but it hadn’t done the potato any good. It burst open and fell to the floor between his feet. For a moment they both stared down at the awful mess.

His gaze swung up to hers and pinned her on the spot. “Someone needs to tame that wild streak in you. A good place to start is over my knee.”

Was he serious? It was hard to tell. His expression revealed nothing. He was good at hiding his emotions when he wanted. Maggie thought he might be kidding until he took a step in her direction. The thought of a spanking actually sent a little thrill through her, only the look on his
face said he’d enjoy it in a totally different way. She backed up, suddenly concerned. She had a 
low tolerance for pain. “Don’t you dare!” A nervous laugh escaped her.

The tiniest glint in Matt’s eyes revealed his own amusement lurking just beneath the surface. 
Maggie breathed a sigh of relief.

“You should have thought of that before provoking me.”

She stopped backing up, and waited for him to reach her. Curious to what he was going to do. 
The sound of someone opening the porch door drew their attention, then the sound of footsteps 
coming their way. They turned as Maggie’s father walked into the room. He halted upon noticing 
them, his gaze taking in the scene. His interest halted on Matt and the potato on the floor.

He raised a curious eyebrow. “Juggling?” Matt shook his head and William turned his attention 
to Maggie. She didn’t offer an explanation. “Oh, I see. I didn’t know you two knew each other, 
but I’m glad you’re getting along. I just came in to see what was keeping my beer.” He went to 
the fridge and opened the door, reached for a beer and turned to leave. “Just make sure you don’t 
ruin my baked potato.”

“Dad…” Maggie was cut short by the phone. Since her father continued through the doorway she 
was left to answer it. She turned and reached for it where it hung on the wall. “Hello?” There 
was no answer but she was sure she could hear someone breathing on the other end. “Hello?” 
More heavy breathing followed before she heard the dial tone. It must have been a wrong 
number. She no sooner hung the phone up then it rang again. “Hello?” Her gaze remained on 
Matt as she waited for a response.

He was staring at her, his chocolate eyes roaming slowly over her until she began to feel over 
warm and tingly. He took a swig of his beer. She smiled in spite of his serious expression. The 
cop expression he’d been wearing the first morning they met. Their eyes remained locked. He 
took another drink and then slowly set it down on the counter.

“Hi, can I please speak to Matt?”

It was a woman’s voice and Maggie’s curiosity was immediately piqued, jealously soon reared 
its ugly head. She could hardly ask who was calling without giving herself away. She handed the 
receiver toward Matt. He took it without hesitation, a slight frown between his eyes.

“Yes?”

Maggie didn’t have to worry about eavesdropping. Matt did most of the listening while the 
woman on the other end did all the talking. A few grunts here and there were the extent of his 
responses to something she said. And then finally, he said, “No, I’m glad you called. I’ll be right 
there.”

He was leaving. Maggie turned so he wouldn’t see the disappointment in her eyes. She grabbed a 
paper towel and bent over the mess on the floor, pretending to be absorbed with cleaning it up.
“Something has come up.”

Yeah, another woman. Maggie tried not to let her imagination run wild. It could have been his mother on the phone for all she knew. Mothers could have low, sultry voices, too. She stood with a smile on her face. “So I gathered.”

“Steve’s girlfriend’s car broke down and left her stranded and she can’t reach Steve.”

Steve’s girlfriend, thank God! “Dad will understand.”

“I still owe you a spanking.”

His comment caught her off-guard. She tried not to look at his sensual mouth but the smile spreading over it was too darn appealing. “See you later, Matt.” The indifference she strived for was overpowered by emotions she couldn’t control. She wanted a goodbye kiss, more than she could ever remember wanting anything else.

“You can count on it.”

She watched Matt leave. When the porch door slammed shut she walked as far as the doorway leading out to the porch and watched him through the screen. His long strides took him to where her father was standing at the grill. After speaking to him briefly he swung around and headed in the direction of the lake. He glanced her way for a split second before disappearing around the back of the house.

Maggie’s hand covered the area over her heart. For the first time she could admit that she was afraid, of a big handsome man who took her breath away and threatened her peace of mind.

And her heart.
Chapter 9

Maggie didn’t realize there was a policeman behind her until she looked up and caught the flashing lights in her rearview mirror. Then she heard the siren. She wondered what the speed limit was on the dirt road. A quick glance at the speedometer revealed she was doing forty. Her mouth turned down, seriously doubting the speed limit was anywhere near that. She reluctantly slowed and pulled over to the side of the road. Maybe he’d keep on going, only he didn’t, he was right behind her. So close that Maggie thought it was a miracle he didn’t hit her bumper when she finally came to a stop. She took a reconciled breath and turned to reach for her purse.

“Keep your hands where I can see them!”

The unexpected command caused her to jump and she froze where she was, turning her head just enough to see the officer approach her car with caution. By the time he reached Maggie she had her I’m innocent smile plastered on her face. “Hello, Officer. Was I going a little too fast?” He reminded her of Barney Fife with his tall, much too thin build, his shoulders slightly hunched forward in a uniform that appeared a size too big. His hat kind of flopped down, shadowing a bony, unattractive face, and the wide gun belt cinched around his waist appeared to be weighing him down.

“Doing forty-five in a thirty-five,” he responded crisply. “I need to see your license and registration please.”

Forty-five? It looked like forty to her but at any rate she was speeding and wasn’t going to argue. “Can I move to get it?” He just stared at her, unaffected by her attempt at humor. Her efforts were wasted; he obviously took his job very seriously. When he continued to stare, Maggie reached for her purse and began to rummage through the contents.

“If I was speeding,” she refused to admit that she was, “I’m sorry. I guess my mind was somewhere else.” Like on a six-foot-five ex-cop who made her blood run hot, made her pulse jump erratically and left her tingling all over. Inside and out. She frowned when she didn’t find her license in any of the usual places.

“That was just one offense, ma’am. Your first one was when you ran the stop sign back there.”

“Stop sign! What stop sign?” Damn! He reached for the ticket book in his shirt pocket. Maggie turned back to her purse and dumped the contents out on the seat in growing frustration.
“The stop sign back at the corner,” he explained in a boring voice.
“Back at the corner?” Maggie knew she sounded like a parrot, but honestly, she didn’t notice any stop sign. She twisted her neck and glanced back. If there was a stop sign it was around the corner and out of sight. “I never stop at the…” She snapped her big mouth shut but it hadn’t been quick enough. She could tell by his expression that he’d heard enough to catch what she’d been about to admit.

“Your license please.” His tone was stern yet patient.

“I can’t seem to find it.”

He didn’t seem to care. “May I see your registration, then?”

“Oh I have that!” She pulled open the glove compartment.

It was completely empty. She closed her eyes and groaned when she remembered cleaning everything out of her car the day before. She’d wanted to go through the contents before putting them back. Maggie turned a sorrowful expression on the man, who by now had started writing rapidly. “I forgot, Officer…I cleaned my car out yesterday and I…”

“Remain in your car, I’ll be right back.” His abrupt words cut her off and before Maggie could say another word he pivoted to walk back to his squad car.

Maggie inhaled deeply, sat back and waited. Her eyes darted nervously to the rearview mirror, watching him open his car door and slide onto the seat. He reached for something and Maggie assumed it was his radio. She’d seen enough cop movies to know he was probably reading off her license tag number to someone on the other end. After a few moments she watched him approach her car again, his expression giving nothing away. Yet Maggie sensed something very different about him, he seemed more on guard. She offered him a smile, hoping to put him at ease and erase the tension building in her stomach.

“Step out of the car, please.”

His tone was no-nonsense and Maggie sensed something was wrong. Her eyes rounded with disbelief, her smile vanished. Didn’t they usually give twenty-four hours to produce those things? “Why, what have I done?”

He released an annoyed breath. “Ma’am, please step out of the car. You can state your case back at the station.”

Case, what case? She had a case?

“I don’t understand.”

“No license, no registration, no license tag.” He counted the list off his fingers. “A car resembling yours was reported stolen a few days ago.”
“What?!” Maggie was totally confused now. What happened to her tag? If she wasn’t certain David was in jail she’d worry he had a hand in this. “But I had…”

“Please step out of the car.”

She released a snort and did as he asked. How could things have gotten messed up so fast? She had no choice but to let him take her arm and lead her to his squad car, where he proceeded to assist her into the backseat. She was only thankful he didn’t insist on handcuffing her. The ride to the small, Summerfield Police Station didn’t take long and was done in stony silence. All the way Maggie tried to make sense of the whole situation. How long had she been driving without a tag?

Once at the station she was booked, fingerprinted and finally allowed to make her phone call. But there was no way Maggie was going to phone her dad and tell him she was in jail. She called Sue, letting it ring twenty times before conceding that no one was home. She couldn’t even leave them a message and just managed to stop from slamming the phone down out of sheer frustration. The sweet little old lady behind the counter told her she would get a chance to make another call later.

Now there she was, standing in a cold jail cell, staring at a cot that looked as old as the hills. Thank God the pillow and blanket looked clean. She sat down on the cot and slowly sank until the sagging mattress was stopped by the sagging springs. What in the world was she going to do?

* * * *

Matt didn’t pull his truck into the station until eight o’clock. Normally he would have returned right after dinner but an accident had detained him. He’d never had to kill a cow before, but the poor animal had broken through a fence and been struck by a milk truck leaving the farm. A shot through the head had taken care of it, but he had to write up a report so the driver could file a claim with his insurance company.

Now he had a prisoner to deal with. Don hadn’t said much when he called it in earlier, just that he’d arrested a female on numerous charges, some of which needed further investigation. It wouldn’t be the first time Matt had to handle a woman prisoner. The first thing he noticed upon opening the glass door to the station was that no one was behind the counter.

“Sheriff, that you?” Matt rounded the partition wall to see his nighttime deputy sitting at one of three desks in the small office. “It was getting late so I let Millie go home. It’s been quiet around here.”

“Thanks, Paul. I wouldn’t have wanted her to stay late. Any trouble with our prisoner?”
Paul grinned from ear to ear, which should have been Matt’s first warning. “Not a peep but she sure is a looker. I checked in on her earlier to find her asleep. Millie said Don forgot to pat her down.”

More likely conveniently forgot. Don’s girlfriend had a jealously streak a mile wide and Don tended to forget his duty when it came to patting down female prisoners. Odd considering he did everything else by the book. As far as Matt was concerned that was extremely dangerous and he was going to have to discipline the deputy if it continued. A woman officer was the answer, only right now he didn’t have any.

“Want me to take care of it?” Paul asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Matt had reservations about that. Paul looked a little too eager. The last thing he needed was a woman screaming sexual harassment by one of his men. Yet he knew Paul’s record was clean and he’d never acted with anything but professionalism toward any prisoner. His comment about her being a looker chipped away at his trust of the man but in the end he ignored it.

He shrugged. “Keep it light.” He started looking through the papers stacked on Don’s desk for his and Millie’s reports. She would have typed up the personal info on their little bad girl, and being the creature of habit that she was, would have stapled it to Don’s. He could sit down and take his time going over both reports before he had to deal with her. He located the report just as a commotion from the other room drew his attention.

“Get away from me!” Matt heard a woman shriek.

“I’m not here to hurt you, ma’am. This is standard procedure. All prisoners get patted down.”

“If you touch me you’ll be sorry! I’ve heard about strip searches…”

“Strip searches?” Paul’s tone was filled with shocked surprise. “We don’t do that kind of thing here, ma’am.”

“I want a woman officer,” she demanded.

“We don’t have one.”

“Why, so you can get away with molesting women prisoners? Are you the sheriff?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I want to see the sheriff.”

“I’ll take it from here, Paul.” Matt heard Maggie gasp but he ignored her. Paul swung around with a look of relief in his eyes. Matt tried not to smile. He’d never seen the happy-go-lucky Paul look so out of sorts before. “Why don’t you hit the road now and check out the trouble spots? I’ll handle,” Matt made a show of looking down at the report in his hands, “Mrs. Myers.”
“Good luck, Sheriff.” Paul couldn’t leave the cell quick enough. Matt pinned his gaze on the surprised Maggie. He slowly began to shake his head, sighing deeply. Arrested on various charges, and giving his deputy a hard time.

“I didn’t know you were the sheriff here,” she said quietly, breaking the silence stretching between them. Matt could understand that. He didn’t wear a uniform like his deputies, preferring khakis and a matching shirt when he was working. He liked the element of surprise it afforded him. “This is all a mistake.”

Didn’t they all say that? Someone had made a mistake all right but at the moment Matt wasn’t sure. He glanced down at the report in his hands, skimming over Don’s comments. Without identification and under the circumstances it appeared he’d followed the book. His gaze returned to Maggie, moving over her slowly. Matt knew what he had to do. He might not like it but he still had a job to do and this was serious business. He couldn’t let his feelings rule his actions and until he got to the bottom of this mess Maggie was a prisoner. That meant she had to be treated like one.

“Which one?”

She looked at him with confusion, wetting her lips. “Which one what?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Which one are you innocent of?” He stepped further into the cell.

“Well, someone apparently stole my license tag. You know my car isn’t stolen.” She backed up when he stepped closer to her. A shaky smile formed on her luscious mouth yet it was clear in her eyes she was a little more than nervous.

“What about the speeding and running a stop sign?” Damn she was sexy. And from where he stood Matt caught the subtle fragrance of her perfume. He purposely hardened his gaze, and his determination to keep things impersonal. He wanted Maggie to understand this was a grave situation and their relationship wouldn’t enter into it. “I think those are legit,” she replied reluctantly, dropping her lids.

“You think?” Matt crossed his arms and halted before Maggie, once he saw she’d backed up against the cot with nowhere to go. Where was the sass he was usually faced with?

“Well, I cleaned out my purse and car the other day and forgot to put them back. No reason to throw me in jail though,” she added in her defense. She was trapped against the bed; the only place to go was up. “Am I in big trouble?”

For a change Matt had the upper hand where she was concerned. She wasn’t in trouble; she was trouble. “You’re in jail, honey, what do you think?”

Damn! He’d called her honey. He had to watch himself.
“But I told you…”

“Save your breath, Maggie. If I had a nickel for every prisoner who said they were innocent…”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Annoyance laced her words.

For the first time Matt felt a slight smile move over his expression. The fire in Maggie’s eyes challenged him. Making him think about her, the woman and not the prisoner, making him forget about his duty. That didn’t sit well with Matt. He prided himself on his work ethics. That was why he was going to force down his attraction for Maggie and do what he should have done the minute he’d heard her giving Paul a hard time. He reached for her, grasped her arms and whipped her around before forcing her away from the cot and against the cold, stone wall.

She gasped at his sudden action. “Matt…you’re not going to frisk me, are you?” There was total disbelief in her tone, and a little humor.

That’s precisely what he was going to do. It was his job, or at least he tried to convince himself of that. Only Matt knew it wasn’t exactly necessary. He realized he was willing to use any excuse to put his hands on Maggie. And he wanted to make her squirm for a change, like she’d been doing to him ever since he met her. It wasn’t very professional. So much for not letting their relationship enter into it.

“It’s my duty,” he reminded her, struggling to ignore the flowery fragrance of her soft hair. But how was he supposed to do that when his nose was practically buried in it? He knew the routine.

He forced her arms high above her head and flattened her palms against the wall, spreading her legs by nudging them apart at her ankles until she was spread eagle. His mouth went dry when it placed her buttocks in close proximity to a part of his anatomy that was showing signs of wanting her as more time went by. It was all Matt could do not to take her by the hips and grind his aching cock against her.

“You can’t be serious,” she breathed, making an attempt to turn and face him. But just as quickly Matt flipped her back around and arranged her into position again. “You know this isn’t necessary.”

That’s what she thought. It was very necessary if Matt was going to keep his sanity. “All prisoners are patted down for weapons.” Only in this case Matt was pretty certain the only weapons Maggie had on her were the dangerous curves beneath her clothes.

He started with her hair. Both hands moved beneath the heavy fall and he ran his fingers through the long strands. Was that her breath catching? She shivered violently. Silky water cascading through his fingertips, that’s what it felt like. He spent more time then he needed to there, but Maggie had a lot of hair. “Did Don read you your rights?”
“Yes,” she whispered, trembling when his hands glided to her shoulders in a smooth move. They continued down the outside of her arms, before repeating the journey on the underside. “Find anything yet?” There was a faint tremor in her voice, the words barely audible.

His breath stirred Maggie’s hair where it fell at her ear. “I’ll let you know when I’ve found anything.” He was just beginning. His hands moved from under her arms, gliding in a thorough caress over her crown tipped breasts, lingering because he couldn’t help it, perhaps pressing a little harder than he should. He continued over her flat stomach and down the sides of her legs. By the time Matt was done he was out of breath and about to have heart failure.

“Is this really necessary, Ma—Sheriff?” Her voice was low and throaty, teasing Matt’s senses. He didn’t know how much longer he could remain in control.

His pat down had somehow veered way off course and into a danger zone. Matt grinned in spite of himself. “Very.” He moved his hands from her ankles up the insides of her legs, wondering at his own good judgment as he neared the top of her thighs. Heavy breathing filled the cell and it took a moment to comprehend he was the one out of breath. It was his own damn fault; he shouldn’t have touched Maggie in the first place.

“Even if you know your prisoner is innocent?”

Every nerve ending in his body awakened to what he was doing to her. A live wire couldn’t have carried the amount of current traveling through his hungry body. He was close to saying to hell with his job and tossing Maggie on the cot and taking her. “Until I determine exactly what you’re innocent of, I’m not taking any chances. A resourceful woman can find the most unusual places to hide a weapon.” Like his heart. With that sobering thought Matt finished abruptly and stepped away from her.

“This is silly, you know me.”

“I know a lot of things about you, Red.” He could hear his heart pounding in his chest and wondered if she could hear it too. “I know you’re reckless and have a knack for getting into trouble.” His hands moved to her hips. “I know you need a few lessons in self-preservation.”

Matt stepped away from Maggie before he couldn’t. But when she swung around to face him he realized he was still too close to her for his own peace of mind. The only reason he grabbed her wrists and pinned her back against the wall was because he wanted to touch her again. For any reason. It became painfully apparent that he wasn’t as in control of the situation as he thought he was.

Maggie wasn’t stupid and in their position she had to know he was aroused. Their eyes clung, and a crazy thought crossed Matt’s mind about kissing her. She wanted him too; he could see the truth in her half-closed eyes. She wet her lips, intensifying the lust eating him up.

“You’re trouble,” he grumbled, slowly closing the distance between them. How much more could he take before he caved? Matt didn’t want to hurt Maggie, but he didn’t want to get hurt
again either. Losing Janey had almost killed him. Made him realize how vulnerable he’d been, giving his heart to another.

He couldn’t deny he was attracted to Maggie. After Janey died he swore he’d never let himself get close to another woman. Emotionally, that is. Not only because he’d loved her, but because there just hadn’t been anyone since her to spark his interest. The occasional kisses bestowed upon him during the blind dates his partner and friends had set him up with hadn’t done anything more than cause an embarrassed moment between him and the lady involved. Maggie had been the first woman he’d made love to after a year of abstinence.

For the first time he began to wonder if he had it in him to love again. Or more importantly, promise himself to another. Was it worth the risk? He forced himself back to reality and focused his eyes on Maggie. It occurred to him that he still had her pinned against the wall and was pressing his arousal against her. “I want to make love to you,” he said simply. Where the hell did love come into it?

Her eyes flared with response, her lips parting with an invitation. “You do?”

He nodded. “But I’m not going to.” His tone was resigned. Now was definitely not the time or the place. To back up his decision he released her wrists and turned to leave, before he gave in to the urge to do the other things his body clamored for him to do. “Let me see what I can do to get you out of here.” He could make the call and release her but he wanted to let her squirm a little more. Give her time to think. Maybe a few hours in a cold jail cell would cure her penchant for recklessness.

The cell door closed behind him with a final click that echoed through the too quiet jail. Maggie remained silent. Matt heard her collapse onto the cot as he was closing the office door behind him.

At least the cell bars would keep one of them safe. The question was…which one of them needed protection?
Maggie didn’t know how much time elapsed when the outside door opened and she glanced up to see Matt pushing two very obvious drunks ahead of him. She sat up immediately, resting her back against the wall and hugging her knees to her chest. Her gaze sought his in the semidarkness, but he chose to ignore her. Maybe he forgot she was there.

“Hey, Sheriff…” One man paused, eyeing Maggie and hiccup-ping loudly. “Pu-Put me in th-there with her,” he stammered thickly.

Maggie looked at the man in time to catch his wink. He could hardly stand on his own two feet, sandwiched between Matt and his friend, who appeared just as drunk. He was staring down at her with glazed eyes and a silly grin on his lopsided face.

The other man’s head bobbed up and he squinted against the gloom, trying to focus his gaze on her too. All at once his eyes were alert and as wide as saucers. “Yeah, Sheriff, pu-put us i-in th-there!” He started to crumble. Matt had already unlocked the other cell and caught him before he hit the floor.

Grabbing each man by the shirt collar he steered them into the cell and closed the door behind them. “Sleep it off, boys. I’ll let you out in the morning.”

Matt turned to leave, his eyes landing on Maggie briefly before he continued out the door. She sighed. She guessed he hadn’t been able to locate Don, which didn’t surprise her. She supposed his deputies had social lives when they were off-duty. She cast a glance at the two drunken men; thankful Matt left the outer door slightly ajar.

“Hey…you!” Maggie knew the comment was meant for her and chose to ignore it. In the semidarkness of the jail she could pretend to be sleeping and they’d never be the wiser for it. “Hey, baby! Wake up!” One man burped loudly, the other one laughed.

“Man, you s-sure are one fine look-ing piece of ass.” There was no way Maggie could close her ears to the crude word. She felt her cheeks heat up with humiliation, praying this wasn’t a sample of what the rest of her night was going to be like. She closed her eyes. Maybe they would fall asleep soon.

“Shssh, Sammy!” the other man said drunkenly. “Sh-she might b-be sleepin’.”
“Na…she ain’t sleepin’, Pete.” He hiccupped, “But if, if she is, I, I su-sure would li-like ta be slee-pin’ next to her. I’d f—”

Maggie had just about tuned Sammy out when she heard him say the foulest word a man could say to a woman. Followed by an obscene description of what he’d like to do to a certain redhead in the next cell. A loud crash came from the outer room where Matt had disappeared, and the door nearly came off the hinges when he plowed through it like a mad bull.

“Shut your foul mouth, Sammy, or I’ll shut it for you!” he barked with snapping eyes. He stopped directly in front of the man. Both were swaying and clinging to the bars in an effort to remain on their feet. “Apologize to the lady, now.” Matt’s tone booked no argument.

“Ah, Sheriff. We w-was just…”

“I said now or you’ll both spend a week in jail.” They both complied instantly and just managed to make it to their cots before falling down.

Maggie met Matt’s eyes when he turned her way. Even in the dim light of the jail she could see he was madder than a hornet. His mouth was as straight as an arrow and white. A muscle twitched in his jaw. She offered him a timid smile, hoping to set his mind at ease. It wasn’t his fault that the two men were crude and obnoxious.

“Man…I’ll be hurt-hurtin’ all ni-night,” someone hiccupped in a low tone. The other man had already slumped over unconscious, half on the cot, and half on the floor. “Just ain’t fair,” he whined.

With a curse Matt unlocked Maggie’s cell door. “You’ve taken enough abuse for one night.”

Thank God! “I’m free to leave?” Maggie jumped off the cot eagerly. Maybe he had talked to Don.

Matt turned and started to walk away from her. “No.”

“Then what…” She was right on his heels as they left the room. The first thing her eyes fell on was the overturned chair. So, that must have been the crash she’d heard before.

Matt sighed deeply. “I’m taking you home with me.”

“Isn’t that against the rules or something?” Maggie bumped into him when he stopped and turned to glare at her.

His expression was hard to read but to Maggie it seemed he was undecided about what to say. “Probably,” he admitted after a long pause. He turned around to gather up a stack of papers he’d obviously been going through.

“You won’t have to handcuff me, will you?” She smiled.
His gaze fell to her wrists, which Maggie was holding out toward him, before leisurely traveling up to meet her eyes. His expression relaxed just a fraction. “Not as long as you’re a good girl.” The smallest twitch of a smile softened his mouth, and something in his eyes caused a flutter in Maggie’s belly.

She knew enough about Matt to know he didn’t do anything he didn’t want to do. He was taking her home, but it had nothing to do with her being his prisoner. Something warned her he wouldn’t compromise his career by making a stupid mistake like that. No, the look in his eyes told Maggie he had another reason for taking her with him, and it was purely personal. “When we get to your home what happens then? You tie me to the bed, or something?”

Matt turned and walked away, mumbling something under his breath. Maggie thought they were alone until they entered the outer room. A uniformed deputy was standing at the counter, his head bent while he wrote something down on the pad before him. He was balancing the phone between his ear and shoulder and when he became aware of them he asked the caller to hold, looking at Matt expectantly.

“I’m leaving for the night. If there’s any trouble call me at home.”

“How come you don’t wear a uniform?” Maggie questioned after they left the station. Buckled up in his roomy truck she couldn’t help but recall the last time she’d been in it. Ironically the circumstances were vaguely similar. Her eyes sought his in the darkness.

“This is my uniform,” he retorted, referring to his khaki-colored clothes. He put the truck in reverse and backed out of the station parking lot.

They drove in silence. Anticipation churned in Maggie’s belly. Several times Matt used his radio but his side of the conversation revealed they were minor issues. After that, he turned on some music and Maggie leaned back and closed her eyes. That turned out to be a mistake because it allowed her imagination to run wild. Before she knew it she and Matt were naked and rolling on his bed, having the hottest sex she could ever imagine. She hoped the country song filling the cab drowned out her sigh of pleasure. A smile took shape on her lips. Her whole body tingled with the visual inside her head.

“Tired?”

Had he heard her sigh? Maggie wondered what he’d say if she told him the truth, that she was aroused. She glanced at him. He was concentrating on the dark road in front of them. “A little.”

“Well, we’re home.” Matt pulled into the long driveway that led to his rustic lakefront home. Tall pines offered him seclusion, opening to a clearing where his home was situated. “It won’t be long before we’re in bed.”

We’re in bed? Lord, he was feeding her fantasy. Was he purposely baiting her? Maybe she was reading more into his comment than what there was. “Nice home.”
“Thanks. I had it built about ten years ago.” He pulled around the house, parking in the garage that was built beneath the house. He cut off the engine and flicked off the lights.

For a moment he and Maggie were cloaked in total darkness. Maggie didn’t open her door until Matt opened his. Exiting the truck, a second later she bumped into something and swore out loud. That something crashed to the floor.

“Oh, oh!” Maggie gasped nervously. She threw her arms straight out in front of her and began to feel her way in the darkness. A soft scream escaped her when her hands finally came upon something solid, hard and breathing. “Oh! You scared me!” she gasped, once the scream died down. Her hands fumbled over Matt’s hard chest and he encircled the fleshy part of her upper arms as they found each other in the dark. Before she knew it he was pulling her behind him through a doorway that led into the kitchen.

He flipped on the light switch, his gaze seeking out something on the wall above the sink. Maggie followed his gaze to a clock. “It’s late. I’ll show you to your room.”

Her room? She was being sent to bed like a child? That wasn’t exactly what she had in mind. She was hungry and would like a shower, but she had no choice but to follow him. Matt flipped on lights as they went but she barely had time to take in the dining room or large living room as he hurried her up the stairs.

They passed several closed doors along the hallway before he opened one and turned on the light. “I’ll be right back.”

Being left alone gave Maggie the opportunity to take in her surroundings. It was a nice room. Tastefully decorated with practical furniture in shades of creams, greens and browns. She walked over to the huge bed and stared down at it. A smile spread across her face. Just then Matt returned and their eyes met. “I’ve never slept on a waterbed before.” She reached down and gave it a push, watching a wave ripple beneath the heavy comforter.

She watched a muscle clench in his taut jaw. His eyes hardened. “Here.”

Maggie accepted the items he thrust her way without comment. Their gazes held. She lowered her eyes afraid Matt would read the desire in them. Then raised them again because she wanted him to.

“The bathroom is the next door down. You’re welcome to shower before turning in.”

Just like that, he was sending her to bed? Hadn’t he brought her here to make mad, passionate love to her? Maggie was confused. He certainly wasn’t living up to her fantasies. Maybe she’d read more into his looks than there was. Without even a goodnight or anything else he turned and left Maggie standing there. Well, so much for why she thought Matt brought her home with him.
Her long hot shower turned into a long hot bath. Half an hour went by before Maggie stepped out of the tub to dry off. The item Matt had given her turned out to be a large tee shirt that just covered the necessities. She cast a frown at the panties she washed in the sink and hung them over the shower curtain rod. Leaving the steamy bathroom, her growling belly caused her to pause in the hallway. If she didn’t do anything else that night she was going to find something to eat. She was starving! After a few minutes of silence and she didn’t hear any movement below she made her way downstairs.

She was thankful Matt had left the lights on. When her gaze fell on the refrigerator she practically flew to it and swung the door open. Strawberries! Right out in front as if someone had put them there especially for her. Maggie reached for the bowl, then noticed the whipped cream and reached for that as well. Taking her bounty to the small kitchen table she sat down and quickly ripped off the plastic lid to the whipped cream.

She was just taking a bite out of the first cream-coated berry when her eyes fell on Matt. He was lounging casually against the kitchen doorframe, dressed in nothing but pajama bottoms that were hanging dangerously low on his lean hips. His expression was slightly amused, but there was nothing humorous in his smoldering eyes. They dropped to her mouth as it was closing over the succulent fruit.

Maggie nearly sucked the whole thing down her throat. Her eyes devoured him much the same way she’d been devouring the fruit. Ravenously. The sight of him made her hungry for something more than food. He was built big and solid and hard. She swallowed with difficulty, struggling to keep her gaze from dropping any lower. She didn’t want to know if he was aroused.

“I hope you don’t mind, Sheriff, but I was starving.” She popped another, smaller berry into her mouth. “They forgot to give me my ration of bread and water back at the jail.” Her smart mouth was going to land her in trouble some day.

“Your smart mouth is going to land you in trouble some day,” he remarked, guessing her thoughts. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

Hadn’t she just told him why? She just managed to hold back a smile. She dipped a finger in the whipped cream and brought it to her mouth, glancing up at Matt innocently. “I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about me eating in your bed.”

Without warning Matt moved away from the door and walked further into the room. The look in his eyes was almost wild. He looked hungry. Maggie caught her breath but he ignored it, continuing toward her with purposeful strides. With a growl he reached for her arm and hauled her to her feet, nearly toppling over the chair she’d been sitting in.

“Sheriff…”

“I brought you here with one thought in mind, to prove to myself that I was immune to you. That I could be in the same room, house with you and control my thoughts of wanting to screw the hell out of you. I’ve always prided myself on being strong enough to overcome any temptation.”
“Do I tempt you?” Her hands fell to his chest.
His laugh was a deep grunt. “Day and night. Hell, you’d tempt a saint, honey. I intend to kiss you
and nothing is going to stop me.” He didn’t sound happy, but that didn’t stop him swooping
down on her and taking her mouth in a savage, lustful kiss. His powerful arms crushed Maggie to
him. He locked her arms behind her back, even though she wasn’t struggling to escape.

She moaned softly, dreamily, welcoming Matt’s powerful embrace and forceful mouth. When
his free hand fastened on her breast, wildfire exploded through her blood, threatening to consume
her. She arched her back and thrust her aching flesh more fully into his rough caress. Silently
pleading for him to do more.

His hand began to move over her, exploring every inch through the thin fabric of the tee shirt she
was wearing, taking his time as though she were something to treasure. Breathless whispers
escaped Maggie as she eagerly gave in to his silent, hungry demands. She began to squirm
beneath his ardent caresses with a need to participate. But Matt refused to release her hands,
keeping total control of the situation. Teasing her at his will.

Finally she was able to twist her head, breaking their fiery kiss, “Mathew!” she panted, gulping
in mouthfuls of air. “Please, I need to touch you, too.” Maggie was careful to keep her face
turned away but his mouth only moved to the soft exposed arch of her throat. She felt his teeth
gently rake along her skin, causing a ripple of sharp desire down her spine.

“Sheriff…” she pleaded, shuddering violently against his length. She felt his hard-on pressing
against her and a pool of warmth flooded between her legs. She was actually throbbing with
arousal.

“Mathew…”

“God, don’t say my name like that, Maggie.” His voice came out hoarse, revealing the highly
aroused state he was in. “You’re going to make me come.”

Maggie laughed huskily. “Isn’t that why you brought me here?” She finally tugged free. Before
she lost her nerve she reached forward and fondled the hot, pulsing length of him through his
thin pajama bottoms. His shaft felt thick and strong in her palm. The breath hissed from between
his tightly clenched teeth, his eyes darkened into murky, fathomless pools. His nostrils flared,
taking in the raw essence of their combined body heat. Chemistry. Maggie watched as he closed
his eyes and groaned. “Isn’t it…Sheriff?” She gave him a little squeeze, reveling in her power
when he shuddered.

“Yes! Damn you!” he admitted. “I could have turned you loose at the station but for the first time
in my life I’ve forgotten the main objective and said to hell with the rules. Nothing I do
concerning you makes any sense.”

Maggie shivered wildly, gently squeezing the bulge in her hand. It thrilled her that she had that
kind of power over Matt.
“Maggie…” He shuddered. She knew she’d caught Matt completely off-guard. He pushed his hips into her intimate caress before reaching down and covering her hand with his. He took control of her movements, grinding his erection into her hand while slamming his mouth down on hers. As their tongues meshed Maggie felt Matt’s other hand reach for the hem to her shirt. Felt his fingers trail along her inner thigh. A weak moan escaped her when she realized where his exploration would take him. She arched her hips, eager and dripping with pleasure for him.

Whimpers escaped her and her knees buckled when his fingers brushed over the hair covering her mound. Oh God! The desire coursing through her equaled no other experience she’d ever had. As their kiss wound down, she refused to let Matt pull away, holding him captive by taking his lower lip between her teeth. Shuddering, he leaned his forehead against hers, struggling for breath.

“This shouldn’t happen,” he said the moment she released him.

“I want you like hell, lady. But…”

A shiver shook Maggie, her breath mingling with his. “There are things I don’t know,” she finished for him. She sensed his hesitation was more personal than professional. Why didn’t he trust her enough to share it with her? There was stuff in her past; too, events that made her frightened to give her heart to another man, unless it was the right man. Pulling back, she peered deeply into his eyes. “We all have a past, Matt, but can’t we just live for the moment? No strings attached. I want you, too.” Just in case he needed further proof Maggie moved her hand down the length of his erection and cupped his balls. His reaction was swift and got an instant response out of him. “Satisfaction guaranteed,” she whispered outrageously.

With a growl that sounded like a wounded animal Matt slipped his index finger inside Maggie’s body. She cried out with shocked pleasure, letting her hands fall to his shoulders to remain on her unsteady feet. Her head fell back, her eyes closed as passion exploded, overtaking her senses. He moved his finger slowly, making sure his thumb brushed over the throbbing button nestled in her wet hair.

“Mathew!” she whispered sharply. He lowered himself down on the chair she’d vacated, pulling her with him. She automatically spread her legs and straddled his lap, not the least bit embarrassed that her lower body was fully exposed to his searching eyes.

Suddenly the kitchen exploded with the sounds of their passion. Their mouths and hands moved over each other seeking and giving pleasure. Maggie rocked against the hard arousal nestled between her naked thighs, her hands exploring Matt’s shoulders, the muscles flexing in his powerful arms. His hands glided over her thighs and hips, then up her sides taking the tee shirt with him. He didn’t stop there, pulling the garment over Maggie’s arms and head and tossing it aside. When his eyes dropped to her quivering breasts a wave of embarrassment came from nowhere.
She brought her hands up. “No.” Matt grabbed her wrists and drew her arms behind her back. The action thrust her breasts out. She glanced down because he did. Her nipples were rosy and as hard as berries, pointing straight up at him. She gasped. Matt’s gaze shot back to hers and with a wolfish smile on his handsome face he slowly leaned forward until he was able to take a nipple into his mouth.

Maggie held her breath as he tugged on her breast until she was squirming and grinding her wet mound against him. Her heart beat wildly in her chest; fire replaced the blood in her veins. Watching him love her with his mouth, tongue and teeth was an intense turn-on, coupled with frustration that she couldn’t participate. She struggled against his restraint but he easily held her captive. Why was he teasing her so?

“I want to touch you, too,” Maggie breathed breathlessly.

A smile spread across his mouth, which was latched around the tip of her breast. His tongue curled around her nipple before he began a journey of sensual kisses up to Maggie’s throat. “Where?”

She shivered. “Everywhere!”

“Tell me,” Matt demanded, suckling the sensitive spot behind her ear.

“Your shoulders, your chest, and belly.”

“Is that all, Maggie?”

She swallowed with difficulty. “And…lower.”

Laughter rumbled through Matt’s chest. “Lower? You’ll have to do better than that.” The heat of his mouth brushed over her collarbone, his teeth gently nipped at her. “Say the word.”

Could she? “You know, down there,” she said, rubbing herself against that part of him.

“My thighs?”

Maggie chuckled in spite of herself. “A little higher up.” Then she caught her breath when he pulled her toward him so that her breasts were crushed against his chest.

“Say it!” he growled, arching up as if entering her body.

“Your penis!” Surely he didn’t expect her to say the C word!

Matt laughed deeply. “You’re a coward, sweetheart.” His free hand reached between their bodies and without warning he freed himself from his pajama bottoms.

“Okay, your cock!” she said passionately.
He growled, and Maggie glanced down, her eyes rounding when she saw again how powerful and large he was. He was beautiful. The strength of his passion encased in velvet steel. His hunger fed hers, and she strained to reach him. A cry escaped her when he sliced through her sensitive pussy lips, so close yet so far.

“Mathew!” Her whisper echoed through the kitchen, revealing her need. “Please.” Maggie rocked against him, ever closer to her prize. “I want you inside me.”

Without warning his free hand was in the hair at her nape of her neck and her head was pulled back. His eyes blazed down into hers, nostrils flaring. The passion stamped on his face was raw, almost frightening. Then her wrists were slowly released and her mouth was being ground beneath his. She wasted no time bringing her hands into play, letting them roam over Matt’s incredibly wide shoulders and the well defined muscles in his arms. Moaning with pleasure, she explored his chest and hard abdomen with her fingertips, gliding over his bellybutton and slowly moving lower.

It was now or never. He didn’t stop her. Without hesitation she encircled his penis and lifted her hips. Their gazes clung. It was clear by Matt’s expression that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Maggie realized the power she wielded in her hands. A smile quivered on her lips. Hesitating, she wanted to tease him as he’d done her. She scooted back on his lap and leaned down, taking him in her mouth.

“Hell!” he growled, arching his hips off the chair as though he couldn’t help it. The action allowed Maggie to take more of him into her mouth. She was amazed at herself for taking the initiative. David had always called the shots and she was used to waiting to be told what he wanted. Matt’s silent encouragement couldn’t be clearer. His hands filtered through her hair, holding her as she ran her tongue and teeth over his steel rod.

He groaned long and low. Maggie followed the length of his penis down to the sac beneath and gently took it in her mouth. The next thing she knew Matt’s hands pulled her face up, and then he took hold of her hips, lifted and lowered her over him. Maggie closed her eyes and released a drawn-out moan of pure pleasure.

“Oh, God!”

“Am I hurting you?” he asked gruffly.

She shook her head no. “You fill me completely.” For a moment they were still. She could feel Matt’s shaft all the way to her womb, throbbing inside her. A sigh of pleasure escaped her. She clenched her muscles and squeezed when he started to slowly withdraw. His hips rose off the chair and she lowered hers, pushing him back down while forcing him further into her body.

Words were unnecessary. Their hands explored each other, mouths and tongues meshed to intensify the hunger. Matt’s hands settled on Maggie’s hips, controlling their movements, their speed. She sensed his hunger, yet he seemed content to take it slow. That was fine with her. It
gave her the opportunity to play with him a little. She tugged on his bottom lip before drawing it into her mouth. Matt growled and joined his mouth with hers for a brief, savage kiss.

“It won’t take much to make me come, honey. Let me do this my way or I might hurt you.”

“You would never hurt me,” Maggie breathed against his sensual mouth. Her hands ran over his biceps, feeling his muscles flex each time he lifted her. She raked her nails, kitten-like, down his chest, making sure to pay special attention to his taut nipples. Her action caused a reaction, and suddenly his movements picked up speed.

“Oh!” Every deep plunge brushed the tip of his penis against her womb, creating a pressure inside Maggie that built with each thrust. She covered his hands with hers and drew them up to her breasts. He needed no encouragement to take them in his hands and knead them. Maggie threw her head back, arched her back and continued to move up and down. The kitchen was filled with their labored breathing.

“Ride me, baby.” Matt caressed her breast before leaning forward and taking one in her mouth. His accelerated breathing warned Maggie he was nearing a climax.

She felt her own building and the thought of his coming inside her body urged her to clench her muscles around his flesh to try and hold him prisoner inside her. His grunts fed her desire and she leaned back in the chair further, adding to the friction of their movements. Each time Matt thrust forward he raked across the bud of her throbbing desire until a powerful orgasm consumed Maggie. Surprised at the force, her eyes bolted open and she cried out, before letting her body ride the wave overcoming her.

“Mathew!” she panted, trembling with release. “Mathew!”

He continued to ram her body, his hands holding her tightly at the hips to keep her from falling to the floor. With a low groan Matt ground his body tightly against Maggie, releasing his own powerful orgasm. “Oh God! Oh God…” he rasped, shuddering wildly. When the convulsions were over they relaxed against each other, laboring to catch their breath.

After a while Matt pulled back. Their eyes met, and he reached up to brush the damp hair away from Maggie’s face. “You okay?” Maggie nodded quietly, still amazed at what just occurred between them. “That was something. You’re just the right fit.” He grinned and Maggie answered it with one of her own.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” she confessed.

“I’ve never been with a woman that I didn’t have to hold back.”

Maggie felt the heat in her face. She knew what he was referring to. Everything about Matt was big and down there, he was as she’d heard the expression go, hung like a bull. “The doctors have told me that I, ah, have a long birth canal.” She released a loud yawn.
Matt chuckled. “I think it’s time we…you head to bed.” He reached for something on the floor.

Maggie took the shirt he offered her and held it to the front of her. “What if I don’t want to go to bed?”

Matt returned her smile, but before he could respond the ringing of the phone shattered the moment and startled them both into action. Matt turned to reach for it; Maggie used the interruption to slip quietly from the room. She nearly flew up the stairs, only the bedroom wasn’t her destination. It was the bathroom.

It was true what they said about cold showers. She felt in control once again but the feeling only lasted for as long as it took her to open the bathroom door. Matt was waiting for her on the other side, his tall masculine frame was leaning against the opposite wall, his arms were crossed and his expression guarded.

“You okay?”

“Don’t I look okay?” Maggie fought the urge not to look down at herself. She knew the tee shirt he’d loaned her was probably sticking to her in several damp places. She felt her nipples peak and resisted the urge to cross her arms.

Matt ignored her remark. “I have to go out.” For the first time she noticed he was fully dressed. “I’ll take you home when I get back.”

“What are the alternatives?” If he was going to pretend nothing happened between them then she could too.

In the next instant he was smiling. “I could handcuff you to the bed.”

“Whose bed?” Maggie teased.

A devilish look came into his eyes. “All the beds in this house are mine,” he pointed out smugly.

The image of them entwined on that damn waterbed remained with Maggie the rest of the night and well into the morning.
Chapter 11

Maggie was floating. She was certain of it. Floating on a sea of rippling waves that brought her a kind of peacefulness she hadn’t felt in a long while. The gentle movement was relaxing, soothing. She sighed with pleasure, refusing to open her eyes, determined to cling to the unexpected euphoria as long as she could. She threw her arm out half expecting to feel the coolness of water, but something soft, dry and solid touched her skin instead. Then another wave hit and she rolled. Bewildered, she opened her eyes, turned her head and gasped.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty.”

It was Steve. And he was the source of the movement of her bed, shaking it with his foot. He was grinning down at her like a naughty schoolboy, only his lighthearted expression caused Maggie’s scowl to deepen. She tried to focus her sleep-laden eyes and reached for the blanket tangled about her naked legs.

“What are you doing here?” she questioned irritably.

“I can tell you’re not a morning person,” Steve teased, giving the bed another kick. “I tried calling your name several times. I tried pounding on the door. I tried slamming the door but you slept through it all.”

“It can’t possibly be time to get up.” She shut her eyes again. “Did Matt send you in here to torment me?”

“To get you up.” Maggie could hear the grin in his voice. “He had an early meeting this morning and phoned me to see if I’d stop by to make sure you’re all right.”

“I’m okay,” she grumbled. “Now leave me alone so I can get my beauty rest.” She tried to burrow further into the bed and covered her head.

“Maggie, it’s past ten o’clock.” Steve gently peeled back the covers until her head was exposed. “Matt will have my head. I was supposed to come by two hours ago to give you a lift home.”

Maggie seriously doubted Steve was scared of his big brother. “So what happened?”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “I fell back to sleep.”
Maggie chuckled and turned her face into her pillow. “Does this mean I’m not a prisoner anymore?” She’d known long ago that she wasn’t.

“Prisoner? Matt didn’t mention anything about that. What did you do? Should I fear for my life?”

Maggie faced him, moving the curtain of hair out of her face so she could see him. “I didn’t do anything…exactly. And I’m harmless.” Except to Matt, she couldn’t help thinking. Steve raised a disbelieving brow and she added, “It’s too complicated to go into.”

“I’m sure. And here I thought big brother had finally found someone to fill the void in his life. Since Janey died…”

“Janey?” Maggie was suddenly wide-awake and all ears. She sat up, hoping her obvious eagerness didn’t cause Steve to clam up.

He looked at her a long time, causing Maggie to wonder what he was thinking. Was he worried about divulging something he shouldn’t? “Janey was Matt’s wife.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. Matt had been married?

“You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. Was that what Sue had been about to tell her the other day? Hoping to hear more she held Steve’s gaze, trying to be patient. Maybe he would divulge something that would help her to understand Matt and his reluctance in getting involved with her. Sure, they’d had steamy, mind-blowing sex, but it was the emotional commitment he was holding back on.

Steve released a long breath. “Janey was a lot like you in a way.”

That wasn’t what Maggie wanted to hear, that she reminded Matt of his ex-wife. No wonder he was scared of getting close.

“I don’t mean in appearances, in that you’re as different as night and day.”

That was something anyway. “Then in what way?” Maggie moved into a more comfortable position, arranging a pillow against her back and the headboard.

Steve shrugged. “In the way you act I guess. Janey had the same carefree attitude about life that you seem to have. Hardly anything bothered her. She was bubbly and naive and tended to only see the good things in life. She didn’t realize meeting life head on could have consequences that could harm her. Even married to a cop. In a way, that’s what killed her.”

Killed her? Maggie gasped out loud, her eyes rounding with shock over what Steve was telling her. She chewed the inside of her lip to keep from asking the many questions on her tongue.
“It would have been better had she died of some illness. Matt would have had time to prepare for it. I think he would have accepted her death easier.” His tone turned sad, his eyes looking past Maggie as his thoughts drifted back to the past. “Everyone loved Janey. She was a special lady.”

“When did she die?” Maggie asked softly, her tone matching the sadness in Steve’s.

His brown eyes focused on her. “She was killed a year ago.”

Maggie caught her breath. “How?” A pain squeezed her heart as she thought about Matt and the suffering he must have gone through.

“She…”

“Was at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Maggie’s gaze traveled past Steve, where Matt suddenly appeared in the doorway without warning. His cold expression revealed he wasn’t happy about the topic of their conversation. He held himself stiffly, the hands dangling at his sides clenched into tight balls. For all his angry outward appearance there was no masking the anguish in his eyes. A sadness dragged from the depths of his soul. How long had he been standing there, listening?

“I’ll see Maggie home, Steve. Thanks for stopping by.” His harsh tone clearly dismissed his brother.

Steve nodded his consent and gave Matt a pat on the back as he left the room.

So, he was back to being the formal sheriff again. Maggie could see the invisible brick wall he’d put up between them. Did he think he could make love to her one minute and then go about his business as if it didn’t happen? Didn’t it affect him the same way it did her? Then she realized it was more complicated than that. Well, she could be just as formal. At least it would hide the hurt.

“Well, Sheriff…”

“Get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

Maggie didn’t get a chance to respond because Matt turned on his heel and left the room. She waited several moments before leaving the safety of the bed and looking for her clothes. If he wanted to pretend she and Steve hadn’t been discussing his late wife it was all right with her. For now, anyway. Sooner or later they’d have to talk about it.

She went to the bathroom to take a quick shower.

* * * *
Matt was pouring a cup of coffee when Maggie entered the kitchen half an hour later. She was dressed and looking fresh from her shower. Some of her hair was still damp around her face. He captured her gaze, wondering what was behind the sparkle. She looked like a woman with a secret, and the knowledge to use it to her advantage. “Would you like a cup?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He poured a second cup and left it on the counter next to the sugar and creamer so she could fix it to her liking, then moved to the kitchen sink where he could look out the window. He didn’t want to get any closer to her than he had to. Making love to her hadn’t done anything to diminish the lust in his gut. He wanted her just as much as before and it wouldn’t take much provocation to grab the little minx, toss her down on the table and take her again. The sexual undercurrents between them seemed to always be lingering at the surface, interfering with his thinking and his control. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, as she stirred sugar in her coffee.

He tried to remain in control. He was still irritated, partly because of what he’d overheard between her and Steve, and partly because he was jealous as hell. And he had no reason to be. Steve and his girlfriend were crazy about each other. Only walking in to find him and Maggie having a conversation while she sat there in his bed, looking like a soft and cuddly angel with that wild hair, prompted the most erotic images in his mind. How could Steve or any man be immune to that?

He turned to glower at Maggie, his gaze pinning her to the counter she was leaning against. Something in his expression must have given his feelings away because she straightened, spilling some of her coffee.

“What did I do now?” she inquired softly, a smile playing upon her full mouth.

“Sit down and drink your coffee,” Matt barked, clenching his jaw so he wouldn’t give in to her charm.

Her smile grew even bigger, a light of delight dancing in her clear eyes. “I think I’m safer over here.” She took a cautious sip of her coffee.

“I won’t bite,” he grumbled.

“Oh…” She said it with a sigh of obvious disappointment and Matt couldn’t help the gruff chuckle that burst from him.

Leaving his coffee behind, Matt moved forward until he was towering over her. And though her eyes were rounding up at him with surprise, Maggie didn’t give an inch. His gaze captured the mischievous light in hers. “You’re nothing but trouble. Sooner or later I’m going to have to do something about that smart mouth of yours.” He braced his arms on the counter on either side of her.
She brought her cup to her lips for a drink, which wasn’t easy considering his chest was just inches away from her breasts. “Like what?” Her tone was husky. Matt could tell by her amused expression that she was enjoying his reaction to her.

His interest moved to her mouth, noticing a trace of coffee had gathered in the corner. The tip of her tongue came out to lick the evidence away. Her eyes darkened with secrets meant to trap a man and his heart, if he wasn’t careful. As far as Matt was concerned her movement was a blatant invitation to kiss her. “You know all the right moves, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“I’ve been saving up,” Maggie admitted teasingly, a seductive smile on her face and a hot promise in her eyes. “For the right man.”

Her outrageous words sent Cupid’s arrow straight through Matt’s heart but he was quick to mask it. Admitting she was getting to him wouldn’t be smart. He pushed away from her, before he leaned into her and showed her what she was doing to him. “I’ll remember that, Red.”

Maggie finished her coffee before placing the cup in the sink.

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, Sheriff.”

Matt led the way to the garage. He opened the door and flipped on the light, then indicated for Maggie to move ahead of him. His gaze took in the appearance of his truck about the time she must have noticed it. She came to a halt with a sound of surprise and glanced up at him. He met the curiosity in her eyes. “I was involved in a high speed chase down Bog Creek Road early this morning.”

“Bog Creek Road?”

He nodded, smiling. “It’s practically a nonexistent road that leads down to Boggie Creek, nothing but mud, dirt and holes all the way.”

“Sounds like the road to my house. Did you catch the bad guy?”

“Honey, I always catch the bad guy. Besides, Bog Creek Road dead ends into the creek.” He gave her a wink. He opened the truck door for her.

Her gaze drifted up to his head. “Where’s the white hat? I thought the good guys always wore white hats.” She slid in.

“It blew out the window.” Matt slammed the door shut and walked around to the driver’s side, conscious of Maggie’s eyes following him. He couldn’t help casting a glance her way when he was settled behind the wheel.
Her smile took his breath away. He quickly averted his gaze and started his truck. Not looking back at Maggie until his truck had eaten up a few miles of country road. His gaze dropped to her jutting breasts, watching them bounce with each bump on the road. Damn…she was turning him on and she wasn’t even doing anything. Then suddenly she stretched like a lazy cat, thrusting those braless mounds out as if in offering. Matt stretched his leg, hoping it eased some of the tight tension in his groin.

If he didn’t know better he’d swear Maggie knew he was watching her. Especially when she lifted her hair off the back of her neck and held it to the top of her head. The movement caused her breasts to lift and when Matt realized her nipples were hard he averted his gaze before he drove off the road.

He was forced to slow down when they came to a series of sharp twists and turns. It wasn’t long before they were nearing the area where Maggie had been forced to leave her car the day before.

Lord, he dreaded having to tell her…

“Matt! Watch out!”

He slammed on the brakes, seeing what Maggie saw. A mother cat and three kittens were scampering across the road ahead of them. He hadn’t been able to stop in time from hitting at least one of them. There was a light thud, and his truck skidded on loose gravel on the shoulder until he was able to bring it to a stop.

Maggie’s hands flew to the door handle, pulling it even before the truck came to a complete stop. “Maggie, wait!” She ignored him, jumping from the vehicle without hesitation. By the time Matt rounded the front of his truck the cats had all taken off except for one tiny, frightened kitten.

“Oh, Matt.” She fell to her knees and automatically reached for it. “It’s so small.” She scooped the kitten into her hands.

Matt frowned at the scene before him. The kitten seemed okay but there was blood on the ground. He followed the spots until he came to the source, pausing at the front of his truck. “Maggie…” He looked her way.

She glanced up long enough to see him motion toward the body of the mother cat. She lay in a pool of blood. He watched Maggie shudder before glancing away. Matt hunkered down beside the cat and examined it to make sure she was dead. His gaze fell on the baby in Maggie’s arms, noticing how timid the animal seemed. Wild cats were exactly that, wild cats. Clawing, spitting and scratching. It occurred to him that maybe they were from one of the neighboring homes in the area.

“What about the other kittens?” He shook his head; they were nowhere to be seen.

“We can’t just leave them out there; they’ll never make it without their mother.”
“They’re long gone, honey, believe me.” He rose in one fluid motion. “And they look old enough to be weaned.”

“What are we going to do?” She gently cradled the baby in her lap, looking up at him with worried eyes.

He sighed deeply. The look in her eyes warmed him, and Matt knew he’d do whatever Maggie wanted. Instincts told him what that was. “I’ll get a shovel and bury the mother.” He moved to the back of his truck with that thought in mind.

“What about the baby?” Maggie called after him.

“You want me to bury it too?” he said half jokingly.

“No!” She glared at Matt like he was a monster when he strode back to her from the back of the truck. “I’m just not going to leave her. I’ll take her home with me.”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe she’s sick and that’s the only reason she didn’t run off with the others?”

“All the more reason I’m taking her home,” Maggie said without a second thought.

Matt made short work of burying the mother on the side of the road in the soft dirt. Once that was done he made a halfhearted attempt to look for the other kittens, but he wasn’t about to go trekking in the marsh after them. He tossed the shovel back in the truck, before walking back to Maggie.

“I’m not leaving her.”

With a sigh of resignation Matt offered her his hand to help her to her feet. “I never thought you would.” He assisted her into the cab of his truck. “If she has an accident…” All at once he was thinking about his leather seats.

He caught Maggie’s grin. “I’ll hold her on my lap.”

Still, he seemed to hesitate, his gaze traveling back and forth between Maggie and the kitten. “Dammit’s not going to be very happy about this,” he commented.

“Since when are you and Dammit friends?” She looked down at the little kitten resting on her lap and patted her head softly. “Don’t worry, Lucky, I won’t abandon you.”

Lucky? Matt’s mouth turned down and he shook his head, closed the door and walked to the driver’s side, mumbling under his breath. She’d already named the damn thing. But the incident did have its advantages, Maggie was so busy pampering Lucky that he was able to make it all the way to the turn off to her driveway before she realized they’d passed where her car should have been.
“Ah…Matt?” There was a big question in those two little words. It hung in the air between them the rest of the way to her cabin. He was going to put off telling her as long as he could.

Finally they came to a stop in front of her door. Not until Matt turned the engine off did he face her and meet the question still simmering in her eyes. He rested his arm on the back of the seat, reaching up to toy with her hair.

“Where’s my car? I don’t recall seeing it on the side of the road where I left it.”

He released a deep breath and met her frowning eyes. “That’s because it wasn’t there,” he admitted reluctantly, knowing how much Maggie liked that old car.

“Obviously.”

“It’s been stolen, honey.” Matt hated like hell having to be the one to tell her.

He waited for her reaction, watching her eyes move around the area searching for it as if he was joking. But Matt knew what she saw. Where she usually parked her Mustang was the little rental he’d arranged for her, instead.

“Stolen?” She laughed softly. “That’s almost funny. I was arrested because your deputy thought my car was stolen, and now it is.” Her hand absently stroked the kitten sleeping peacefully on her thighs.

“Sorry, honey. Did you leave anything in the car you shouldn’t have?”

She inhaled deeply, shaking her head. “The keys, obviously.”

Matt shook his head, fighting down a smile, “No, that’s not what I mean. I’m talking about papers, anything that can lead the thief here.” It probably didn’t occur to her that some car thieves showed up at the owner’s home to rob them, if they had a paper trail to follow.

“That’s what got me into this mess, Matt. I didn’t have any identification on me.”

“You’re taking this pretty good. Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded. “I’ll get my car back, won’t I?”

He wasn’t going to lie to her, knowing any number of things could happen to her car, depending on the thief and their reasons for stealing it. Being a classic it would be easy to spot, but they would know that and probably have already taken the necessary steps to change its appearance. That is if they were still in the area.

“That’s the goal we’re working on. You’re insured, aren’t you?” She nodded, looking so sad that Matt wanted to pull her onto his lap and just hold her. His eyes fell on Lucky.
“I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of getting you a rental.”

Maggie glanced at the small white Ford. Matt was aware it looked like something her grandmother would drive if she were alive, but it was the only car available at the small rental agency in town. A chuckle escaped her before she could rein it in. “Thank you.” Their gazes clung for a few breathless minutes, and they both seemed to become aware at the same time that he was still playing with her hair.

“So…what now, Red?” As much trouble as she was Matt found he was reluctant to leave her just yet. Her hair was soft and silky, reminding him of the night before when he’d frisked her unnecessarily.

“I guess I should get out of your truck so you can get back to work.” She turned the handle, careful to cradle the kitten in her hand.

“It’s my unofficial day off.” As soon as the words were out, he could have bitten off his tongue.

“Oh, well…” She met his eyes. “You could join me for lunch, or something.”

Or something? Matt swallowed hard. He could think of a hundred things he’d rather do at the moment than eat lunch. His gut told him he was making a mistake, but it didn’t keep him from opening his door when Maggie opened hers. She hugged Lucky to her breast as they made their way to her door.

“Poor, baby,” she murmured softly.

It wasn’t the kitten she was speaking of, but the yelping mutt on the other side of the front door. Matt wondered how Dammit was going to react to Lucky. He started to grin, until Maggie thrust Lucky at him. “Here, you take her while I deal with Dammit.”

Left with no choice, Matt caught the kitten to him, nearly losing the animal as she scampered up his chest in nervous fright. He braced himself for anything. Maggie opened the door and released the little devil on the other side. Moving with the speed of light, Dammit flew out the door, made a few frantic circles around Maggie and disappeared behind a bush.

Maggie’s light laughter took Matt’s breath away. With the sun on her beautiful turned up face and the sparkle of life glowing in her beautiful eyes…something he hadn’t felt for a long time shot straight to his heart, and settled there.

“Dammit likes her privacy,” she joked. Matt rolled his eyes. “You see? She could care less about Lucky.”

For now. “She hasn’t seen Lucky yet. Now take her away before she claws me to death.” He was having a hard time keeping the little animal still, she was meowing and shaking and… “Damn it!”
In the process of reaching for the kitten, Maggie jumped back, dropped her arms and automatically glanced down. It was obvious she was looking for Dammit at his feet. In silent explanation Matt lifted the squirming kitten and everything became clear by the dark spot spreading rapidly over his shirt. A short laugh burst from Maggie before she caught it behind her hand.

“Poor, baby.”

Matt didn’t know if she meant him or the kitten. “You weren’t thinking about laughing, were you?”

“Never.” Before she could stop him, Matt lowered Lucky to the ground. “She’ll hang around if she wants to be here.” He plucked the wet, stinking material away from his chest.

“Take your shirt off and I’ll wash it for you.” She turned and entered the cabin. “I’ll get you a cloth so you can wash off your chest.”

Matt followed Maggie inside. She went straight to the sink and grabbed a clean washcloth from the drawer. He watched her lather it up under the primitive faucet for a moment before turning his curious gaze up to the loft. His gaze took in her unmade bed and the open window beside it.

Images of them naked and making love among the covers took his imagination over and Matt knew it was just a matter of time.

Before he had Maggie naked and under him again.
“That’s the bedroom,” Maggie explained unnecessarily when noticing Matt’s interest there.

“There’s no curtain in the window.”

Her smile never wavered, knowing by now how Matt’s mind worked. She already had an idea what thoughts were running through that handsome head of his. “Well you see, there’s this lonely old man who lives down the road.” No one lived within a mile of her. “Once in awhile I give him something to look at.”

“He must have good eyes, for an old man,” Matt teased back.

“Binoculars,” she replied without missing a beat, reaching for his shirt. “It’s better than watching TV, no reruns.” She turned and headed for the sink, not realizing the soapy washrag was still in her hands.

“If I thought you were telling the truth I’d…” His hand wrapped around Maggie’s arm, bringing her to an abrupt halt. Their eyes met.

The meaning behind his unfinished comment caused a tingling in the pit of Maggie’s stomach, she caught her breath. “You’d what…Sheriff? Come over and watch, too?”

He gave her a toothy grin. “Now that’s a thought.”

“I’ll call you next time.” She took a sniff, wrinkled her nose, and made a face even though she couldn’t smell anything, then brought the soapy cloth up and slapped it against his muscular chest.

He glanced down at the wet rag Maggie was running over his skin. “Are you trying to tell me something?” There was a teasing glow in his eyes, and it took all of Maggie’s willpower not to lean her aching breasts into his chest. Several seconds ticked by as she scraped the cloth over his flat nipples until they became tight.

“Enjoying yourself?”

The husky timbre of his voice barely registered. “Huh?” Maggie reluctantly pulled her gaze away from what she was doing, meeting the smoldering look in Matt’s eyes. “I’m drawing a
picture,” she explained, wondering why there was a frown on his face. Her gaze dropped back to her hand, fascinated by the swirling designs she was making with the soap on Matt’s hard chest.

“Enough!” He grabbed her hand and held her away from him. “It’s clean,” he stated a little too harshly.

Their eyes clashed. Maggie felt small standing next to Matt, and they were so close she had to tilt her head back. Her tongue snaked out to lick her suddenly dry lips, watching his interest drop there. She wondered what he’d do if she took the initiative and kissed him, like she wanted. Just thinking about what his stunned reaction would be brought a smile on her face.

“What are you thinking, Red? You look like I’m about to become dinner.” His voice, deep and sensual, sent a ripple of awareness through Maggie and certainly wiped the smile off her face. The charged atmosphere between them was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“You finish up here and I’ll take care of your shirt.” She tried for nonchalance, failing badly. The only thing she could think of was his sexy mouth, and what it did to her. Swinging back to the sink, she began to pump water into it. She used her free hand to reach in a drawer and pull out a dry towel. What she really needed was some fresh air. She could see Matt out of the corner of her eye, rubbing his chest down with the towel she’d handed him. She tried to concentrate on the shirt in the sink.

“You don’t have a washing machine?” He peered over her shoulder.

“What?” His voice broke into her silent thoughts. He was standing so close she felt her hair stir at the back of her neck. It finally dawned on her what he said. “There’s an old wringer washer in the mudroom out back.” She indicated a door with a toss of her head. “But I doubt it works.” Even if it did she didn’t know how to use it.

Matt contemplated her answer for a minute. “So you’ve been doing all your wash in the sink?” After her silent nod he turned to head out to the mudroom.

Maggie watched him open the back porch door and disappear through it, listening to the sound of his boots scraping against the rough plank floor. Suddenly things between them seemed very domesticated. And she couldn’t help wondering if Matt knew what he was doing, he’d be out of there in a flash. A few minutes later he called out, “I think I can fix this!”

“I’m not paying you!” she shouted right back, rinsing his shirt with a smile.

“You can pay me with lunch.”

That didn’t sound unreasonable, especially since she’d already offered him lunch. But first she wanted to change into some clean clothes. No telling how long Matt would be working on that old machine. He was still at it when she returned to the kitchen a few minutes later to fix them something to eat.
The minute she stepped onto the mudroom Matt raised his head off the floor and announced, “It’s fixed.” His gaze moved over her with open appreciation.

Maggie had changed into a full-skirted sundress, the square-cut bodice lined with a row of tiny, cloth-covered buttons that hugged her full breasts. The gentle breeze rushing through the open mudroom door caused the gypsy-style skirt to dance and swirl around her bare legs. She was barefoot too.

“Are you sure?” She smiled down at him, her gaze moving hungrily over his large frame. “You don’t look dirty enough to have fixed anything.” His long legs were parted, the denim encasing them fit snugly over his zipper, leaving little to the imagination.

Without warning Matt jumped to his feet, and Maggie stepped back with surprise. “Cute,” he responded. He ran a finger down the bridge of her nose. Maggie made an attempt at catching his finger with her teeth, but he was much too fast for her.

A devilish gleam appeared in Matt’s eyes. “You’re treading on dangerous ground, woman, attempting to bite an officer of the law.”

“No, you are, Sheriff.” She took a quick glance in the old mirror hanging by the door and rubbed the dirt off her nose. When she turned back to Matt her eyes dropped meaningfully to the floor. She’d already seen Dammit sneak into the room. Matt’s gaze fell to the floor at his feet. He groaned, the sound drowning out Dammit’s pitiful little growl.

“If she takes a bite out of me, I’m going to take a bite out of her owner.”

Maggie liked the sound of that, opening her mouth to explain that Dammit wasn’t growling at him in warning but for attention. A thought crossed her mind that Matt wasn’t moving because he thought Dammit was about to sink her teeth into him. She laughed softly.

“What’s so funny?” he demanded to know. A quick look revealed Dammit was still smiling up at them.

“A two-hundred-pound man being held at bay by a little pooch, that’s funny.”

“These are new boots,” Matt pointed out, crossing his arms menacingly. “Is this the thanks I get for repairing your washing machine?”

“Are you trying to intimidate me…Sheriff? Maggie put her hands on her hips in response to him crossing his arms. She was aware the action caused her breasts to swell gently over the low top of her dress. “I’d be careful if I were you.” Her eyes dropped down to Dammit and back up again. “I think I’m the one with the upper hand for a change. Why, I bet I could get you to do just about anything I wanted right now.”
Matt growled threateningly but the light in his eyes told a different story. He was enjoying their playful banter as much as Maggie was. “You can try, baby, but don’t blame me if things get out of hand.”

Maggie’s heart did a flip-flop at the way he’d said baby. Her eyes locked onto his, the look in his gaze heating her blood. “And what might those things be?” Maggie inquired softly, her gaze dropping to his naked chest. She reached up to run her finger over him lightly. “I think I can handle anything that might get out of hand,” she teased, then threatened when he made a slight move, “You better not move a muscle, Sheriff, or you’re boots are history.”

“That sounds like a threat. I think I’m at an unfair disadvantage here.” His body was beginning to show signs of responding to her closeness. “You’re enjoying this,” he ground out. “I’m eager to see how far you’re willing to go.”

“Even if it means bringing you to your knees?” She brought her face closer to his chest and under his watchful scrutiny kissed him lightly. His skin smelled warm and musky, and faintly of the soap she’d used on him earlier. Determined to keep it light, she gently ran her open mouth back and forth over his flesh, losing a little bit of control when her lips brushed his nipple. Her heart jumped, butterflies settling low in her belly.

She couldn’t help herself. Her tongue came out, flicking over the hardened nub, over and over again. Maggie heard his gasp and glanced up, his eyes were glazed with desire. She was trembling inside as the situation began to spiral out of control at a rate she couldn’t keep up with. She liked touching Matt, kissing him. She liked the feel of his muscles quivering under the touch of her hands. And by the dark look on his flushed face, he liked it too.

“Ever been brought to your knees before, Sheriff?” she murmured in a seductively low tone. The desire in his darkening eyes promised Maggie both heaven and hell. And she wanted both.

She had no doubt she could bring him to his knees in a heartbeat.

“You do and I’m taking you with me,” he growled back, watching her finger continue to move over him. She ran a nail from his neck down the center of his chest, to where the triangle of crisp hair disappeared beneath his jeans. Below his belt was his impressive hard-on, pushing against his fly. She recalled all too clearly how good it felt being filled by his penis.

His eyes were bright with burning intensity. After the briefest hesitation her finger continued its downward journey, moving over his belt and slowly, brazenly, tracing the length of his straining zipper. He was big and powerful. They both caught their breath.

Matt’s hands were dangling at his sides, clenched into tight fists. Dammit had taken off long ago and as far as she was concerned the game was over.

Now!
Matt apparently felt the same way. He sucked in his breath, grabbing Maggie to him and slamming her body against his. Her startled cry was one of pleasure, not pain, and died beneath the onslaught of his hard, unyielding mouth. She welcomed his rough embrace, and matched the wildness in him. Passion for passion. The intensity of his need thrilled her and she wound her arms around his neck, clinging to him wantonly. Her full breasts were flattened against his bare chest and she opened her mouth to accept the stabbing thrust of his tongue.

Maggie moaned shamelessly. Flames of desire licked at her body as his hands began to travel over her curves, sending her into a whirlwind of sensations. She cried out when they moved from her shoulders down her back, to cup her buttocks, bringing her intimately closer to his burning arousal. All the while Matt thrust his hips against her until they were up against the wall.

Once there, Maggie found herself against the wall. Matt seemed careful not to crush her with his impatient need. His hand moved to the front of her bodice, quickly and expertly undoing the tiny buttons until enough were undone that he could part the material, baring the hidden bounty there. Maggie thought she would die when he stood back a moment to take her in, before tenderly running his palm over her breast as if in awe. His look made her feel beautiful, and desired.

Crying out, she arched into his caress, burying her hands in his hair and clutching him closer when he bent his head and began to nibble and kiss the exposed flesh. His tongue licked a path to the swollen, quivering peaks, driving Maggie a little crazy. She reached down to the belt buckle on his jeans, impatient with her own burning hunger. She wanted him. Now. “Mathew…” Her husky plea demanded everything. “Please…love me,” she begged.

His answer was an animal growl, his actions backing it up. Burying his hands once again in the soft flesh of her buttocks, he jerked her up against his hardness and held her there. Letting her feel his need, grinding himself against her. His nostrils flared with a sharp breath when she began moving her hips in response.

The breath rushed from his body in uncontrolled spurts. “Keep this up and I’ll come just like this…”

“I want you inside me when you come…” she insisted feverishly, trembling wildly against him. She kissed his neck and shoulder, running her tongue down his naked chest while her nails raked the bunched muscles of his back. She could feel something smooth and warm at the center of her womanhood, turning her bones to mush. Making her legs buckle.

She was primed for love and wished fiercely there weren’t any clothes between them. Maggie didn’t care if Matt lowered her to the floor and made love to her. She wanted him too much, and she thought she was getting her unasked for wish when all at once he lifted her into his strong arms.

Instinctively she wrapped her legs around his hips, not questioning where he was taking her. Not caring. She continued to caress his flesh with her hands and lips, seductively rubbing her naked breasts against him and purring like a contented kitten. While Matt moved through the kitchen he nibbled and suckled at the skin below her ear before traveling over the flesh of her neck.
“I’ll never make it upstairs to any bed,” Matt rasped, making it to the dining room table. He cleared it with a single sweep of his long arm, sending the doily and an empty wooden bowl to the floor.

Maggie didn’t have time to protest when he lowered her to the smooth dark surface, pulling her fanny to the very edge of it. The violent hunger in him matched hers, and protesting didn’t enter her mind when Matt moved her skirt aside and pulled her bikini panties from her before parting her legs in one fluid motion. Nor did she have time to feel vulnerable, exposed or embarrassed when he stared down at her nudity for a breathless moment before pressing forward.

He groaned deeply. Her arms reached for him, but he refused to give in to her silent demand. Even though it wasn’t the first time he’d seen her naked, how was he to know an unexpected shyness filled her, lying on her back partially exposed before his eyes?

For some reason, he wanted to prolong the final moment of possession. He gazed down at Maggie, his passion-glazed eyes staking a claim to everything they touched, before he kissed her hungrily. Maggie welcomed his hard kiss, welcomed the roughness of his touch as he finished unbuttoning her dress before pulling it down off her shoulders, tearing it in his haste to have her totally naked beneath him.

His fingers clenched into the soft flesh of her buttocks, kneading the flesh that filled his hands while grinding the shaft of his arousal against the folds of her femininity, teasingly at the gates. Their moans of animal frustration and mutual satisfaction filled the silence about them. Her nails raked down his muscular back as she began to slip from reality into a world where nothing but the pleasure-filled moment mattered. She arched her body wildly into his but it wasn’t enough. He surprised her by pulling away.

“No!” she cried out loudly, gasping for breath, relieved to see through heavy lidded eyes that he was having the same problem.

Now, now he would make love to her. She waited, impatiently watching his smoldering eyes move slowly over her flushed, damp body before coming to rest on the most intimate part of her—the portal to her womanhood that would lead them to the ultimate pleasure.

“Mathew…” Her hands made short work of undoing his belt, unsnapping and unzipping his jeans and lowering them with unabashed ardor. They came down easy enough, and when her eyes fell on him the breath locked in her throat. Before another heartbeat he pulled her hips forward and impaled her.

Maggie was certain she was going to faint from the pleasure of being loved by Matt. It tore a cry from her throat, which he quickly cut off with a long, searing kiss. He was making love to her with every part of his body, his mouth on hers, his hands roaming over her soft flesh and finding all the right places to tease her. His fingers dipped into the hollows and curves that made her womanly form, pleasuring her until she was a quivering mass.
His hardness electrified her and when his fingers moved down to where his body was joined to hers, brushing the swollen bud of her desire, he swallowed her cry as she yielded to the searing need. A powerful climax gripped Maggie and she was powerless to do anything but let it control her body. Her fulfillment seemed to cause his own release and in the next instant Matt’s body bore her onto the table with a final, deep thrust. His body began to spew liquid fire, filling the wet, pulsing haven of her womb. As uncontrollable tremors shook them both, they collapsed against each other out of breath.
Minutes later, filled with an amazing sense of completeness, Maggie reluctantly drifted back to earth and became aware of two things simultaneously. They hadn’t thought about protection again, and she was fairly certain she had a splinter in her behind. She barely had the energy to smile. In spite of her discomfort and exhaustion she held Matt’s head against her breast tenderly, giving him the time he needed to catch his breath. Loving his weight on her.

It also gave Maggie the time she needed to come to grips with her emotions for him. She’d never come close to experiencing the full and complete satisfaction in David’s arms that she found in Matt’s. After all her years of marriage she should have had more confidence and experience in this sort of thing. But Matt was teaching her there was so much more, and on her grandmother’s dining room table of all places!

She chuckled lightly to herself.

“What’s so funny?” His breath was hot against her breast. He raised his head, the look in his eyes questioning.

“I don’t think my grandmother’s table was meant for this kind of activity,” she teased. The fact he was still deeply embedded in her amazed Maggie. She couldn’t resist lifting her hips against him and was rewarded by a flare of hot desire in his eyes. “How are you at getting splinters out?” Her hands absentmindedly smoothed down the hard contours of Matt’s back.

“I beg your pardon?” His lips tickled her where they brushed against her skin, causing Maggie to shudder with delicious reaction.

“I think I have a splinter in my behind. And since you’re partially responsible for it being there I thought you might like to get it out for me.”

“You’re not serious…”

Maggie nodded. “Oh, but I am.” Her hips once again lifted.

He closed his eyes and groaned, “You keep that up and you’ll never leave this table.” He threatened in a raspy voice. He placed his hands on the table and gave himself a push away from her.
He stood there for a moment looking very male and very sexy, staring down at Maggie. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe or think. Not with his eyes resting on her the way they were. In spite of his earlier tone, his eyes were lazy and hot, eating her up like she was a delicious treat. Poor Matt. He obviously couldn’t make up his mind about what he wanted. That caused a smile on her face.

“You have very expressive eyes, Red.” He held his hand down, waiting patiently for her to take it. Maggie let him pull her to her feet. Her other hand was quick to grab the remains of her dress and she clutched it to her breasts.

“You’re too late; I’ve already seen everything you have to offer.” Before Matt let Maggie catch her breath he kissed her hungrily, slipping his tongue inside the cavern of her mouth. She leaned into him weakly. The fire that had only recently been banked soared rapidly to life once more.

Maggie’s tongue eagerly battled his during their heated kiss. She lost her grip on the dress and it floated to the floor between them, leaving her naked breasts crushed against his unyielding chest. Mutual sounds of pleasure and desire filled the room while their mouths worked roughly against each other’s, communicating a fierce need. Maggie arched into Matt as his wandering hands made short work of claiming her. They seemed to be everywhere at once, caressing her back and hips before settling on the rounded curves of her fanny. As his fingers sank into the soft flesh Maggie flinched away from his hold.

“Ouch!”

He tore his mouth away. “Sorry. Now, about that splinter…”

Warm eyes moved over her hotly. Matt looked anything but interested in wasting time looking at a splinter. There was no denying he wanted her. There was no denying she wanted him. But the splinter had to come out, and it was located in an area she’d never be able to reach. Smiling in the face of his desire, she presented Matt with her backside, and leaned over the table.

“Do you see it?” She lowered her head to her crossed arms.

“I see it.”

“Is everything okay?” His voice sounded weak, his breathing uneven. Maggie turned her head to glance at him over her shoulder.

“Everything is just great,” he grated beneath his breath.

She quickly turned back around so he couldn’t see her victorious reaction to his weakened state.

“The splinter isn’t deep. I’ll try not to hurt you.”

“I trust you.” In the next instant she began to wiggle.
Matt slapped her lightly on the behind. “Be still!”
“You’re tickling me,” Maggie complained, stiffening to keep from moving. She felt the lower half of his powerful thighs pressed against her, the rough denim scraping over her sensitive skin. A soft sigh escaped her.

“Sorry.”

He’d obviously misinterpreted the sound. “Will I live?”

“Yes, got it.”

They both breathed a sigh of relief and Maggie scooted back off the table, only to find when she stood that Matt hadn’t stepped away. She gasped when her backside came up against the front of him. His arms closed around her, pulling her even further into him, letting her feel his rekindled desire.

Oh God! A soft moan escaped her as a smile of contentment formed on her lips. “It looks like I’ve unleashed a tiger.” Maggie rested her head back against Matt’s chest, letting the weakness of desire consume her.

“You don’t know the half of what you’ve unleashed.” The heat of his words caressed the baby fine hairs against the back of Maggie’s neck. His teeth worried the flesh of her lobe gently, tugging and sucking. She trembled, her breath leaving her in tiny pants. Was he going to make love to her again?

His voice was a velvet murmur. “It might take me awhile to get you out of my system.”

Maggie didn’t want him to get her out of his system, but she couldn’t tell him that. It was too soon. She’d have him running scared. At least knowing how he felt she had a fighting chance to make him change his mind. Surely he felt something for her other than as a convenient sexual outlet. If Maggie believed that was all there was to it she’d turn around and slap his face and order him out of her home. No, there had to be something more between them then just sex.

“Are you all right?” His mouth traced the gentle curve of her shoulder while his hands moved over her belly and down the front of her thighs, spreading fire along her flesh as he went.

“Yes…are you?” He made her want him so easily, and quickly.

“No.” Matt’s hands caressed her intimately, moving into places that were dark and forbidden. And wet. “I’m burning up inside,” he admitted hoarsely. She knew he was as hot as she was. There was no denying the response of his shuddering body.

“I’m…” She couldn’t think clearly. His fingers were teasingly light as they glided over her skin.
“What?” Matt questioned huskily, his mouth back to caressing her delicately arched throat. “Tell me…” His teeth gently raked over her skin, causing Maggie to moan deeply and shutter uncontrollably. “You make me hungry,” Maggie gasped unwillingly. “You make me want to be…reckless.” When Matt’s fingers neared the apex of her thighs she parted them willingly, the pleasure pure and explosive. “Oh…God.” Her knees buckled and she would have fallen to the floor had the heat of his body not been holding her in place against him. His fingers brushed against the hair covering her mound.

“Like what, honey?” he panted.

“You know what!” she insisted passionately. Surely Matt didn’t expect her to put it into words. She’d never been that liberated!

“Tell me,” he insisted, thrusting his hardened body against her.

“I can’t!” Maggie was barely able to breathe, let alone talk. She felt a liquid wave of intense heat roll throughout her body, knowing it was a promise of something bigger to come.

“Then I’ll tell you.” Matt swung her around in his embrace, until Maggie was flush against his hot body. They were both gasping for breath now. Their gazes locked. Maggie saw her own hunger reflected in Matt’s passion-glazed eyes. “I’m going to sink my cock deep inside your body. I want to feel your wet heat surround me, feel your muscles milk the cum from my balls.”

His passionate words caused an explosion inside Maggie. “Mathew!”

“Actions speak louder than words, honey.” He brought her down, burying his shaft inside her quivering body. Her wild cry mingled against the heated passion of his seeking lips, and Maggie wrapped her legs around his waist to ride out the storm.

* * * *

“Feel better?” Matt’s gaze noticed the changes in Maggie, the rosy glow that covered her flawless skin, giving it a healthy sheen and the glaze still simmering in her clear eyes. Seeing a woman who’d been well and truly loved.

She nodded contentedly, meeting his smile a little bashfully. “Much better.” She’d grabbed another shower after their second bout of lovemaking.

“I hope you don’t mind, I fixed us another lunch.” The first plate of sandwiches ended up in the trash.

“I’m starved. Why don’t you take a shower, too?”
“After lunch. We can’t afford to let these sandwiches dry out too, you’re out of bread.” Matt put the plate on the table and grabbed a couple napkins off the counter before sitting down. “What kind of sandwiches did you make?”

He had a hard time keeping his eyes off the provocative bounce of Maggie’s fanny when she walked by. “I found some tuna.” Thank God he’d found something that looked fit for human consumption. Tuna in a can was easy. Whatever had been between the bread on Maggie’s sandwiches hadn’t smelled or looked very good after being left out for over an hour.

“You could have opened another can of salmon.” She returned to the table with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses that had obviously been jam jars once. Matt grinned when she gave him one with a big sunflower on it.

Mulling over the last hour, he ate his sandwich silently, watching Maggie and wondering what the hell he’d gotten himself into. Matt sensed she wasn’t the kind of woman who gave herself to a man lightly. And that terrified him. If she wanted strings he wasn’t sure he could deliver.

He didn’t want to hurt her but the feeling in his gut told him he was bound to. He’d loved one woman and lost her and he’d made up his mind he wasn’t going down that road again. The wall he’d erected around his heart would take a lot more than a few steamy episodes with Maggie to tear it down. He knew he should tell her where he stood, before things went any further, but the words stuck in his throat.

When he polished off his sandwich he got to his feet. “I think I’ll grab that shower you offered…” After that he was getting out of there.
Chapter 14

The phone was ringing when Maggie opened the door to her cabin. Her first thought was who would be calling her at that late hour? One thing was sure, she could rule out her sister and father because she’d just left them. And she doubted it was Matt. She hadn’t heard a thing from him since he left her place after lunch two days before. She’d known by the solemn expression on his face when he’d said goodbye that he needed time to think about the way things were going between them. Maggie had made up her mind she wasn’t going to force the issue. She was half in love with the impossible man and she was certain he felt the same about her.

“Hello?”

There was no answer, but there was the usual heavy breathing. This was becoming a habit and she hung up the phone without even acknowledging she knew someone was there. She turned toward the steps leading to the loft when it began to ring again. Tired, frustrated, she grabbed up the receiver and nearly screamed into it. “Hello?!”

“Mrs. Myers?”

The voice on the other end was gruff, no-nonsense and vaguely familiar. Maggie hesitated, not liking the way he’d said her name. She was forced to answer him when he asked her if she was Mrs. Myers a second time. “Yes, I’m Maggie Myers. May I help you?” She sank down onto the sofa, leaning back tiredly. Her hair was thick and heavy against her neck and she pulled it up, dropping it to hang over the back of the couch. All she could think about was how much she wanted to strip and crawl into bed.

“You probably don’t remember me; my name is Bob Sm—”

Oh no! Not someone calling her for a date! And he was right; she didn’t remember him. The only Bob Maggie knew was Sue’s husband. “I’m sorry, Bob,” she interrupted, trying to think of a nice way to put him off. Closing her eyes, she pinched the bridge of her nose, continuing softly, “I’m really not free for a date.”

“Date?” His voice sounded confused.

“It’s just that I’ve, ah, gotten married since I, ah, thought I might be looking for a…friend.” She was terrible at lying. Did he say she might not remember him? Hopefully that meant they’d met.
Maggie wished she could recall him, assuming he was someone Sue or her mother had tried to hitch her up with in the past.

“I’m afraid you’ve got me all wrong, Mrs. Myers. My name is Bob Smith.” He paused long enough to give it time to sink in, obviously hoping she’d remember him. “We met briefly one night in Bangor, a couple months back.”

Bob Smith…Maggie racked her brain but no memory surfaced, nor did any face come to mind. “I’m really sorry…” she began again, only to be cut off.

“Detective Bob Smith? Matt and I were partners. Remember the night you were dressed up like a hooker?”

Maggie knew he was just trying to jog her memory and was glad he couldn’t see her face. She did remember him. But why in the world would he be calling her? “Please forgive me, Bob; I remember who you are now. You were the nice cop.” She smiled. “Why are you calling me, and how did you track me down? Are you trying to locate Matt?” If she’d been thinking clearly she would have realized locating Matt wouldn’t have been a problem for him.

“Actually no, I was looking for you. But now that you mention it, I can’t believe what a small world we live in. For you and Matt to both show up in the same small town. What are the odds of that?” There was a smile in his voice.

Maggie had no idea but was thankful the odds were in her favor. She wondered what his reaction would be if she were to tell him that she and Matt were involved.

“Maybe I should get back to why I’m calling.”

The change in his tone got Maggie’s immediate attention. “Yes?” Her hand dropped down to toy with the soft curls on Dammit’s head.

“I hate to be the messenger of bad news, but it’s my duty to inform you that your ex-husband has escaped.” He released a heavy sigh.

“What?!” He certainly had her full attention now and Maggie straightened her back, expecting more. “But how?” The sharpness of her tone sent Dammit off the couch. “How could that happen?”

There was a brief hesitation before Bob responded, “I’m embarrassed to say but these things do unfortunately happen, on occasion. He escaped while working on a road crew.”

“A road crew! Why was he even out on a road crew? I thought that was for trustworthy prisoners, or something.” The knowledge that David was out there somewhere, free, sent chills down her spine. She immediately thought about the phone calls she’d been receiving lately.
“He wasn’t scheduled for it. He forced one of the other men to stay behind so he could take their place. Unfortunately the officers in charge were only concerned with the count that morning, and not the IDs of the prisoners they were taking out. Something that should never have happened.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Maggie knew a stunt like that was exactly something David was clever enough to think of. And she could well imagine the devices he’d used to persuade the other prisoner into letting him take his place. She realized Bob was still talking and forced her attention back to what he was saying.

“I wanted to warn you that he could be headed your way. Unless you didn’t inform him of your plans to move there?”

There was no mistaking the hopeful note in Bob’s worried voice. Maggie wished she could reassure him, but she’d be lying. “I didn’t tell him of my plans but we were married for eight years. He knows my family lives here and will know where I am.”

It hit her suddenly, how isolated she was there. Her gaze started to dart about the quiet room nervously, she strained her ears to catch any suspicious noises coming from outside. Just thinking about David coming around was enough to cause her imagination to work overtime.

“Are you still there, Mrs. Myers?”

Maggie released a long breath and fell back against the cushions with a knot of fear in the pit of her stomach. “I’m still here, Bob. You’ve caught me by surprise. I thought David was out of my life for good.”

“He might not be heading your way,” he said, but his tone revealed he wasn’t totally convinced of that. “I’ve informed the police department there in Summerfield to be on the lookout for him.”

“Matt knows?”

“I wasn’t able to talk directly to Matt. I left a message with some nice, little old lady.”

Maggie picked up on the smile in his voice and felt her mouth tilting in response. “That would be Millie.” The same nice, little old lady she’d met the night of her arrest. “We’re strictly a small-town operation here, Bob.”

“I thought Matt was nuts when he told me he was moving back there to be sheriff.” His tone revealed he missed Matt. “I intend to keep calling until I speak to him directly. You take care of yourself.”

After returning his goodbye Maggie hung up reluctantly, suddenly feeling very alone. What was she going to do if David showed up? She shuddered, thinking about the last time she saw him. He’d been mad enough to kill her that night, and knowing David, he was still mad. He didn’t forgive and forget easily. She got to her feet and went to the door to make sure it was locked.
It was well past midnight and Maggie lay tossing and turning in her bed, unable to get to sleep. She wanted to blame it on the late cup of coffee she had at Sue’s but knew it was thoughts of David and what his plans might be concerning her. Where was he? Every little sound set her on edge and she was fidgeting so much that Dammit actually snapped at her before jumping off the bed to find somewhere else to sleep. She wanted to call Matt, to hear his voice, and reached for the phone several times, only to slam it down again. Why hadn’t he called?

Dammit let out a bark that pierced the quiet of the cabin. Maggie released a nervous squeal, almost jumping out of her skin, which showed her just how jumpy she was. She turned angrily on her side and plumped up the pillow beneath her head, closing her eyes and trying once again for sleep. For the first time since moving to her grandmother’s cabin she felt the frightening isolation of its location. Not even the familiar croaking of crickets and frogs soothed her.

The next time Dammit barked she yanked back the covers and got to her feet with a loud curse, peering over the side of the loft below. “Be quiet!” she ordered, her gaze moving around the darkened room until she located Dammit at the door. In defiance Dammit barked several more times. “It’s too late to go out!” Maggie said in a loud whisper. There was no way she was going to open her door at this time of night.

All at once there was a flash of light at the window, and Maggie almost had heart failure. Just managing to hold back a scream, she watched in stunned terror, as the beam of light moved at different angles around the room as though someone was searching for something. As the beam flashed upward in her direction she stumbled away from the rail and flew to the nightstand next to the bed where the phone was.

The receiver was halfway to her ear when she heard a distinctive sound that indicated someone tried to open the door. Eyes rounding, she stabbed out 911 with her finger before realizing there was no dial tone. Someone tried the door again. And this time Maggie screamed, throwing the useless phone down. She dashed back to the rail; panic rushing through her at what to do. One thing was certain; she was trapped in the loft.

She hurried down the stairs, trembling on adrenalin and reckless with speed, stumbling over furniture she’d forgotten that she moved the day before. When the flashlight appeared at the window again, she dashed in the direction of the sofa, scraping her knees when she hit the floor.

“Dammit, hush!” she whispered harshly, the blood pounding hotly in her ears. She heard a noise from outside. Dear God, was that laughter? She couldn’t tell through the thick log walls. Whoever was out there began tapping on the window, and Maggie’s mind raced with escape alternatives should the person decide to break the glass and enter that way.

He was at the door again and she held her breath, listening for the telltale click as they tried the knob once more. This time they pounded on the door. “Maggie!” She started violently, the voice hard to decipher over Dammit’s barking. “Maggie, open the door, it’s Matt!”
Matt? Without hesitation she got to her feet and ran to the door, opening it before he had a chance to issue the command a second time. “Matt!” she gasped with relief, stepping back so he could enter. “God, you scared me half to death! What…”

“Turn a light on,” he cut in, waiting until she did as he asked. His eyes flickered over her briefly as he closed the door.

Maggie heard an engine start, focusing her eyes on Matt. Why hadn’t she heard a vehicle approach earlier? “What’s going on?” she questioned quietly, her heart still beating wildly from the scare she’d had. “Who’s leaving?”

“Paul. I was halfway home from Bangor when I called in to get my messages, and heard the one from Bob. I tried to reach you but something’s wrong with your phone.” He picked it up and brought it to his ear. “I asked Paul to come out and check on you until I could get here.”

“I take it you’ve heard about David.”

He nodded. “I headed straight here when the office radioed me and said they couldn’t reach you either. Anything strange happen around here that I should know about, something at the time you might have brushed off as unimportant?” He returned the phone to the cradle and walked toward her.

“I’ve had a few phone calls with no one on the other end.”

“When did those start?” He frowned.

Maggie thought about the call at her father’s house the other day. “About three days ago.

“I’m sure there’s a reason for the phone not working… I mean, surely you don’t think David…” Her voice trailed off, enthralled by the protective gleam in Matt’s eyes. He was all business, and he looked exhausted. “Are you alright?” she asked softly, concerned.

He nodded, running a hand through his hair. “Sorry if Paul and I frightened you. And don’t underestimate your ex. He didn’t escape until yesterday but that doesn’t mean he’s not the one who’s been making those calls.” His gaze dropped down her body. “You’re hurt.”

Maggie glanced down at her knee before laughing it off as nothing. “When I saw the light in the window I threw myself on the floor behind the sofa.” She vaguely recalled scraping her knees in the process. “I’m sure I’ll live,” she joked.

Moving forward he took her hand, the action sending an electrical surge through her. “Let me take a look at it.” Because she had no choice she followed him to the kitchen, where he flipped on the light. Before Maggie could brace herself his hands were at her waist, lifting her to the counter next to the sink.
She gasped, tugging at the hem of her shirt. “Are you a doctor and a sheriff?”

He barely spared her a glance. “I know how to put on a Band-Aid,” he said gruffly. “Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do now that your ex is roaming free?”

The last thing Maggie wanted to talk about was David, especially when Matt’s hands were on her. She watched his bent head, mesmerized that he could remain in control when she was fairly burning up inside. That’s what his nearness did to her. “I…” It came out way too throaty and she swallowed, clearing her voice before continuing. “I can’t live my life frightened he’ll show up any time, Matt. And knowing him, he won’t stray too far from what he’s familiar with. There are too many elements he can’t control here.”

“Don’t count on that, honey.” He looked into her eyes for the first time. “Where do you keep the washcloths?” Maggie blinked, trying to make sense of what he was saying. She knew he was talking, because her eyes were on his mouth, watching it form the words. “Maggie?” he said softly. Her eyes slowly drifted up to him. “The washcloths?”

Oh! She pointed to the drawer on the other side of him. “This isn’t really necessary.” She glanced at her bloodied knee. But Matt ignored her, running the cloth under the faucet before wringing it out. She tensed as it neared her leg and he paused, raising a brow of concern. “Don’t hurt me…” she breathed softly.

He carefully brought the cloth to her knee and gently began wiping the blood off. “Just a few scratches,” he said, continuing to wipe the dried blood that had run below her knee. “The blood made it look worse than it is.” He tossed the cloth into the sink, dropping his hands to her bare thighs as he straightened.

“Thank you,” she whispered, feeling a warmth seep all the way to her bones where his hands rested on her flesh. “I can do the rest.” He seemed to be peering at her intently, as if trying to make up his mind about something. She held his gaze unflinchingly, silently daring him to do what they both wanted. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue.

The action drew Matt’s gaze there, and his eyes turned a darker shade of chocolate. Smooth and bittersweet. His fingers flexed into the flesh of Maggie’s thighs, before gliding smoothly up and under the hem of her short nightgown, nearing the apex of her legs. She caught her breath, her body instantly responding to his intimate caress.

“What happens now, Sheriff?” Her tone came out low and husky. She was afraid to move. So hot that she knew the slightest provocation from Matt and she’d be all over him. She brazenly placed her hands over his, moving them closer to the moist heat of her body. Half an inch and he could easily brush his thumbs over the damp heat between her legs.

His touch felt like fire and ice. Maggie reached forward and touched him. His erection pulsed strongly beneath her fingers, straining against the zipper of his pants. His fingers tightened on her thighs, his thumbs snaking beneath the elastic of her panties to glide over the swollen lips that guarded her womanhood. Maggie gasped and arched into his caress, the breath leaving her
body in uncontrolled pants. She ran the tips of her fingers up and down his arousal, making him a little wild too. It seemed they were each striving to drive the other one out of control. And a little crazy!

“I didn’t come here for this.”

“Then leave.”

A growl of hunger erupted from Matt’s throat and he slapped his mouth down on hers, drowning out her whimpers of excitement. She parted her lips, eager to feel his tongue against hers. Maggie became breathless and weak with longing. Just when she thought it couldn’t get any hotter, his lips left hers to nibble on her earlobe before searing a path down her throat.

Nothing prepared her for the wildness that consumed her. She was on fire, rocking against his pleasure-giving thumbs as he continued to flick between the folds, feeling the wet heat of her response to him. Before she knew it Matt gently spread her legs further apart, pulling her hips to the edge of the counter where he was able to press against her.

They both went a little mad, forgetting about the place and time. Only knowing there was nothing sweeter on earth than that moment, and the pleasure that surged through them, demanding satisfaction. Mouths met and clung in a drugging kiss, tongues battled, moans filled the room. Maggie was primed and ready for love; she wanted Matt inside her.

He put his hands against her hips and pulled back. The fire in his eyes captured hers. “As much as I want to make love to you, Maggie, it’s not going to happen. You deserve better than a man who only wants sex from you,” he rasped in a guttural tone.

He was only fooling himself if that’s all he thought he wanted from her. Maggie decided it would work to her advantage to meet him on the same level. “What makes you think a woman can’t want the same thing?” she shot back, breathing heavily. Her whole body was alive and tingling, her nipples painfully hard against her nightshirts.

“Some women, but not you.”

“Well, you’re wrong, Matt. I have needs too. We’re not all looking for a wedding ring.” She paused to let her words sink in before asking, “Have you found that woman yet? The one who’ll satisfy your sexual urges but not expect an emotional commitment from you?” The thought of him with another woman tore at her heart, shredding it into a thousand pieces.

“Maggie…” His voice was still thick with desire. Regret. “I’ll make sure one of my deputies drives by occasionally until we know your ex is back behind bars. And I’ll come by tomorrow and install a deadbolt on the door.” She nodded, saying nothing. “Don’t take any chances, Maggie. He wasn’t playing games that night in your apartment.”
He didn’t have to tell her that. Before long they were slowly walking toward the door. She kept her mouth clamped shut for fear of begging him to stay. “Thank you for coming by, Matt. Goodnight.”

His gaze remained on her for a moment, as though trying to gauge her thoughts. Then without a word he gave her a brief nod and walked briskly away. Maggie stood in the doorway and watched him saunter to his truck, feeling empty and alone.
Chapter 15

Matt only got as far as his truck before turning back around. Maggie hadn’t shut the door yet. He sucked in his breath. She was still there, standing in the threshold and watching him, with the soft glow of the living room light behind her. His gaze raked over her slender silhouette, and the way the light was shining through her nightgown. She might as well have been naked. He felt a burning need uncoil in his gut. Why couldn’t he just walk away?

He knew why, because he was thoroughly bewitched by her.

As she continued to stand there, he took in the hourglass shape of her, the way her legs were slightly parted, and the shadowy patch between that her skimpy panties outlined. He swallowed hard. His eyes continued to follow the shapely line of her thighs and legs down to her bare feet, before shifting back up to the rounded fullness of her breasts.

His mouth went dry. His senses went into overdrive and his cock lengthened and grew with hunger. He hesitated for only a second before deciding to walk back. The thought of spending the night in Maggie’s bed far outweighed his intention of sleeping in his truck outside her door. He forced her to step out of his way as he plowed through the entranceway, telling himself all he wanted was a quick lay. Only the truth was he wanted more from Maggie.

Damn her!

“Forget something?”

Matt closed and locked the door, never taking his eyes off her. The sexy softness of her voice traveled over him, teasing his senses and keeping him aroused. He forced her to turn, then steered her toward the stairs that led to the loft, and her bedroom. “You said you have wants too, so let’s get to it.” He was right behind her. He knew he was being crude but reminding Maggie of her earlier comment was a good excuse to ignore the real reason he wanted to make love to her.

A nervous laugh escaped her. “Right this minute?” She was halfway up the stairs and turned to face him. Seductive eyes moved slowly over him, pausing at his hard-on.

He didn’t like the little smile of victory on her face and clenched his teeth. “What better time?” He just barely managed to catch himself before mowing her over. His hands grasped the rails
on either side of her, effectively entrapping her. With her several steps above him, his eyes were level with her breasts. An inch forward and he could take one in his mouth and wipe that smile of triumph right off her face. “Since I’m in the neighborhood, and in the mood,” he explained. “Thanks to you.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” she defended herself. “I’m innocent. No one made you come here tonight,” she pointed out.

Matt wanted to fuck.

His laugh was low and throaty. “Innocent!” he barked with disbelief. “You knew exactly what you’re doing, Red. You have from the beginning. And I’ve been playing right into your hands.”

“But…”

Matt let his gaze slide downward in a slow sweep that had to tell Maggie exactly what he was feeling. “No buts, honey, and no emotions, just raw, hot sex. A lot of it.” Her eyes rounded but she remained silent. “Nothing to say?” he demanded softly. “Good, than we know where we stand.” For every step he took forward Maggie took one backwards. “Once we’ve done this a few times, then you can decide if you want to be as free with your body without the commitment.”

“A few times?” A short laugh escaped her as she continued up the stairs, backwards. “I’m not sure if I’m up to a few times,” she teased.

Matt ignored her comment and continued to stalk her until the back of her knees came in contact with the edge of her bed. He wanted to erase the gleam of amusement from her eyes but damned if he wasn’t fighting the urge to grin in return. She made wanting her too easy.

“Now what?” she whispered.

Matt’s eyes fell to her mouth. “You want a blow-by-blow description? You take off your clothes. Then we get down to business.”

A laugh escaped Maggie. “You expect me to just put out?”

He shrugged. “If that’s what you want to call it, honey.”

“Maybe I’m not in the mood.” Obvious amusement flickered briefly in her eyes.

Matt shook his head and reached out to caress her cheek—an action that revealed much more than words. “It doesn’t work that way. And besides, you forget I had my fingers inside you just a few moments ago. You were wet and hot, sweetheart.” Before either one of them realized his intentions he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers in a kiss. It was too sweet. He deepened it until passion spiraled out of control. They were both slightly out of breath when he pulled away.
Maggie surprised Matt by reaching for the hem of her gown. She brought it over her head and let it drift carelessly to the floor between them. Matt’s gaze narrowed, yet he never lowered his eyes from hers. Instead, he reached forward and curled his hand around a plump breast, grazing the puckered nipple back and forth with his thumb. His reward was the warm color spreading across Maggie’s face. As he caressed first one breast and then the other, she swayed into his touch, releasing a little, breathless sigh. Her hands fell upon his shoulders, as if she needed help to remain on her feet.

Matt’s gaze fell to her breasts, their crowned peaks tilted upward slightly, seeming to beg for further attention. Attention he was only too eager to give. He bent forward and fastened his mouth onto one. Her cry echoed throughout the small cabin. Matt lifted her to continue loving her body with his mouth and tongue, tracing a path over her quivering breasts and belly below, before returning to her breasts. As he slowly lowered her against him, his mouth moved along the curve of her throat, taking her mouth in a long, searing kiss.

They were both trembling when it ended. “What about your panties?” he asked hoarsely, his nostrils flaring wildly with desire. The scent of their arousal was heavy around them, and Matt had to steel himself to take things slow.

“What about them?”

There was a challenge in her tone that Matt was only too willing to accept. His hand glided down her body until he reached them. He toyed with Maggie for a moment, running his finger along the elastic well below her bellybutton. His journey took him to the triangle outlining her mound. His finger dipped inside, brushing along the soft curls, finding them wet at the core of her. She caught her breath, trembling. His blood turned hot. He curled his probing finger and tore the garment from her in one quick movement.

His gaze moved over her, appreciating her wild beauty, admiring the curves his hands knew by heart. He realized with all clarity that sex was not what he wanted from her. He cared about Maggie too much to use her this way, only proving to himself what he should have already known. He was too involved with her to go through with any cold, calculated sex.

And she’d known that all along!

Before he knew it Matt reached for the fleshy part of her upper arm and pulled her flush against him. “You’ve got me so hot I don’t know if I’m coming or going.” He could feel the heat of her naked body right through his clothes.

She arched into his hard-on. “Then what are you waiting for?” She threw her head back until their eyes met.

He snorted at her challenge. “You’re so smart, you tell me.” For the first time in a long time Matt didn’t know what to do. He knew what his body wanted, but his mind was full of doubts and indecision. And he had a feeling the little witch in his arms had it all under control.
Matt swore the light of triumph shone in Maggie’s eyes, turning them a pretty shade of green with flecks of gold. “Well,” she began, leaning forward and giving his chin a gentle bite. “This is just a guess, mind you, but I’m thinking you can’t go through with your cold-hearted plans because you just discovered…something?”

He wondered if she had the nerve to put it into words. “And that would be what?”

Her brows lifted as her eyes rounded. “That maybe you like me a lot more than you thought.” She hit the nail right on the head and then surprised him by adding, “Or, maybe I just don’t turn you on.” Without warning she jerked his shirt open and pushed it over his shoulders and down his arms.

Matt only had to think about it for a second before he attacked her sweet mouth in a savage kiss. He swallowed her moan and nearly her tongue before reining himself in when he realized he was being too rough. She was breathless by the time he pulled away, sighing softly and nearly swaying on her feet, her eyes half closed and glazed. “Does that answer your question about whether or not you turn me on?” His breathing was irregular. The next thing he knew his pants were undone. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” he rasped, as she slowly lowered the zipper. He was about to explode, his control all but snapped.

“I hope so too,” Maggie responded with mild humor, her voice full of heat and promises. And sex. “Otherwise, we’ll both be disappointed.” Eyes locked onto his, Matt held his breath when she lowered to her knees, bringing his pants down with her. It was easy stepping out of them. Her position put her in very close proximity to a part of his anatomy that was pulsing with life and straining toward her soft lips. He saw her nostrils flare as she inhaled deeply, before drawing him into her mouth.

Matt closed his eyes, groaned low in his throat, and struggled to remain on his feet. It was more than he could bear. His hands clenched in her hair with the intention of pulling her away but he clutched her closer. He glanced down, realizing his mistake. Weakened by the sight of Maggie’s soft mouth swallowing him, watching the way her cheeks caved in by the sucking motion of her mouth. His heart jumped, he sucked in air, releasing it in a whistle through his clenched teeth.

“Maggie…” he said hoarsely, his breathing irregular. But she ignored him, smoothing her hands around his hips until she reached his taut buttocks, forcing him deeper into her mouth. “Maggie!” The telltale heat rolling through his body signaled release was near. He pulled her up before that could happen and fell with her on the bed, entering her sweet body on the way down.

“Oh…” she released a long, blissful sigh, clutching Matt to her. Her hips began to move beneath his in a rhythm he set. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Her caressing hands smoothed over his shoulders and down his back. Matt tore his mouth from hers to suckle a swollen nipple.

His mouth filled with the sweetest flesh he’d ever known. His hands roamed over the curves and valleys of her body in search of her pleasure points until he reached the crevice between
Maggie’s legs. Flicking his finger over the engorged bud of her desire caused a sharp cry from her. She arched wildly, meeting his pounding thrusts. And he knew then that he had to taste her. He withdrew, ignored her moan of protest, and moved down her body leaving kisses on her skin along the way. When he reached her wet pussy, Matt inhaled deeply, drawing the scent of her sex into his lungs.

“Mathew!”

Her hips came off the bed. Matt thrust his tongue deep inside her body. The heady taste of her drove him over the brink and he began to make love to her with his tongue. Maggie began to squirm wildly, forcing him to pin her to the bed so he could take his time and love her like he wanted to. He used his tongue like a battering ram, bringing her to a sweet release.

“Oh, God…I’m coming!” Maggie cried, her body convulsing with a powerful release. Matt continued to tongue her, groaning deeply when the musky essence of her orgasm flooded his mouth. It was then he felt his own orgasm spiraling in the direction of his cock. Barely giving Maggie time to come down he climbed up her body and entered her.

The pleasure became intense. Matt knew when the time came he was going to go off like a rocket. Maggie was convulsing beneath him. His hands held her where he wanted her; he picked up speed. Each thrust threatened to be his last. But the feeling of sheathing his cock inside Maggie’s hot tight body felt too good to hurry. Their bodies were in perfect synchronization, each soaring higher and higher until the peak of fulfillment was achieved, exploding in a kaleidoscope of fiery sensations.

Low groans erupted in Matt’s throat as a powerful climax ripped through his body causing him to push Maggie deeper into the mattress. Their mouths found each other’s; her hands clenched his taut buttocks as her tight body took him over the edge to a place that brought a sweet agony of pure and profound rapture.

At that moment Matt knew he loved Maggie.

* * * *

“Wow…” Maggie said some time later, curled into Matt’s embrace as they lay upon her bed. She’d opened her body to him, responding to the explosive pleasure that had come with being filled by him. His hardness had electrified her, bringing her the sweetest ecstasy she’d ever known. Made better by the love in her heart.

“That’s an understatement.” His tone was low and lazy, revealing his exhaustion.

She turned her face to meet his eyes, willing him to see there was nothing to be afraid of. Praying he’d finally realize they were good together and belonged together. That it was okay to get close to someone. Was he strong enough to acknowledge it?
“How would you sum it up?” Her mouth curved temptingly.
“Spectacular,” he said without hesitation, his gaze moving over her face. “I guess it’s time to face the music and be honest with you.” He took a deep breath, Maggie held hers. “Things should never have gone this far. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Not exactly what she wanted to hear, but she fully understood what he was talking about and nodded briefly to accept his apology. “There’s been enough hurt, Matt.” She smoothed his hair with her hand and loved him with her eyes. “Do you think we can go on from here?” She waited breathlessly for his response.

“I’m not sure I can make any promises…”

“No promises,” Maggie quickly assured him, needing to put his fears to rest. “We can take things slow, can’t we?”

“One day at a time?” He waited for her brief nod, searching her eyes as if looking for the truth. “I suppose I can manage that.” His tone was indulgent, yet cautious. In an unexpected move he rolled over, pinning her on the bed. He reached up and gently brushed the wisps of hair off her face, then kissed the tip of her nose. “You make a damn comfortable bed.”

His eyes spoke volumes and Maggie’s gaze darted to the dresser where the clock was. It was almost two in the morning. His gaze followed hers and his mouth turned down. Maggie read his mind. “You’re welcome to stay over,” she offered shyly.

His reaction revealed she’d said the right thing and Maggie suddenly found herself kissed breathless. Hunggrily, he thrust his tongue between her teeth, forcing her deeper into the mattress. She answered the rising passion in him with her own, moaning softly beneath the onslaught of his sensual attack, wanting, demanding more.

“I’d planned on sleeping in my truck outside your door but I like the thought of your bed a hell of a lot more. I’ll need to set the alarm. I have to be somewhere early in the morning.”

Maggie’s heart sank at his words. “I don’t have an alarm,” she breathed sadly.

Matt nuzzled his face between her breasts, taking the time to kiss each nipple. It took a moment for her remark to sink in. Suddenly his head jerked up and his eyes searched her face to see if she was fibbing. With a tortured groan he forced himself to roll away before things went too far. “Oh.”

Maggie reached for the edges of the quilt and drew the corner of it over her, turning toward him. A yawn escaped her as she curled against his side. “Sorry,” she mumbled, closing her eyes after a second one claimed her. “It would be nice to wake up with you at my side.” She glanced at Matt with a dreamy look in her droopy eyes.
A chuckle rumbled through his chest. “We need to talk, honey, but it can wait until another time.”

Maggie nodded, closing her eyes. “’Kay,” she mumbled, smiling when Matt kissed her on the nose before rolling away. “Don’t go,” she murmured. She opened one eye to peer up at him.

“Have to, baby.” Matt pulled on his pants and zipped them up. “I’ll be right outside in my truck.”

“’Kay,” she said sleepily.

“What are you doing Saturday?”

“Nothing, why?”

“Some of us guys are getting together to play a ball game at the church. Our womenfolk usually bring food and set up a picnic table.”

“Womenfolk?” Maggie grinned at that but didn’t open her eyes. “Sounds like fun. Are your womenfolk allowed to play, too?” She yawned noisily.

“They usually stick to the cheering section.” Maggie felt him brush a wayward strand of hair away from her eyes. Purring like a contented feline, she nuzzled his palm when he turned it against her cheek.

“I hope you don’t expect me to have any pompoms,” she joked.

“Honey, I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.” There was a trace of laughter in his voice, but there was nothing funny about the kiss he bestowed upon her soft, responsive lips.

“What time Saturday?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow night after I talk to Steve, to let you know what time.” She heard him say something else—something that sounded like he loved her.
Maggie was almost home when it began to sprinkle. She thought about all the salad stuff in the backseat, and wondered what she’d do with it if Saturday’s plans were called off because of bad weather. According to the weatherman on the radio it was a good possibility.

The first thing she noticed when reaching her front door was the new lock. True to his word, Matt had come by and installed it. She was sorry she missed him. The shiny new brass looked oddly out of place on the rustic cabin door, but the purpose it served gave her a little more peace of mind.

By the time she unloaded her car she was drenched and chilled to the bone. She decided a hot shower was in order before getting down to the business of cutting and dicing. Leaving everything on the counter, she flipped on the radio before heading for the bathroom.

She was halfway done with her shower when a sound penetrated through the bathroom door. At first she brushed it off but the second time she stilled and turned her head to listen for it again. But all she could make out was the distant drone of the radio, realizing that must have been what she heard. A loud rumble of thunder shook the cabin and frightened her enough into rinsing off and getting out.

Slipping into her terry robe she grabbed a towel for her hair. She was halfway to the kitchen when someone started pounding on the door. A nervous cry escaped her, her gaze darting there. She hoped she remembered to lock it. Unwelcome thoughts of David came instantly to mind but she brushed them aside when realizing he would hardly knock on the door for entry. Dammit let out several sharp barks and ran to the door, stopping to glance back at her expectantly. It was really storming outside now, the sound of thunder drowning out everything but the persistent hammering on the door.

“Maggie, open the door! I’m getting drenched!”

It was Sue. A breath of relief left her as she rushed to the door. Thankfully she had locked it. She unbolted it and pulled it open. Sue was wet, but she was hardly drenched. Her umbrella had kept her dry, at least from the waist up. A bright crackle of lightning caused her to drop her umbrella and push her way inside. She slammed the door shut; as if afraid the deadly bolt was right behind her.
“Can you believe this storm? Sunshine one minute and then this the next!” She slipped off her soaked sneakers and socks. “What took you so long? I was out there for five minutes, screaming my fool head off.”
“T was in the shower and didn’t hear you.” Maggie rubbed the towel through her wet tresses, smiling at Sue as she stood there shaking the wetness from her bare legs.

“Are you crazy, sis?” Sue’s tone clearly implied she thought she already knew the answer to that.

“Well, it wasn’t storming this badly when I first got in. Where are the girls?”

“At a birthday party, I’m on my way to pick them up now. I stopped by to tell you the guys are playing a game tomorrow, they usually do every Saturday. And we…”

Maggie grinned, cutting her off. “I’ve already been invited to go tomorrow.” She wisely omitted by Matt. “I just got back from grocery shopping.” She turned toward the kitchen, flipping on several lamps as she went. “I wonder if we’ll be rained out.”

“This isn’t expected to last. If it does rain it won’t be until late afternoon.” Sue followed Maggie to the kitchen. “I take it you’re making a salad for tomorrow?”

Maggie laughed, her gaze following Sue’s to the counter where all the salad stuff was laid out. “What else? You think I’ve suddenly turned into a rabbit? Since you’re here, you can help.” She wondered if Sue was there for a reason. Had she heard about David? If she didn’t bring it up one thing was for sure, Maggie wasn’t going to.

“So, what’s up with you and Matt?”

Talk about changing the subject in midstream! And Maggie had been worried she was going to ask about David! She shot Sue a look that clearly said she felt like she’d just been ambushed. But Sue was smart enough to keep her gaze focused on what she was doing. Maggie’s lips turned down into a frown, wondering who’d been talking. In small towns’ gossip traveled fast.

“You’ve been talking to Steve?” He was a good place to start.

Sue met her eyes, giving a light shrug. “Not exactly. But he does work with Bob every day.” She began washing the vegetables.

“Oh.” Maggie knew she should be angry but the thought of Steve and Bob gossiping like two little old ladies caused her to smile with humor. “And everyone gossips.” She supposed the whole town must know by now, that there was something going on between her and the sheriff. It didn’t matter to her but she wondered what Matt would think about it when he found out tongues were wagging. Would it scare him off? She looked into her sister’s eyes for a few seconds, wondering how much she should tell her. After all, they were sisters. “I love him,” she blurted out, surprised at herself for admitting it.
Sue turned off the tap, mouth dropping open at the admission. Something in Maggie’s eyes must have alerted her to the fact that something was wrong. “Oh, sis.” She gave Maggie a motherly hug. “Does Matt know how you feel?” Maggie nodded. “He’ll come around,” she guessed. “How could he not love you, too?”

Maggie couldn’t blame Sue for misunderstanding the situation. She didn’t know why, but she was suddenly fighting tears. “I think he does love me,” she spoke after awhile.

“But he hasn’t said it?”

Maggie shook her head. “Not in so many words, but he’s shown it. He’s…being cautious.”

Now Sue was the one shaking her head. “Because of Janey.” Maggie agreed with her silently. “From what Steve has said about it, Matt became a different man after she was killed.”

“I can understand why,” Maggie responded. “After David, I didn’t want to get involved with any man. I didn’t want to leave myself open for that kind of hurt again.”

“There’s no comparison and David was a bastard!” Sue’s lips thinned with hate and she angrily snatched up the lettuce and began shredding it. “I’ve never hated anyone as much as I loathe him and what he put you through all those years.”

Maggie jerked back with astonishment, not bothering to remind Sue that it had been her own fault for putting up with him, and no one else’s. What surprised her most was that Sue never swore. Then a smile spread on her face when Sue’s hand flew up to cover her mouth, her eyes rounding. “Don’t tell the girls I swore; they’ll make me wash my mouth out with soap.” They shared a laugh before Sue continued, “I take it Matt’s the one who invited you to the game tomorrow?”

Maggie nodded silently.

“Tell me everything…”

* * * *

Later that evening Maggie sat in the dark on the porch, listening to the sound of the rain surrounding her. The fierce storm from that afternoon was over now, but a light downpour continued to fall, bringing with it the peaceful serenity Maggie needed. She’d always loved the rain and the soothing effects it had on her.

The cabin door was wide open, the light she’d left on filtering through just enough to give Maggie a sense of security. She was waiting for Matt’s call. As soon as the phone company had repaired her lines she’d called to let him know, at his insistence, and he’d promised to call her later that evening. They’d both been a little relieved when finding out some wires had simply
come loose and that her phone problems hadn’t been caused by someone tampering with the lines.

Dammit lay peacefully in the doorway, snoring softly. Matt should be calling her soon. It was getting late, and she knew she wouldn’t go to bed until she heard his voice. One of Granny Markham’s quilts kept the night chill off her, and she tightened it around her more firmly when it appeared the cool air was getting damp.

Her eyes drifted shut as she leaned her head against the leather pad built into the old oak rocker. She brought her feet up and tucked her knees closer to her body, enjoying the gentle sway of the rocker caused by her movements. It would be easy falling asleep, but she fought the urge, realizing it wouldn’t exactly be the safest thing to do.

Maggie didn’t know if it was minutes later or an hour when she heard the noise of a vehicle approaching in the distance. It didn’t worry her, she was certain it was one of Matt’s officers doing his hourly check on her. She could see the headlights coming down the drive toward the cabin, but it was too dark to make out what kind of vehicle. Whoever it was, they were moving at a slow pace, probably because the storm had turned her dirt road into a mass of potholes.

She smiled on recognizing Matt’s truck. Her heart did a little flip when he parked and switched off the ignition. It was raining hard enough to make her wonder if he’d sit inside and wait it out for a few minutes. She could just make out the glitter of his eyes from the interior. She knew he was watching her. Dammit had roused from her sleep and jumped to her feet at his approach, but refused to go beyond the edge of the porch into the rain.

Maggie’s heart swelled with an intense emotion that all but took her breath away. God, why couldn’t he just get over his fear and tell her he loved her? She knew that he did. His windows were fogging but Maggie could still see enough to watch him reach forward for something. She sighed with growing frustration. Mother Nature was working against them. Instead of letting up the sky opened releasing a heavy downpour. No thunder or lightning, just the hard steady echo of water pelting the ground and cabin. She breathed in deeply, growing impatient for Matt’s arms around her.

She kept her eyes on his darkened shadow; barely able to make out that he was talking to someone on his radio. She wondered if he would have to leave. She stood up, letting the quilt drop to the chair behind her, before walking to the edge of the porch. The spray of rain teased her upturned face, refreshed her lightly clad body. If he wasn’t coming to her, she’d go to him. She hardly noticed the cold as she slowly made her way to where Matt sat in his truck. Even in the darkness she could tell he was surprised by her actions. A movement revealed he put his radio down, and in the next second he opened the door and jumped out, covering the ground to reach her in long, hurried strides.

“You little fool!” He swept her up in his strong arms and proceeded to carry her back to the porch. They were both soaked by the time they got there, and once they were under the cover of the roof he let her slip to the ground, keeping her close. “You’re soaked, now.” He kept his arm
tightly around her waist, holding her against him. Maggie couldn’t help noticing they fit together nicely.

“So are you.” She smiled, nuzzling his neck. “You were going to call,” she reminded him, happy he was here. Finding the pulse at his throat she began to suck the skin there, enjoying the salty taste of him. She was hungry for him. Always!

“Would you rather I leave so I can call?” he teased. With one arm around her slender waist he raised his other one so he could bury his fingers in her wet hair.

“No, I like this much better.” She gently pulled away from him. “Come inside and I’ll try to find something you can change into.” She took his hand and turned, trying to pull him with her into the cabin.

But Matt surprised Maggie by pulling her back and into his arms and slanting his mouth firmly over hers. She melted into him without protest, opening her mouth to the onslaught of his and accepting the thrust of his tongue. She was wet too, but nowhere near cold! She was instantly engulfed by a fire that spread rapidly through her body.

She was breathless by the time his mouth left hers. “You’d better hold me up.” Her legs threatened to buckle under her. She clutched at the wet material of his shirt, weakened by the intense emotions running through her.

“Who’s going to hold me up?” he joked, grinning down at her. A frighteningly close flash of lightning suddenly lit the sky and he turned her back toward the door. “We’d better get inside.”

“I think we’d better change into something dry,” she added, her mind racing with ideas at what she might have for Matt, but coming up blank.

“I’ll start a fire while you look.” He indicated the stone fireplace that took up a good portion of the wall. There was a stack of logs on the grate, as well as more against the wall.

“That sounds like heaven!” Maggie agreed, walking away. “I’ll be right back.” She hurried up to the loft to change.

In no time flames were dancing in the hearth, filling the cabin with intimate warmth while casting shadows on the walls around him. Maggie was aware Matt could see her movements from his crouched position before the fire, but didn’t let that stop her from peeling her soaked camisole from her shoulders and breasts. She worked it down her hips, wiggling them as she smoothed the clinging garment down her fanny to the floor. He slowly stood when she was completely naked. His eyes eating her up.

Maggie reached for the dry nightshirt she’d placed on the bed, sensing Matt’s intense interest. Smiling and secure in the knowledge that he found her attractive, she stood there long enough for him to drink his fill. His eyes roamed over her in a visual caress, causing her body to tighten with need, her nipples harden with tingling awareness. The fire he’d started crackled loudly behind
him, the clean fresh scent of burning pine drifted up to her, adding to the intimate atmosphere surrounding them.

Their eyes finally met. A sexy grin spread across Matt’s face. He glanced back at the fire briefly, as though to make sure it was under control, before slowly walking in the direction of the stairs. Their eyes remained glued on each other as he silently moved through the cabin. He took the stairs just as slowly, instinctively knowing where to put his feet. By the time he reached the top, Maggie was trembling with a hunger so strong she felt weak with it.

Matt’s hands went to the buttons on his shirt and he slowly began to undo them, while continuing his unhurried strides toward her. She was still clutching the nightshirt in front of her, but stood her ground. Her pulse leaping with excitement the closer he got.

“I-I’m afraid I haven’t been able to find anything for you to wear.”

He slipped his shirt off his shoulders and let it drop to the floor. Next, his hands dropped to his belt buckle. Her gaze fell to his hands, watching them quickly and expertly undo the belt, before moving on to the snap and zipper of his jeans.

A shiver of wanting ran through her and she caught her breath. He was still moving toward her, it wouldn’t be long before he was right in front of her. He took the time to slip his boots off, then the rest of his clothes, until he was naked. Maggie dropped the nightshirt she’d been clutching in her hands.

They had never been quite so naked in front of each other before and the new experience was a heady one. They took the time to admire their splendid forms, staring at each other like hands fueling their hunger all the more.

Matt’s eyes traveled over Maggie slowly and right before her eyes she saw his arousal lengthen and grow and become heavy with need. The sight of what she did to him turned her on, made her hot. Excited her. When his gaze lingered on her quivering breasts and lower, to the curls between her legs, her body responded by becoming wet and achy.

His eyes darkened with desire, his nostrils flared like a wild animal catching the scent of a receptive mate. The sight of raw passion on his chiseled face revealed what Matt’s feelings were at that moment. Maggie became transfixed on his tall, powerful body. His broad shoulders beckoned her to put her hands there, to explore further the well-defined chest of black fur. The rippling muscles in his arms revealed his strength, drawing her attention there and reminding her how it felt to be enclosed in his embrace.

Her eyes filled with pleasure, continuing to Matt’s lean waist and hips, taking in his long, sturdy legs. His thick, powerful thighs of unmistakable muscle. His stance emphasized the heavy fullness of his sex as it throbbed and reached out to her. She shuddered wildly, primed for love.

“You’re beautiful,” they spoke simultaneously, their faces softening with a smile for a fraction of a second before turning serious again.
“Come here, baby.”

Matt moved first. He reached out, cupping the back of Maggie’s neck and pulling her against him until their heated flesh was touching intimately. He kissed her. At first a soft and gentle touch that was almost exploratory in fashion, but grew quickly out of control when a need that couldn’t be denied engulfed them. Mutual moans of satisfaction split the air. Maggie opened her mouth willingly, letting his tongue have access, meeting his thrust with her own sensual assault. She felt his raging arousal against the core of her womanhood and unconsciously rotated her hips into him, relishing in his low responsive growl.

Suddenly he broke the kiss and sucked in air. His eyes were half closed and glazed with excitement, his nostrils flaring wildly as he breathed in the scent of their combined passion. He caught Maggie by surprise, and turning her around he brought her backside up against the front of him, holding her there with hands that caressed her breasts and belly and back up.

She cried out with pleasure.

Then his mouth was against her shoulder and he was running his lips up the sensitive curve of her neck, nipping at her ear and kissing the side of her face. When her head fell back against his chest he took advantage of what she offered, running his mouth over the exposed column of her throat, kissing the moan of desire that rumbled there.

While he loved her with his mouth, he worshiped Maggie with his hands. They moved over her with strong purpose, not leaving an inch untouched as he explored the full softness of her swelling breasts, smoothing over her stomach and drifting further down to the tuft of curls between her legs. A finger dipped inside, testing her readiness.

She cried out with pleasure, trembling violently, moving her hands behind her to roam over Matt wherever she could reach him, touching him in places that caused him to groan loudly with pleasure. She rubbed her bottom against him and felt him shudder in wild response. Soon a layer of damp heat covered them from their exertions. Before she had time to prepare herself he pushed her toward the bed.

“Damn, Maggie!” he growled, losing control. He forced her down, face first, and entered from behind in one smooth thrust.

“Oh God!” she cried out, rocking against him with unbearable pleasure.

He plunged into her body several times before turning her so that she faced him again. His mouth fastened on a nipple, pulling on the hardened nub until she began squirming wildly beneath him. She cried out with pleasure but he ignored it and moved on to her other breast. When he was done torturing that one he kissed her, guiding his seeking flesh back into her body.

Their mouths remained locked, and Maggie ran her nails down his back as she was engulfed in a moment of intense pleasure. He grunted, lifting his head to look down into her eyes. She found
her wrists grabbed. He forced them to the bed on either side of her head, holding her down while he continued to plunge into her welcoming body. But she wouldn’t be denied her own pleasures. She raised her head and fastened her mouth on one of his nipples, pulling on it deeply. Passion pounded the blood through her heart, chest and head and Maggie knew the end was near. She matched the tempo of Matt’s movements, her body exploding into a million fiery stars, the convulsive tremors signaling the release she’d been striving toward. As she convulsed beneath him, he clutched her to him in a moment of unrestrained need, and slapped his mouth over hers, collapsing as he emptied his seed inside her in a moment of sweet release.
Chapter 17

Quiet minutes slipped by, their heavy breathing mingling with the gentle sound of the constant rain blowing against the bedroom window. Matt moved to his side, bringing Maggie into the crook of his arm and closing his eyes. He could hear the fire snapping below and knew he’d have to get up soon to check on it. He was loath to move, exhausted. Enjoying the feel of Maggie cuddled next to him.

“My,” she breathed against him, her soft breath tickling his ultra sensitive skin. “That was better than a phone call any day.”

His chest rumbled with silent laughter. “You’re shameless.” His heart was still pounding rapidly in his chest and he wondered if he’d ever come down from the high of loving Maggie.

“Is that against the law or something, Sheriff?” She snuggled closer into him.

“No, thank God.”

The cabin was filled with cozy warmth and the fragrant scent of outdoors. He closed his eyes thinking how easy it would be to go to sleep in the welcoming softness of Maggie’s arms. Naked, wrapped in one of her grandmother’s old homemade quilts. Her hand was smoothing over his chest and he wondered if she could feel the pounding of his heart beneath her palm.

The rain didn’t seem to be letting up. Once in awhile the small window was illuminated by a flash of distant lightning. Thunder vibrated in the background, miles away. Maybe the storm was moving on. “I need to check on the fire.” He didn’t make any attempt to move. “What have you got in the fridge that’s edible?”

Maggie raised her head to meet his eyes. “You haven’t had any dinner?” Matt shook his head. There hadn’t been time. “I’ll go down with you and fix something. I’m afraid I wasn’t able to find you anything suitable to wear, so you’ll have to wrap a towel around your waist.” She indicated the towel folded on top of the window seat.

Matt rolled to his feet and glanced down at Maggie, wondering why she remained in bed, beneath the covers. Their gazes met and held. Was that a look of shyness in her eyes? There was no denying the becoming blush on her cheeks. He grinned and turned toward the window seat for the towel. Movement behind him told Matt that Maggie had left the bed, too. By the time he wrapped the overlarge towel around his hips and faced her, she’d slipped into a nightshirt.
“How about I fix you a salad, some cheese and crackers and a beer?”
“Sounds good to me.” Matt kissed the tip of her nose before turning her back around and pushing her in the direction of the stairs. When they reached the bottom Matt went to the fireplace while Maggie headed for the kitchen. Even though they were in different parts of the cabin, they could still see each other, and he found himself glancing to where she was more than once, suddenly struck by the coziness of their situation.

After he stirred the fire and added more logs to it he sank down on the sofa, staring at the flames and enjoying the warmth and peaceful ambiance. Listening to the sounds Maggie was making in the kitchen reminded Matt of the domestic way of life married couples shared. Strangely he found he enjoyed that too, not realizing how much he missed having someone to share his life with until that moment.

Maggie brought a tray out and placed it on the antique blanket chest that served as a coffee table. It was clear he was the only one who was going to be eating, but there were two beers. “You don’t have to wait on me; I could have come to the kitchen.” He automatically opened his mouth to accept the carrot she offered him.

She smiled, loving him with her eyes. “Enjoy it while you can. I’m not very domestic.” She took one of the beers and settled back against the cushions.

“You’re doing a damn good imitation of it.” His eyes met hers as he reached forward for some cheese. There was no denying the dreamy shine in Maggie’s eyes, or the flushed tone of her rosy skin, indicating an inner glow of satisfaction. “Except for one thing.”

“What?” She took a drink, staring at the flames dancing in the hearth.

“You’ve disappointed me.” He waited for her reaction and as he expected, she turned his way. “You haven’t asked me to…sleep over again.”

He saw the instant relief on her face. “I’m prepared tonight; I bought an alarm clock today.”

“Tonight you don’t need one.” This time he offered her a bite.

The phone rang and Maggie jumped, laughing at the expression on Matt’s face when she’d nearly chomped down on his fingers. She reached for it. “Hello?” Her eyes remained on him while she waited for a response. “Hello? Is someone there?”

Matt had been getting ready to take a drink; his hand paused in midair. He fixed his gaze on Maggie’s face, trying to read her expression, yet she didn’t seem apprehensive. His eyes turned hard when instincts warned him of something he couldn’t see, or hear. Something dangerous. His thoughts immediately went to her ex-husband, and all his protective instincts came to the surface full force.

“Hello? I can…”
Matt took the phone from her. “Who’s there?” he demanded, in a voice of steel. The person at the other end quickly hung up.

“Why did you do that?” Maggie replaced the receiver after he handed it back to her, her brow furrowing with confusion.

“I wanted whoever it was to know that you aren’t alone. And that you have a man here with you.”

A few quiet seconds passed before she asked, “Do you think it was David?”

Matt got up to stir the fire again. “It’s possible.” There was no reason to lie to Maggie. They both knew her ex was out there somewhere, and that he was crazy. Matt moved the embers with the poker, adding another log. When he was satisfied the fire was safe, he turned back to her. “I want you to move in with me, until we get your ex back in custody,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I’m not going to spend the rest of my life running from David, or hiding from him, Matt. I won my independence the hard way two years ago and I intend to keep it. I can take care….” She halted abruptly.

“Of yourself?” he filled in when she wisely broke off what she’d been about to say. They both knew what almost happened to her the last time David got his hands on her. At least Maggie was smart enough not to admit to something even she wasn’t sure of.

Matt fought to stay calm, his police training reminding him it would be better to try and reason with Maggie then force her to do something she didn’t want to do. But he knew it was just a matter of time before his temper exploded, because he was too emotionally involved. He sighed deeply, struggling to keep his voice calm. “I can’t be with you twenty-four hours a day to pro—”

“That’s exactly the point, Matt. You can’t baby-sit me. I won’t let you.” She put her beer down on the table in front of her, and started to reach for a cracker before changing her mind. Her hand was trembling.

“That’s why I want you move to my place. At least David won’t know where to find you if you’re there.” He was afraid to move from the hearth; afraid he’d try and shake some sense into her stubborn head.

“And what am I supposed to do once I move there? Never leave the house? I might as well be in jail, then.”

The tilt of her chin told Matt she wasn’t going to back down and he was hard-pressed to understand why. She loved him. She’d shown him that more than once. He thought she’d be jumping at his offer to move in with him. In spite of his resolutions to remain calm, he felt anger rising, threatening to boil over.
“Mind telling me why you’re so dead set against it?” he gritted the words out through clenched teeth, crossing his arms. The heat of the fire behind him didn’t hold a candle to the heat rolling through him from sheer frustration. Maggie’s flushed expression revealed she was just as irritated. Couldn’t she see that moving in with him would solve so many issues between them? “Not going to tell me, sweetheart?” His burning eyes held her captive, if only for a second.

She glared at him as though he should already know the reason, and then lashed out angrily. “Figure it out for yourself!” She jumped from the couch and stomped to the kitchen.

Matt knew he was too angry to follow her. He needed to cool down before getting anywhere within a foot of her. The thought of leaving her alone out there to fend for herself went against the grain. He had the sudden unreasonable urge to arrest her and put her shapely little butt back in his jail! He hadn’t realized what a stubborn little minx he’d fallen in love with. He could admit that to himself.

It wasn’t a surprise she let out a startled shriek when the phone rang a second time. Her gaze shot to his, a worry in her eyes she refused to voice. She didn’t make any attempt to reach for the phone and on the third ring he finally snatched it up and brought it to his ear. “Hello?” He handed it to her almost immediately. “It’s your mom.”

He purposely turned his back, trying not to listen in on their conversation. But it was difficult in the small cabin, and from the gist of what Maggie was saying, her mother was getting ready to fly off somewhere and wanted Maggie to go with her. He picked up the remains of his dinner and brought it to the kitchen. He was rinsing the plate off when he heard Maggie say goodbye.

“Mom’s flying to Boston for a few days and wants company,” she explained when he looked up from what he was doing.

“Maybe that’s a good idea.”

“Matt…” She placed her hand on his bare arm. Their eyes clung to each other, both determined to have their own way and neither giving an inch. “Please don’t let this come between us.”

This, meaning that once again she was going to ignore a possible danger to herself and refuse to take the necessary precautions to protect herself. He leaned in close, so close that she had to tilt her head back to give him room.

His next words were precise and to the point. “You can’t have it both ways, Maggie. You wanted me to care for you. Against my will you made me care for you. When Janey died, part of me died with her. I never want to go through that kind of hell again. Do you understand? I will do whatever it takes to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” He watched the flare of alarm in Maggie’s eyes, ignoring it. “If it means putting up walls and walking away, I’ll do it.”

Hearing the words echoing through the cabin, Matt had to wonder who he was kidding. It was already too late. Walking away from Maggie would hurt like hell and be damn near impossible.
He was already too involved with her emotionally to erect any walls now. She’d crawled inside his heart. He watched tears fill her eyes and hated himself for hurting her.

She shook her head, unwilling to accept what he was saying. “No one goes through life without experiencing hurt, Matt. We—”

“That may be true,” he agreed gruffly, not wanting to get into that conversation again. “But we all have certain amounts of self-preservation.” He walked back to the fireplace, and tested the dryness of his jeans. Satisfied, he slipped them on. Only when the zipper was up and the snap closed did he meet her gaze again. “I’ll stay here tonight. In the morning I’ll take you to the church.” He couldn’t make her listen to reason. His failure to do so left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“And after that?”

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment, wondering if he was making a big mistake. “After that, you’ve got that hard fought for independence you want so badly.”

“I suppose I had that coming.” Her tone was dejected. “I’m going up to bed.”

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” He looked over at it. It didn’t look very comfortable. He’d have to make do with the throw on the back and one of the decorative pillows on the end.

“Here.”

Matt barely had time to glance up. The next thing he knew Maggie was dropping a pillow and blanket down to him. He managed to catch them before they hit the floor. They exchanged glances, long enough for Matt to recognize the glisten of tears in hers.

“I just want you to know, Matt; if you’d asked me to move in with you for a different reason I’d have jumped at it. I love you. Until you can be honest with yourself and admit you love me too I guess there’s nothing left to say.”

His gut clenched at the teary softness of her voice, and he realized the walls around his heart weren’t high enough to keep Maggie out.
Chapter 18

Morning came much sooner than Maggie wanted it to. She lay in bed for a few minutes, quietly listening to the noises coming from outside. It had finally stopped raining, and she could hear the robins singing as they flew through the giant maple trees outside her window. Reaching over she pushed open the small window, letting in a gust of fresh air.

Other noises began to filter through the cabin and penetrate her consciousness. Matt must be up, and by his movements below, she could tell he was in the kitchen. The smell drifting up to Maggie told her he’d made a pot of coffee. She threw back the covers and went to the railing to peer below.

She couldn’t see him. But she could see where he’d apparently spent the night. Not on the too small couch, but on the old braided rug in front of the hearth. The blanket and pillow she’d thrown down were laid out in a way that revealed he’d made a bed before the fire, which had long ago burned out. It would have been nice sleeping before the fire in Matt’s arms.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

She glanced in the direction of his voice. He was still barefoot and shirtless, his jeans unsnapped and parted open. One hand was holding a mug of coffee and the other one was running through his thick, uncombed hair. Lord…he was a sexy sight first thing in the mornings.

“Please.” Maggie tried to gauge his mood. Was he still angry with her? An outrageous thought crossed her mind that if she went downstairs naked whatever was bugging Matt would all be forgotten. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

Before Maggie descended the stairs she slipped into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt and quickly ran a brush through her hair. She haphazardly pulled it into a loose bun, fastening it in place with a large clip.

When she went down to the kitchen she found Matt leaning against the counter. He was staring out the window above the sink, obviously deep in thought and sipping his coffee. Maggie didn’t know what it was that alerted him she was there, but he turned and met her eyes briefly, before letting his gaze drop to take in the rest of her. She knew she’d looked better, and averted her gaze while reaching for the mug of coffee he’d poured for her.
“You missed Sue’s call this morning.” Maggie’s eyes flew to the clock, it was only nine. “She said she’d see you at the game later.” He turned his attention back outside the window, and Maggie wondered what he found so interesting out there.

“Did she happen to say why she called?”

His tone remained indifferent. “They were going to swing by and pick you up.”

She wondered what Sue thought about Matt answering the phone so early in the morning.

“Oh.”

She opened up the refrigerator. “Would you like some waffles for breakfast?” Not waiting for Matt’s answer, Maggie pulled the metal door down to the small freezer, where she kept the frozen waffles.

The first thing her eyes fell on when she opened it was the small pint of ice cream she kept on hand for emergencies, like when she was suffering from PMS. Moving it to one side, she began to forage around when her eyes landed on something tucked away in the very back. Some unidentifiable leftover wrapped in foil. She frowned, unable to remember when the last time was that she wrapped something up to freeze. She pulled it out. Curiosity prompting her to open it up.

What in the world… Whatever it was, when she peeled the foil away she came to a plastic bag. Sue must have put something in there and forgotten about it, that was the only explanation. With a smile she opened the package and peered inside. Her smile faded. She sucked in her breath. Her eyes widened with shocked disbelief and she screamed, dropping the bag to the floor. With her hand flying to her mouth she turned and ran to the bathroom, praying that she made it in time. She just managed to lift the toilet seat and then she was retching, loudly and uncontrollably.

“My God!” She heard Matt utter loudly between her sobs. Maggie slid to the floor in the corner next to the old porcelain sink, and hugged her knees to her chest. She cried uncontrollably, as shock rapidly spread through her system. The next thing she knew, Matt was striding through the opened doorway.

“Baby.” He sank to the floor next to her and pulled her onto his lap. His arms cradled Maggie to him tightly. She welcomed his strength and turned her face into him, welcoming his heat flowing into her cold, numb body. She couldn’t control her violent tremors, unable to get the horrible image out of her mind.

“David…it had to be David…Oh, God, Matt, he’s twisted! He’s never done anything like this before.”

“Hush, sweetheart.”

“I wondered where Lucky had disappeared; I hadn’t seen her lately and thought she just ran off. How could he, Matt?” There was no reason to believe that David wasn’t somewhere close now,
he was the only one cruel enough to do something in such a drastic manner to get his meaning across. “How can anyone be so, so cruel?” A sob shook her and Matt held her even tighter against him.

“I hate him…I hate him!” Maggie cried into his neck.

Her mind churned with thoughts at how David had gotten into the cabin, and apparently after Matt had added the deadbolt. Thank God he’d stayed with her last night. She closed her eyes and let out a slow, shaky breath, realizing she was shaking inside with the knowledge that her ex-husband had crossed the line. What did that mean for her?

When Matt started to move Maggie clung to him like a frightened child. Quietly drawing strength from his solid presence. She was afraid of letting go. He reached up for the washcloth hanging over the towel rod, ran it under the faucet, and gently began to wipe her hot face with it. The cold wet cloth felt wonderful against her hot skin.

“Thank you,” she breathed softly. “Why, Matt? How can anyone be so cruelly evil?”

She tilted her head just enough to meet the quiet concern in his eyes. She watched a muscle twitch in his clenched jaw, comforted that he was holding her like he was never going to let her go. God, she probably knew the answer to that already. What makes anyone do the things they do? For some it was booze and drugs. Others were just sick in the head, warped by something that had happened in their pasts and unable to cope.

“He’s sick, honey. That’s all I can say.” He started to get up but she held him down. “I need to make a few calls, honey. We’re only going as far as the living room sofa, okay?”

She nodded. He moved to his feet and before she could protest swept her into his arms. Maggie found herself carried into the other room. “The kitchen…” She shuddered with revulsion and turned her face against the naked warmth of his shoulder.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said in a clipped tone, depositing her on the couch.

A sudden whining at the door drew their attention. “I let Dammit out to do her morning business.” Maggie nearly left the couch in a panic, but Matt easily held her back, understanding what she was afraid of. “I’ll let her in.”

Her gaze followed him to the door, holding her breath until she saw Dammit fly through the opening directly to her. “Lock the door!”

Rejoining her on the couch, Matt sat sideways on the edge, facing her. “When’s the last time you saw Lucky?”

“I didn’t see her at all yesterday.” Maggie clutched Dammit to her, stroking her head. “She came and went as she pleased and usually only came around when it was time to eat.”

“Have you been remembering to lock the door behind you?”
Welcoming his touch, she leaned her face against his palm, nodding. “When I came home and saw the key to the new deadbolt on the table, I put it inside my purse so I wouldn’t forget.” Matt grew quiet for a moment, as though trying to come up with a solution at how David got inside. “There aren’t that many windows in the place, I’ll check them to see if there’s any evidence of tampering or forced entry. I’ll check the door to the mudroom too and…” He halted abruptly, giving Maggie an odd look. “Wait a minute.” Dark eyebrows slanted in a frown. “You said key. I left two keys, honey. What did you do with the spare?”

Turning towards him, Maggie’s eyes sought his. “No, there was only one key. It was taped to the note you left.” She was sure of it.

“Damn!” Matt exploded, punching his fist against the chest in front of him so hard that the items on top of it rattled noisily. Dammit jumped off Maggie’s lap in fright. “So, that’s how he got in,” he finished, more to himself. “I should have held on to them and handed them to you personally.”

“But I don’t understand. I’ve been home the whole time. Sue even came by and we…” She paused, remembering the small noise she heard while taking her shower the day before. A sound drowned out by the rumble of thunder, so insignificant at the time that she’d brushed it off as something playing on the radio.

Oh God! It must have been David. He must have come by while she was still out shopping and taken one of the keys. He could have come in at any time, and obviously had while she’d been in the shower. That was the only time he could have put Lucky in the…

She shuddered, a knot of sick fear settling in her stomach. He could have come in while she and Matt were… She couldn’t finish the thought. David was obviously playing one of his sick twisted games with her, trying to regain control of her through fear.

“Matt?”

His eyes met hers, a resigned sigh leaving his body. “It’s my fault, honey. I should have…”

“No!” She quickly moved into a kneeling position, gently taking his face between her hands, searching his eyes deeply. “It’s not your fault. You don’t know David. He would have found a way, believe me.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I want to go home with you.” She held her breath, afraid to go on but knowing that she had to. “If you still want me.”

“Want you? Hell, I’d just about made up my mind to move in with you if you were too stubborn to come to my place.” His hands were rough against her waist as he pushed her slightly away from him so he could look directly into her eyes. His expression was almost angry. “You have to ask?”

Maggie shrugged slightly and said hesitantly, “I know you…want my body.”
“That’s not all I want!” he barked, leaving the couch without elaborating. “I need to make some calls, but first I’ll clean up the kitchen.”

“Matt?” He stood above her, his frown softening. “Please call Sue and tell her what’s going on. I don’t particularly feel like being around a lot of people right now.”

He nodded. “Do you want anything?”

She shook her head brusquely, knowing she wouldn’t be able to hold anything down. When Matt walked away she grabbed the small accent pillow and hugged it to her, relaxing back against the cushions. She closed her eyes, not wanting to think about what Matt was doing in the kitchen. But she could hear his movements, and blocked out the noise by sending her mind elsewhere.

Something she’d learned to do during her worst moments with David.
Maggie wasn’t a morning person so she didn’t understand why she was the first one up. Maybe it had something to do with conking out so early the night before on the sofa. She awoke to delicious warmth beside her, realizing it was the heat coming off the body lying against her. Matt had apparently carried her up to bed. Smiling dreamily, she listened to his soft snores before glancing at the clock on the dresser to see that it was only six o’clock. She couldn’t recall the last time she saw six in the morning.

Willing herself back to sleep didn’t work so she decided to get up and go below to make some coffee. She carefully slipped from beneath Matt’s arm, holding her breath when he started to stir; relieved to see he was only changing positions. He must be exhausted. She stared down at him tenderly. He’d had a late-night call after they’d arrived at his house. She still smiled at the thought of Steve showing up fifteen minutes after Matt had left. Matt wasn’t taking any chances with her, Steve had confessed.

It didn’t take Maggie long to slip into her jeans and tee shirt before making her way down to the kitchen. First on her agenda was coffee, but Maggie’s search only turned up an empty coffee canister with a metal scoop in it. Sighing with disappointment, she looked around for some tea bags, which would be a poor substitute but something warm at least.

Damn! Not even a package of hot cocoa. She glanced around the kitchen for a minute, in quiet contemplation, coming to the decision there was nothing left to do but make a trip to the little country store down the street. Retrieving her purse from the living room sofa she halted midway back to the kitchen.

“Damn!” She didn’t have her car.

Her eyes lit on the keys to Steve’s jeep, which he’d dropped on the counter the night before. Maggie wasn’t in the habit of borrowing someone else’s vehicle without asking first, but under the circumstances, she didn’t think Steve would mind. She’d leave a note, just in case someone woke up before she returned. The last thing she wanted was for Matt to wake up and find her gone. She didn’t want him worrying over her unnecessarily.

It only took five minutes to reach the store located less than a mile from Matt’s house, but when Maggie arrived there she found it closed. A note on the door explained that Mr. Winters had been called away for a family emergency and would return later in the week. She let out a
frustrated groan, more determined than ever to have her coffee. Waterville was just a few miles
away and she decided to make the trip, since she was already halfway there.

Early morning traffic was quiet. With a little luck she’d be back at Matt’s before anyone was the
wiser. It didn’t take long to reach the grocery store. She slipped inside, made her purchases and
was on her way back out to the jeep when her eyes landed on a car parked across the street.
Stunned surprise caused Maggie’s steps to falter. It couldn’t be… Was that her car? Maggie
knew there were other old Mustangs on the road, but refused to brush it off as a coincidence. It
was the same color.

She tossed her purse and packages in the jeep and raced across the street. Her first thought was
that the car had been abandoned. It made sense, if it were stolen. Even through layers of dirt and
mud she’d recognize it anywhere. It was her car! Her gaze moved over it, noticing the new dents
and scratches beneath the caked-on dirt. The paint had been scraped off the driver’s door, too.
Further investigation revealed the back bumper was hanging half off. Whoever had stolen it had
done their best to disguise it by using it badly. It was filled with garbage, as though someone had
been living in it.

She had to call Matt! Her cell phone was in her purse. Remembering her purse was back at
Steve’s jeep she swung around to go get it.

“Going somewhere, Maggie girl?”

Maggie halted, meeting the evil glare in David’s wild, bloodshot eyes. No! She tried to back up
but she was frozen in place, unable to think or react. Even when he began to move toward her
slowly she was unable to do anything more than breathe. It was as if he knew that fear held her
captive for him. “David…” Maggie croaked, feeling her heart racing in her chest. She was afraid
to take her eyes off him. The streets were empty this time of the morning. The few people
walking about were oblivious to what was going on around them.

“This couldn’t have worked out better, baby. I saw you back at the old store in Summerfield and
followed you into town.”

Why hadn’t she noticed him behind her? Because her mind had been on something else, or rather
someone else, and not what was behind her. “Please, David, just go away. Take my car and—”

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? Well, you’re my wife—”

Maggie shook her head. “No, David. Not any longer. You—”

“Yes!” he hissed. “You’re mine. No one else will have you.”

He rushed forward and Maggie found herself backed up against the car. She cried out with alarm,
glancing wildly around them. Searching for an outlet.
“Afraid, Maggie? Why?” David moved up against her, sneering into her face. “Have you done something you shouldn’t have?”

Her hands came up to push David away. “David…” Panic like she’d never known before welled in her throat, threatening to choke her. The sharp sound of squealing tires against pavement drew both their attention to the direction of a police car, making an illegal turn to head back in their direction. Relief flooded Maggie, when it dawned on her they were the reason the police had turned around. Maybe they’d recognized her stolen car, or David’s wanted posters. She didn’t care which.

With a curse David grabbed Maggie by the arm and pulled her away from her car. Before she could comprehend what he was doing he jerked the door open. “Get in!”

Fear overwhelmed Maggie, that if she got in the car with him she’d never see Matt again. “No!” She dug in her heels when he tried to push her into the car. Her gaze remained fixed on the approaching police car. “Help!” she screamed when she noticed their window was open and they were close enough to hear. “Help!” They turned on their siren and began to race in their direction.

“Get in!” He easily forced Maggie behind the wheel. When he released her arm she wasted no time crawling to the passenger side and reaching for the handle. “Listen, bitch.” The hand twisting in her hair was cruel and unrelenting, almost snapping Maggie’s neck when he yanked her around to face him. “Don’t make me cut you.” A knife materialized from nowhere. “You have no choice, understand that, bitch? You should have thought about the consequences when you let them put me back in prison.”

The words were snarled at Maggie and she shuddered at the thought of being cut. David was desperate, dangerous and mean enough to do it. Lucky’s lifeless little body was testament to that. His hand forced her face up against his, and she couldn’t see anything but the hatred in eyes.

David suddenly pushed her away from him and turned to start the car. He pulled away from the curb, giving the police a crude hand gesture as they sped past. Maggie turned in her seat. None of them were Matt or his men, but she breathed a little sigh of relief when she saw them turn to follow. One of them was on the radio. She turned back to David.

“David, give yourself up,” Maggie began, trembling violently. “You’ll never escape—”

“Shut up!” he screamed, driving like a maniac. “Who’ll take care of you if I go back to prison?”

Maggie realized David was serious and shuddered, looking away. He was high on something, and insane. The years of drugs and booze had warped his mind. And he’d gone too far this time. She did as she was told, secure in the knowledge that the police were right behind them. Then wondered if she was going to come out alive after all, with the way David was speeding through traffic.
He ignored red lights and took turns that caused the car to rock dangerously back and forth. Other drivers were forced to squeal to a halt to avoid a collision. They were leaving Waterville and heading into the country, back toward Springfield. Maggie wondered how he thought he was going to outrun the police once they were out in the open. It didn’t seem to be a concern for him. He floored the gas pedal, flying over dips and valleys in the road like a madman. Maggie wanted to buckle up, but the car didn’t have seat belts, so she was forced to improvise by clutching the dashboard. More than once she cried out in fright and squeezed her eyes shut every time they sped over a hill, too afraid to see what they might encounter on the other side.

Even though she could hear sirens piercing the air behind them she worked up the nerve to glance back one time, just to make sure she wasn’t hearing things. It surprised and relieved her to see several other police cars had joined the chase. And when they cleared a surprisingly steep hill, it was Matt’s big black truck she saw at the roadblock they were coming upon.

His truck was parked sideways in the narrow road, a siren flashing brightly on top. He’d positioned himself safely on the other side, leaning over the top with his gun drawn and pointing directly at them. “Matt!” she breathed softly; unaware she’d said his name out loud.

David glanced in her direction with a nasty scowl on his face. “Save your breath, baby, no one’s going to save you this time. If I can’t have you, I’ll fix it so no one will.”

David showed no signs of relenting and tears filled Maggie’s eyes, clouding her vision. Two of Matt’s officers and their cars were flanked on either side of his truck, but it would be an easy thing to go around them, which is exactly what David did. She cried out, turning in her seat to watch Matt getting further and further away.

“David, please! You…”

Without warning he reached over, grabbed her by the hair and forced her around to face him. His expression was wild, and terror gripped her when she saw the madness swimming in his eyes. His lips curled back in a snarl. “Is he the one?” He twisted his hand cruelly, until Maggie cried out with pain. “Has he had you? Huh, Maggie, has he fucked you?” He didn’t give her a chance to reply, giving her head a vicious shake. “Has he?!”

Crying out, Maggie reached back to his hand, trying to loosen his hold. His eyes shifted back and forth between her and the path they were taking, and at the high speed they were traveling it was just a matter of time before he lost control. The tires skidded and slipped on the loose gravel on the shoulder of the road.

For a few breathless seconds they were spinning out of control on the wet grass beyond. Maggie screamed, as everything whirled around her making her sick and dizzy. She held onto the dashboard and door handle for dear life, screaming again when they sideswiped a tree. The car came to a jarring halt. For a moment Maggie thought it was over. But David was already taking action, revving up the engine to take off again. She glanced behind them in time to see Matt and his men jumping into their vehicles. It was obvious they were going to follow. The police cars that had been following them from town also closed in.
The chase was over before it began once the car sputtered and died. Swearing up a storm, Maggie glanced at David nervously, watching as he frantically tried to restart the car. It was then that she noticed the gas gauge; they’d run out of gas! Elation raced through her, until David finally noticed it too, turning ugly. She barely had time to brace herself before he grabbed her and dragged her out of the car.

“David, give yourself up! You can get help—”

“I’m not going back to prison!” He whispered the words against the back of her ear, holding her against the front of him. “This is the end of the line for us!” he grated. “If I die, you die, too!”

Maggie slipped on the wet grass, and he momentarily lost his hold on her. Hauling her easily to her feet, he viciously slapped her with the back of his hand. Maggie saw stars and her knees buckled, but he refused to let her faint. She was frighteningly aware that he still had the knife in his hand.

“Move it, bitch, or I’ll slit your throat right here and now! In front of everyone!” He was in a panic. Matt’s truck and the police cars closed in on them from all directions. Doors flew open and they were suddenly surrounded by uniformed men as they jumped out with their guns drawn, and ready. Matt took a stand with the rest of them, keeping his gun trained on David, but his eyes were on Maggie.

“Don’t come any closer, or my wife gets it!” To prove he wasn’t bluffing, David pulled Maggie’s head back, touching the blade to her arched throat. His intentions were clear to everyone present.

Maggie was afraid to swallow, noticing how badly David’s hand was shaking. Afraid if she did the movement would cause the knife to accidentally cut her. Her terrified gaze was glued to the quiet strength she drew from Matt’s brown eyes. She told him over and over again that she loved him, silently mouthing the words as tears slipped down her face.

“Take it easy, buddy. We only want to help you,” someone said, who didn’t matter.

“Sure you want to help me, straight back into jail!” David snarled. “No thanks! I’ve been there!”

“Then take one of us in exchange for the woman,” another officer suggested. “She looks done in. She’ll only drag you down.”

“I’m not stupid!” David growled near Maggie’s ear. “I have a better chance of getting away with her, than with any of you.” The hand holding the knife was relaxing, indicating David was either getting tired, or he was just that sure of himself.

Maggie began to breathe a little easier when she noticed the blade wasn’t touching her throat. She swallowed, surprised when David allowed her to move her head in a more normal position.
“What’s your problem, fella? Maybe we can help you. Talk to us.”

David actually had the gall to laugh, but it was an evil sound, revealing how insane he’d become. “My problem at the moment is getting away from you guys!”

“Leave the woman, and take my truck,” Matt offered calmly. He seemed tense and ready.

“Now, why would I want to leave her behind? She’s the reason I’m here. We belong together, till death do us part.” David moved the blade up and down Maggie’s vulnerable throat in a vulgar caress. Maggie shuddered. He obviously didn’t recognize Matt. “I can take her, and your truck.”

“David…”

He forced Maggie into silence by reminding her about the knife at her throat, pressing it against her flesh slightly until the tiniest sting indicated he’d pierced her flesh. His tone matched the deadly seriousness in his eyes. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted, baby. I could have had you any time…out at the cabin. I was there you know.” A sadistic laugh escaped him as he continued to run the blade of the knife along her arched throat. “Cleaned out the freezer lately?” David laughed cruelly before turning his attention back to the police. “I want a gun, too.”

“We can’t do that,” someone replied without hesitation.

That enraged David more. “Then maybe I should do something to change your minds!” His face turned red with frustration. “Maybe I should prove how serious I am!” His hand twisted painfully in Maggie’s hair, jerking her head back further.

Scared and shaking, Maggie began to realize the reason the police hadn’t made their move yet was because of her. It was clear David wasn’t going to let her go. And she knew they would never give him a gun. She knew she would have to help them in some way.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said hesitantly, trembling uncontrollably. Her eyes pleaded with Matt, willing him to understand what she was doing.

“Don’t you dare!” David gave her a rough shake.

“I-I can’t help it! Oh God…here it comes!” Maggie made a gagging sound and David let her go. He jumped back, momentarily caught off-guard and surprising them all. Maggie knew he’d recover quickly once his initial repulsion wore off. With a scream she threw herself to the ground.

“You bitch!” David lunged for her when he realized her deception, raising the knife high above his head and bringing it down toward her.

Maggie closed her eyes, bringing her arms over her head for protection when a volley of gunfire erupted all around her. David’s body jerked backwards from the force, the knife flying from his hand as he hit the ground, just inches away from her.
She refused to look at him, scrambling to her feet with thoughts of getting as far away from there as possible. She didn't know who reached her first, or whose strong hands took her shoulders to propel her further away. Maggie only knew when she turned she found herself in the safe haven of Matt’s powerful embrace.

“Matt,” she cried huskily, burying her face against his shirt, shaking so badly that he had to hold her up. Her fingers curled into his shirt. “I was so scared!” she murmured, against his chest. His strong arms tensed around her, almost crushing the air from her lungs. But she didn’t care. After a few moments he turned Maggie toward his truck and gently nudged her in that direction.

“Come on; let’s get you away from here.”

She glanced up at him with watery eyes. “You’re not going to baby me, are you?” She managed a shaky smile.

“Humor me, sweetheart. You’ve just been through a harrowing experience. You might not realize it yet because reaction hasn’t set in.” When she started to look back Matt wouldn’t let her. He opened the door to his truck and ushered her inside.

Maggie realized it, but nothing seemed to matter as long as he was there. She leaned her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. She didn’t understand, but something was happening to her. She suddenly felt strange, drained. Detached from her surroundings. Noises and voices seemed to be coming from far away…

Maggie was vaguely aware of the firm lips pressing against her forehead. “I’ll be right back, honey,” he said softly, with deep feeling. And then she let the dark void of warmth and safety swallow her up until she knew no more.
“Hello, beautiful.”

Maggie had been trying to force herself awake for the better part of an hour. Hearing Matt’s sexy voice brought a blissful smile of welcome on her face. She slowly opened her eyes to see him staring down at her. “Good morning.” She moved her body in a lazy stretch, sighing softly. “I feel like I’ve been sleeping for hours.”

He laughed softly. “You have. Understandably, considering what you went through yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Goodness, how long have I been sleeping?”

She sat up and rested her back against the pillows, slightly confused. Glancing down at the large shirt covering her, Maggie instinctively knew it belonged to Matt. A quick peek revealed she was completely naked underneath. Matt gave her a wolfish look, his eyes dancing like polished jewels.

“About ten hours.” He chuckled. “After we finished up at the crime scene, I brought you home and put you right to bed.”

Maggie reached for his cup, needing a shot of caffeine as she slowly began to recall the events of the previous day. She sobered, as everything came back to her with startling clarity. “David…” She couldn’t bring herself to say more.

“It’s over, baby.” Matt’s eyes took on a hard gleam. “He’ll never hurt you again, Maggie.”

All she could do was acknowledge it with a brief nod of her head. She didn’t want the details. David had paid the ultimate price for his obsession. Perhaps if she still harbored any feelings for him other than hate, she’d feel more than just guilty relief. “I can’t believe I slept straight through the night.” She set the cup down on the nightstand that was close by.

Reaching forward, Matt’s hand tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Well, there might have been a moment or two when you, ah, might not have been fully asleep.” He leaned forward, just enough to kiss the corner of her mouth.
Maggie caught her breath, wishing his mouth had lingered longer. Their eyes met and held. “You didn’t by any chance take advantage of me during one of those, ah, semiconscious moments… did you? I mean, I’d hate not to have remembered it if you did.”

He shook his head sadly, not able to hide the devilish twinkle in his eyes. Then reaching out, he trailed his fingers down her exposed throat, spreading fire as he went along. “Your virtue was quite safe with me last night.” He leaned forward. Their lips meshed briefly, too briefly. “Although, I was mighty tempted. Especially when you curled into me and teased me into arousal.”

Maggie stared at him with puzzlement, her gaze focused on his lips, until she comprehended what he was talking about. A soft smile reached her eyes and her hand came up to gently caress the side of Matt’s face. “Tempted, to do what?” She could hardly lift her voice above a whisper. She couldn’t disguise the reaction of her body when Matt’s fingers continued to trace over her, moving underneath the shirtsleeves to the skin beneath. She felt her nipples tighten. She trembled.

The smile in his eyes contained a sensuous flame. “To do this.” His hand moved to the front of her shirt, slowly unbuttoning the buttons there.

Maggie swallowed with difficulty, growing warm when his fingers brushed over her skin with each button he undid. “What else were you tempted to do?” she asked huskily, her breath catching. She wet her lips.

Matt parted her shirt. “This.” He lowered his head, kissing the hollow at her throat before traveling down in a stream of kisses, to her quivering breasts. He teased them with butterfly touches.

Maggie trembled. “What else?” She felt the blood race though her body, like molten fire.

“Maybe a little of this.” His tongue snaked out, licking her taut nipples while his hands came up to cup her breasts, tenderly caressing them. She was surprised to feel the slight tremor in his caress.

Maggie cried out softly, throwing her head back and arching into his hands. “Anything else?” She held her breath.

A chuckle erupted from Matt that didn’t have anything to do with humor. He pulled Maggie away from the pillows and followed her down upon the bed with his body, covering her like a blanket, flexing his hips against her and letting her feel his erection.

“You’re shameless, sweetheart.”

Maggie grinned and accepted his kiss, opening her mouth beneath his willingly. Arching her hips she wished he were inside her. “I know what I want.” She reveled in her power when Matt lost
control and ground against her, closing his eyes with a groan. “We’re going to be okay, aren’t we?” Moisture filled her eyes. She loved him so much!

“More than okay.” His arms moved to either side of her head and his eyes delved deeply down into hers. For the first time Maggie saw the love she’d never had a problem expressing, in his gaze.

“I love you, Maggie,” he breathed hoarsely against her quivering mouth. “I have for a long time.”

Maggie jerked her head back from his teasing lips, her eyes rounding at his husky admission. She met the desire in his eyes with awe. The tears in her eyes spilled over, onto the bed. “You love me?” she whispered, voicing her thoughts.

“God, yes!” Matt declared passionately, burying his hands in her hair and ravishing her trembling mouth. “I’ve been a fool, Maggie.”

“Yes, you have.” Her heart swelled with happiness like she’d never known. “You’re a stubborn man.” She smiled against his mouth.

“I need a good woman to keep me straight,” Matt agreed, nuzzling her throat. His hands moved to her hips, tugging at Maggie’s thong. “Are you up to the task?” he teased.

She laughed huskily. “Are you?” Her hand moved between them, caressing his shaft. “Yes, I see that you are.” Since he was wearing pajama bottoms Maggie had no problems slipping her hand inside and caressing his hot, hungry flesh. She shivered with pleasure.

He sucked in his breath. “I’m ready to take that risk again, Maggie, with you. I need a second chance at love. Will you marry me, sweetheart?”

For a moment, time stood still. Maggie’s hand ceased movement. Matt pulled back slightly so they could make eye contact. She hadn’t been expecting a marriage proposal. Her heart swelled and tears slipped from her eyes. “Yes!” she gasped. “I’ll marry you.”

Joy raced through her. She pulled him closer, running her lips over every inch of his face, showing him just how much she loved him in return. It had been a long road between them but she’d finally proven to Matt, love was worth taking a second chance on. And she was going to prove it to him every day for the rest of their lives!

The End

****Please continue reading for information on the author’s up-coming books. ****
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tory has wanted to be a writer since she was a kid, but life always seemed to get in the way. She didn’t get serious until a few years ago, when encouragement from her family prompted her into submitting to a publisher. It surprised and thrilled her when a couple months after submitting she received her first contract offer. Originally from Maine, Tory resides in sunny and always hot Florida. Retired from Disney, she lives in Deltona with her daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren.

Writing is a hobby for Tory. It thrills her to be able to share her stories. And she loves seeing her characters come to life with each new book cover.

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Someone to Love Me  Coming 11/1/14

Chapter 1

A high-pitched scream cut through the silence surrounding Luke Remington. He halted and brought his binoculars up, even while knowing the sound was a bird of prey. Nothing looked out of place against the frozen backdrop of snow and ice and the towering pines that dotted the Alaskan mountainside. No movement to indicate life, the human kind anyway.

He dismissed the beauty of the majestic eagle soaring overhead and sucked in air cold enough to burn his lungs. His gut, and the fresh shoe prints in the snow, told him he was getting close to the survivor of the plane crash. He knew the direction the pilot had taken would lead straight to a river.

And a dead end.

He hoped the pilot wasn’t stupid enough to try and cross the river to the other side. It would be suicide. Even if some of the water was frozen, the ice would never hold up beneath the weight of a person, even a small one. A sense of urgency came over him. If the person was foolish enough to leave the crash site, then they just might be crazy enough to try and cross over a frozen river.

The darkening sky revealed the signs of an approaching snowstorm. That was nothing new for this time of year. Lately it snowed every day, sometimes twenty-four hours a day for days on end. There were days when he couldn’t leave his cabin. Those were the only occasions he regretted the isolation of his mountain home. When he couldn’t come and go as he pleased. So
why was he going out of his way to rescue someone who was probably going to end up invading his privacy for the next couple of months?

Luke knew the answer to that because it was the right thing to do. He might be a loner, but he was still human. He’d seen the small Cessna go down, and couldn’t ignore the fact that there might be survivors. Only he hadn’t counted on that person being stupid enough to leave the crash site.

He took a deep breath, exhaling a cloud of white air. It was a good thing he’d thought to bring his backpack with him because he knew the extra warm clothes would most likely come in handy. He began to follow the small footprints left behind in the snow, again.

His instinct told him the pilot was a woman.

* * * *

Charlie Wayne came to an abrupt halt and stared in disbelief at the raging river in front of her. Of all the rotten luck! She glanced both ways. A sick feeling settled in her empty stomach. She couldn’t see any way around it. At least nothing that didn’t involve getting wet.

Why isn’t the blasted thing frozen over like everything else in this godforsaken wilderness? She glanced down at her feet and frowned at the inadequate sneakers that were fast becoming caked in ice. She could barely feel her toes. Shivering violently, she strained to see to the bottom of the dark, churning water in an effort to determine if it was shallow enough to cross. One thing was certain, it was far too wide for her to try and jump over. Even with a running start.

The thought of getting wet appealed to her about as much as returning to the wreckage of her plane. Which Charlie knew she should never have left. She knew what the rules of survival were. And she had broken the most important one. Only staying could have meant her death, too. She’d been way off course. She hadn’t had time to radio in a mayday call with her location. And the thought that no one knew where to begin looking for her had convinced her to leave the wreckage and take her chances.

The sky was turning a dismal gray. She knew from years of living in the north that it was going to snow and the temperatures were going to drop. The last thing she wanted was to become a frozen Popsicle for some carnivore to munch on when spring arrived. It was bad enough that disappearing would probably give her agent a heart attack. Charlie couldn’t help wondering if she was going to make her next singing engagement. Now that her comeback tour was well under way, Charlene Benton was becoming a household name again.

Charlie pulled herself back to her immediate problem. It was already late afternoon and she’d have to find some kind of shelter before dark. The thought crossed her mind that if she turned around and headed back to the plane she’d be safe for another night. And in the morning she could try a different direction.
She searched the sky again for any signs of smoke that would reveal the possibility of a cabin nearby. She knew she was in a remote area, which the empty skyline emphasized with stark clarity. With a heavy sigh she turned to start walking again, and came face to face with a large, white dog.

Correction, wolf!

Her heart fell as fast as the blood freezing in her veins. She halted so swiftly that she lost her balance. One foot slipped down the muddy embankment into the icy water, but Charlie hardly acknowledged the freezing temperature. For a timeless moment she and the wolf squared off like two adversaries sizing each other up before a fight.

A feeling of doom settled in the pit of her stomach when she realized that if the wolf charged she’d have no alternative but to jump into the icy river, facing one death to escape another. Freezing or drowning would be a welcome alternative to being torn apart and eaten by a wolf. A chill ran down the length of her spine that had nothing to do with the frigid weather, as their gazes remained locked.

What is it waiting for?

As if reading her mind, the large beast crooked its head to look at something in the opposite direction. Was there a pack lurking somewhere beyond the trees? Fear galvanized Charlie into action. She turned to run, knowing that if the wolf decided to come after her it would be over in a matter of seconds. There was no way, as numb with cold and as exhausted as she was that she could outrun a predator.

Especially a hungry one.

In her haste to get away she fell several times. She cursed with frustration. The snow, knee deep in places, slowed her down. But Charlie was determined not to let it keep her from putting as much distance between her and the wolf as fast as possible as her survival instincts kicked in. She could hear movement behind her but wasn’t certain if it was the animal or the blood pounding in her ears.

“Wait!”

Charlie heard the command but didn’t believe it. It had to be the wind playing tricks on her. She pushed herself harder, but all at once the wolf was upon her. A heavy force hit the back of her body with a strength that knocked her to the ground. She screamed, expecting to feel her flesh savaged by canine teeth at any second.

Something snagged the hood to her parka pulling it away from her head. Charlie was sure the animal was going for her jugular. She screamed again, not realizing her face was in the snow until it rapidly filled her open mouth.
She turned her head, and cried out desperately. “No!” Maybe the sound of her voice would frighten the animal away. “Get away from me!” she screamed, hearing the sound echo throughout the surrounding mountains.

The sheer weight and size of the animal was crushing, holding Charlie nearly immovable. She was helpless against its strength. Suddenly and without warning she was flipped onto her back. Her hands were pinned to the cold ground above her head. And she realized it was a man and not the wolf pinning her down. For a moment she could only lie there in stunned silence and gasp for air.

Charlie relaxed beneath him when she realized he wasn’t a threat to her. Where had he come from, and where was the wolf? She tried to move her head to see, but the hair he’d released when snagging her hood was wrapped around his gloved fingers preventing her from moving. He was slightly winded, looking her over with mild interest as he held her against the frozen ground.

“Why didn’t you stop when I called out?” he said above her, his voice laced with more annoyance than concern. His hands shifted slightly, allowing her to move her head.

“The wolf,” she whispered. She held herself stiffly beneath him. Her gaze darted everywhere around them. The wolf, where had it gone?

“The wolf,” he said and Charlie’s gaze was drawn back to the man. He was looking down at her, not an inkling of concern in his tone. “Won’t hurt you.” He got to his feet, bringing her with him.

“Who are you?”

Charlie brushed at the loose snow covering her clothes. Then pulled the hood up and tucked in her hair. She watched his gaze fall to the socks covering her hands. The faintest hint of a grin spread across his chiseled mouth but disappeared in the time it took to blink.

“Luke.” His tone was flat.

Movement out of the corner of her eye caused Charlie to look at the wolf again.

“Lady won’t hurt you,” he repeated, obviously noticing her unease. “Look, we’re losing valuable daylight. We need to go.”

The impatience and hardness of his clipped words caused Charlie’s head to whip back in his direction. Go? Just like that he expected her to go with him? Okay, she really had no choice, but he could at least be sensitive to her situation.

As their gazes locked it was unclear what was going on behind those watchful eyes of his. They narrowed on her slightly. She began to wonder about him, wondered if he was dangerous. Her gaze ran over his tall form, made massive by the heavy insulated snow jacket he was wearing. She couldn’t tell what color his hair was because all that was visible was his rugged face. Most
of that was covered with a neatly trimmed black beard. Eyes the color of dark chocolate stared at her set in a face that could be handsome if he softened it with a smile.

“I won’t hurt you, either.”

Did she look worried?

Charlie forced a smile, when what she really wanted to do was spin around and run the other way. She was completely alone with him and at his mercy, lost somewhere in the wilds of Alaska. She had no choice but to trust him, or die.

“I’m sorry if I gave you the impression you frighten me. I’m very thankful that you came along. I didn’t know what I was going to do come nightfall. How did you find me?”

“I saw your plane go down. When I came across the crash site I realized someone had survived. Your tracks were easy to follow in the snow.” His gaze raked over her with amazement. “I’m surprised you survived without so much as a scratch.”

“I was lucky,” Charlie admitted. She shuddered a little as she recalled her frightened, helpless feeling when the plane’s engines had stalled, forcing her to crash. Practices during flight school hadn’t compared to the real thing.

“Very lucky,” he agreed. “Why didn’t you remain at the crash site? Search and rescue would have eventually found you.”

“I know that’s what you’re supposed to do, but I couldn’t count on anyone finding me.” Charlie brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. “I was way off course.” She’d flown back and forth to Skagway enough over the years to know that. “None of my gauges were reading correctly, and before I was able to get off a distress signal they went completely dead.”

He acknowledged that he was listening to her with a brief nod of his head. Then cast another brief glance at the sky. “We need to get going.” He turned and began walking.

“Going where?” Charlie had to practically run to keep up with his long, brisk strides. “Is there a ranger’s station close by?”

“I’m not a ranger.” He continued to walk without sparing her a glance.

Charlie didn’t know if she liked the sound of that or not. She struggled to keep up. “Are you taking me to a ranger’s station, then?”

“No.”

It was clear he didn’t want to talk but Charlie didn’t let his sharp, one-word answers discourage her. “Do you have some kind of transportation near here?” Her tone was hopeful.
“No.”

She clenched her teeth. He certainly wasn’t very informative. She was beginning to get annoyed. She fell to her knees and quickly got up again when he didn’t even notice. She was panting by the time she caught up to him again and more than a little frustrated. In spite of the fact he’d come looking for her, she got the impression he’d leave her if she didn’t keep up.

“Look, can you please slow down? I can’t keep up.” She wasn’t going to whine, but they’d been walking for hours already. “Where are we going?” In her opinion, nowhere fast. When he didn’t say a word she grabbed him by the arm to get his attention. “Luke…”

He swung around and glared down at her.

She caught her breath.

“I’d forgotten how talkative and troublesome females were.”

His expression said he wasn’t joking. Charlie’s mouth dropped, she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. “Excuse me?”

“Look, I’ve been living alone in these mountains for three years and have gotten used to not talking to anyone. To not being touched.” His glance took in her sock-covered hand on his arm, before traveling back to her eyes. “Now I’m going to be punished for being nosey, and checking out a damn plane crash.”

Charlie could only stare at him in stunned silence. She didn’t know what to say. If he feels that way why did he even bother?

“Look, lady—”

“My name is Charlie.” She stood her ground in spite of his firm tone. And she would not cry.

Luke released a heavy sigh. “I’m not interested in knowing your name or anything else about you. I’m taking you to my cabin, which happens to be about two miles in that direction.” He indicated the direction with a careless sweep of his arm.

Charlie’s gaze followed the same route. She frowned. “All I see is snow and snow-covered trees. No roads of any kind, no paths, nothing to indicate we’re heading anywhere near civilization, much less a cabin. Where is this cabin, in a cave?”

The next thing she knew he was glaring down at her. His mouth thinned.

“What?”

“Are you going to chatter all the way? Because I’m warning you right now, if you sap your strength I’m not carrying you. And before you ask, I don’t have a phone.”
How did he know she was about to ask him that? Charlie gave him a scowl. “Now why doesn’t that surprise me?” She did her best to keep her tone light, feigning a smile. “What about a pigeon?”

“Look, we can talk later.” He sounded aggravated, his tone sharper than the cutting edge of a hunting knife.


He pulled his arm away and bent to a backpack he’d obviously dropped in his pursuit of her. She hadn’t noticed it until now. She wondered what they were going to do after it got dark if they didn’t reach his home. The backpack was the size of a small car but she doubted it contained a blow up house with a fireplace in it.

She was frozen to the bone. Thinking about a roaring fire and a cup of hot cocoa wasn’t helping. On top of that, snow had gotten down her back when her hood had been pulled off during their struggle. Her goose bumps had goose bumps. She ripped off the frozen socks on her hands, and pulled the sleeves of her parka down over them.

She watched in curious silence as Luke pulled out a stack of clothes and something that resembled a rain poncho in an ugly shade of green. It reminded her of something she’d seen her brother wearing once in a picture of him taken when he was in boot camp.

“Two miles can seem like ten in these mountains. It’s going to start snowing harder and the clothes you have on aren’t adequate. In these frigid temperatures it won’t take long for frostbite and hypothermia to set in.”

Charlie’s eyebrows arched high with astonishment. Her mouth fell open when it dawned on her what he was getting at. “Surely you don’t expect me to change my clothes out here, like this!” Her arm made a sweep of the openness of the surrounding area. “Two miles or ten miles doesn’t make any difference to me. I’m in good shape,” she insisted, which had absolutely nothing to do with the fact he wanted her to change clothes.

His eyes narrowed, his gaze ran over the length of her almost as if he was trying to see through her clothes. “Are you cold now?”

Charlie nodded reluctantly, but only because she had a feeling he already knew the answer.

“How cold?” he asked.

She was numb she was so cold.

“A little,” she lied, unable to meet his eyes. He didn’t know her. Maybe he wouldn’t recognize the signs that gave her away.
“You’re lying,” he said without a second thought, dashing her hopes. “We don’t have time to argue over this. Put these clothes on and the rain poncho, which will keep you from getting damp again as the snow continues to fall.”

Her eyes clung to his stony gaze. She was looking for understanding, but only found steadfast determination. She knew it wouldn’t be to her advantage to fight him on this. He looked about as solid as one of the pines towering over them and just as unbending.

“What about you?” She was hedging and they both knew it.

“My jacket repels water and I’m used to these temperatures.”

Charlie realized he wasn’t going to give an inch. She reached up and unzipped her lightweight parka and slipped it off before shaking her hair around her for the little bit of warmth it would offer. Luke just watched until he finally noticed her fingers were so numb she couldn’t undo the buttons to the flannel shirt she was wearing. He pulled his gloves off with his teeth, shoved them in a pocket then brushed her hands aside with an impatient growl.

Charlie caught her breath and accepted his help with reluctance. Her eyes looked everywhere but at him. She welcomed the rush of heat filling her frozen cheeks. His warm fingers worked deftly at the buttons, and when he was done he pulled her shirt open. She thought his hard mouth curved into a slight grin, but it was so fleeting she must have imagined it.

She had a second flannel shirt on just like the first. Luke quickly got rid of that one, too. He stepped back when he came to the sweatsuit. Was he wondering if he’d reached the last layer? Wordlessly, Charlie reached for the hem, and pulled the top over her head. Then, just as quickly kicked off her sneakers and wiggled out of the bottoms. His brows shot up, but he remained silent.

“This is the last layer,” she said, making no effort to remove her cashmere sweater and ski pants. She shrank back with a cry when he reached forward to touch her. However, all he did was test the dampness of her clothes.

“You can leave these on. Just slip the clothes I brought over them. But take off those socks and replace them with these.” As he spoke he rummaged through his bag until he found what he was looking for, a pair of thick, wool socks.

Charlie did as she was told. She sighed with gratitude from the warmth that came with putting on new layers of warm, dry clothes, even if they were miles too big on her. Luke helped her with her socks and sneakers.

He glanced up at her from his position at her feet. “How does that feel?”

“Wonderful.”
Before straightening he stuffed the clothes she’d removed into his bag. “Good, let’s get going.” He slipped the rain poncho over her shoulders.

The sky darkened at an alarming rate. The snow began to fall harder. For a moment Charlie watched powdery flakes land upon Luke’s beard, before carefully tucking her hair beneath the hood of the poncho.

His eyes met hers briefly as his fingertips brushed against her cold cheeks. For a second his movements faltered, his dark eyes frozen on hers, and then he turned away.

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**Other books coming soon:**
Someone to Love Me
Wild Marauders MC
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****

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