

# Playing Doctor

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Sandy Craig is a busy young woman. Her life is all about her work as a reconstructive surgeon and medical partnership. She doesn't have time for a personal life, much less love. Keven Braddock is a well-to-do artist on the rise like the space shuttle. Women throw themselves at him and life is his oyster, but something is missing. When they meet, something in their lives changes

Now if only things would stop going wrong and getting in the way of them finding happiness. This has a real plot and three-dimensional characters. It's more than just a wanker story.

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## **Chapter One: An unexpected meeting**

I had just gotten comfortable in front of the television set and was digging my spoon into a bowl of double fudge delight ice cream when my cell phone rang. Hitting pause on the remote, I froze the episode of House with the main character making some rude comment to one of his patients. I don't know why a character that abrasive, sarcastic and flawed appealed to me so much, but his biting sense of humor always made me

laugh.

A glance at the phone confirmed my worst fears. It was Danny, and that usually meant something had gone wrong and almost certainly meant that House and my ice cream were going to have to wait. I flipped the phone open and launched right in. "You're at an art gallery. What could possibly go wrong while you're buried in conversation with groups of long-haired men that only bathe when their muse tells them to?"

"Plans have changed," Danny said. It wasn't hard to hear the difference between Danny and his alter ego, Doctor Hammerstein. It could happen in the blink of an eye and the cheerful, fatherly man I loved to death would turn into the physician I hoped to be when I grew up, calm and professional when everything was coming apart around him.

I felt the cold chill as adrenaline dumped into my system. I jumped up, the fattening ice cream and entertainment forgotten, as I jogged into my bedroom, already shedding my tee shirt. "Where do you need me?"

"Holly and I are on the way to Mercy General. They have a woman and child enroute. A damned car crash and it sounds bad, so Holly will work on one while I work on the other. What I need from you is a favor. A really big favor."

I buttoned my pants and paused, suddenly confused by the direction of the conversation. "Wait, you don't need me in the operating room?" I asked, my confusion bleeding through.

He chuckled. "No, you already performed yeoman's work today, and I don't want to totally disrupt your schedule tomorrow. Relax, go to the show and have a glass of wine instead. And while you're there, review the pieces for me. I need to know what you think of the art and, maybe just as importantly, the artist."

That stopped the dressing process completely. "You want me to go drink champagne and look at paintings with a bunch of art snoots? I don't know anything about art."

Danny laughed. "Sell that to someone who doesn't know you. Remember, I know about all the museums and galleries your mother dragged you to when you were growing up. If you really cared, you could snoot with the best of them. Look, we'll be at the hospital in a minute so I don't have time for the full explanation, but going to the show is exactly what I need you to do. Mix, look at the art and meet the guy the show is all about. His name is Keven Braddock. I want to know what you think about him and his work. It's important, or I wouldn't ask you. Will you do it for me? Pretty please with double fudge

delight on top?" Danny knew me way too well. Then I remembered the ice cream melting in the living room and took a moment to put it in the freezer for later.

I looked at the clock on my counter. It was a bit after seven PM. I sighed. "Okay. What time does it start?"

"Seven-thirty at the Pendel Gallery. And it's black-tie."

Shit! There was no way I was going to look worth a damn and still make it on time. "Damn you, Danny," I sighed dramatically, "I'll go, but you owe me, Danny boy. Good luck and I'll find out how the surgery went tomorrow. Bye now."

I hung up on him and tossed the phone on the bed. Stripping naked, I stood and stared at my closet. What to wear? I finally settled on a dark green cocktail dress. If I was supposed to make a good impression, this was the dress to do it. Besides, I hadn't had a chance to dress up in over a year. I'd just have to be fashionably late.

Ten minutes and a quick shower later, I slipped on a thong and then squirmed into the dress. I stood in front of the mirror and adjusted myself, pushing my boobs where they belonged and smoothing down the sides of the dress. Turning myself left and right, I frowned as I decided that I'd picked up a couple of pounds since I'd last worn the dress. It hugged my body before, but now fit like a glove, accentuating me in ways that probably shouldn't be seen outside my bedroom.

I almost pulled it back off, but a look at the clock told me I didn't have time to dither. What the hell, I thought. It wasn't like I knew anyone there or would ever go back to the gallery. Taking a deep breath for courage, I pulled my one pair of fuck-me pumps out of the back of the shoe rack and slid them on.

Turning my back to the mirror, I looked at my legs. Jeeze, I was going to have every guy in the place staring at my ass! That brought both a blush and a smile. Maybe it was okay, this one time, to be a tease. Let 'em drool.

A single strand of pearls completed the look, subtly drawing attention to the generous swell of my cleavage. I teased my long, red hair and styled it in place across the soft spray of freckles that graced my shoulders. Not bad for a woman in her mid-thirties, I thought with a saucy grin.

Grabbing my cell, I tossed it and my wallet into a small purse, grabbed my car keys and headed for the door.

It was closer to eight when I pulled up in front of the Pendel Gallery. I stepped out of my sole indulgence, a fire engine red Porsche 911 convertible, and handed the keys to the valet, who was having a hard time deciding whether to stare at the car or at me. I smiled at him and walked into the building, feeling his eyes caress me as I exaggerated the sway of my hips. I felt heat rising from my face, but it didn't stop me from acting the temptress.

The interior of the gallery was already packed with people. With a shrug, I guessed it was no longer en vogue to be fashionably late. The crowd was made up mostly of either balding grandfather types or long-haired ex-hippies in suits, each matched up with universally younger women; in some rare cases, the men were better looking. A few really good-looking women in their twenties were mixed in. They looked like models and they had an air about them - the imperious air of someone that feels they are a couple of rungs higher than you on the social ladder.

The walls and easels sported paintings of people and landscapes. Taking a flute of champagne from a server, I strolled over to the nearest display and gave it a really good look. Despite what Danny might think, Mama's 'rounding out' of my education never really took, as all those trips to the museums ever did was bore me to tears. Still, for a moment, I tried to remember what she'd taught me, and reached inside to see how my soul reacted. I found myself smiling. It was surprisingly good, in my unenlightened opinion. A pair of children, a boy and a girl in their early teens, racing bicycles down a dirt road between some trees. I could almost feel the breeze on my shoulders and shivered just a little. You could feel the raw determination radiating from each of them, their faces fierce, hair streaming behind them. They were neck and neck and neither one of them was going to concede victory to the other. The vitality of the painting took my breath away.

When I forced myself to look away, the room seemed more drab than it had a moment ago, the people less real. I felt shaken by my response. I'd expected some kind of new-wave art, something so abstract I wouldn't know if it was supposed to be good or not, much less care what it was supposed to represent. Even though I didn't know the technical aspects of art, I could see that this somehow wasn't like taking a picture and copying it to canvas. The background led the eyes toward the people, and the natural lines took the eye from object to object subtly. Not all the items in the background were done in meticulous detail, but the focal points were amazingly clear.

The people, though they weren't larger than they should be, seemed larger-than-life.

The colors being used were subtly different than what you might see in a photograph, too. Not enough to jar, but more than enough to add an intense vibrancy to the scene. In my mind, I could hear the children shouting playfully at each other behind me.

I sipped the champagne to clear my throat and started circling the room, looking at the paintings closely. People and nature were blended seamlessly together in every painting. All ages and genders were represented, though I noticed that there were more women than men. That was natural, I supposed, since the artist was a man. The paintings were garnering intense attention from the people looking at them. I heard muttered comments like "Totally unique," and plenty of "I've never seen anything quite like these," and from the number of people writing notes frantically, I suspected the reviews would be incredible. I heard one man say that it was "the finest and most unique representation of man and nature that he'd ever seen."

The more paintings I looked at, the deeper the pieces drew me in. As I ventured further, the people slowly changed, becoming younger and better dressed. Or at least more expensively dressed. I looked back and saw what I'd missed earlier. There was a definite series of strata of people in this large room. I wasn't sure who fell into what category, but it was obvious that I had been moving from one group of people to another as I wandered deeper into the gallery.

A blonde in a firecracker red designer dress, flaunting her assets even more brazenly than I, stood on the other side of a painting I was moving toward. She was looking at me, not the canvas. Over her glass, her expression was haughty and dismissive.

"You're wasting your time, you know," she said off-handedly. "There's no point in trying to display the goods when you showcase it in something so out-of-date. Especially in a knock-off from Taiwan from two years ago. Or is it three?" She cocked her head at me.

While I had no idea who she was or why she felt the need to attack me, I wasn't going to take it lying down. I felt my lips curve in a smile as I met her challenge, the memory of that first painting coming to mind.

"You're lop-sided," I said matter-of-factly.

"What?" she said, surprised at the unexpected comment.

"You're top heavy, your breasts are too big for your frame, and one is noticeably larger than the other," I said critically. "Whoever your surgeon was, he was second rate. You

really shouldn't have gone for the lowest bidder. Cost savings are fine in some things, like your hair for example," I said, gesturing to her head with my glass, "since that god-awful cut will eventually grow back out, but those mismatched domes make your temple look like a bordello, and a cheap one at that. If I were you, I'd sue the hack."

Her eyes glittered dangerously and her whole body tensed. "Keven won't be interested in talking to you about modeling. You're too old, those freckles make you look like a leper, and that bottled hair makes you look like Bozo the Clown. Pack it up and hit the road, you has been. Just sashay your elderly ass out of here."

I laughed right in her face. I knew I shouldn't, but I just couldn't help myself. Hell, I had the temper to go with my red hair, and it isn't bottled, thank you. People in a bubble around us stared at the growing confrontation with mixed expressions of interest and amused horror. Either this didn't happen very often or it happened a lot.

"I'm not here to model for anyone," I said contemptuously. "I have better things to do with my life and my time. Not to mention a hell of a lot more self-respect than some people."

The woman glanced at the attention we were getting and paled. The mood of the watchers seemed predatory, but I didn't feel like they were hunting me. She tilted her nose up in the air and whirled around without another word, walking toward the front of the gallery.

I stood there and laughed at her retreat, shaking my head. What the hell had that been all about?

The crowd started moving again, now that the show was over. One young man leaned over with a grin. "That's telling her. And don't let her talk worry you, she and Keven broke up almost six months ago."

Focusing my attention on him, I cocked my head. "Keven Braddock? The guy that painted all these? That was his girlfriend?"

"Karen Galloway, his ex-girlfriend," the young man emphasized. "Though you'd never know it from the way she acts. This is the first show he's had since they split, and boy is he going to be furious when he finds out what she did. Don't worry about her screwing up your shot at the model's gig. I think you'd be much better, much more interesting and certainly more talented, than Karen ever was."

I grinned back at him. "Really, I'm not here for any modeling job but thanks."

With a shrug and a wave, he moved back off into the crowd, and I mustered my willpower and moved further to the rear of the building. I wasn't going to let that hag run me off or ruin what had been a surprisingly good evening.

The very back of the room had a few final pieces, including several of the now identified Karen. I sniffed and examined her body in the painting closely. Either the surgery was new, which I doubted, or the artist had adjusted her to mask the imperfections in her form. It was like she was in a soft-light picture, her innate inflexibility diffused.

When I looked up, I saw a man standing in the very back corner who struck me speechless for a moment. He was half-turned away from me, talking to a small group of older men in suits, but he stood out from them like the sun surrounded by spotlights.

Long, lustrous black hair swept to his mid-shoulders, black silk that fell across his black silk shirt. I'd always considered men wearing leather pants to be the equivalent of women wearing spandex. A privilege earned, not a right. On him, it was more like my privilege.

I flushed when I realized my mouth was open and I snapped it closed. I had no idea how long I had been staring. What was wrong with me? You'd think I'd never seen a good-looking man before! Oh, please! Sandy, get a grip on yourself. I shook my head and smiled wryly at my own foolish behavior.

Shaking my head, I walked back to look at the last few paintings more closely. More of Karen. That earned another headshake. The artist had to be a genius to make her look good. In spite of Mama's best efforts, I didn't know art, but I did know what I liked, and I genuinely liked his work. I had to find out how much that first painting cost. It would be perfect for my living room, and was probably as close as I would ever get to having children in my home.

I shook my head at the morose thought, and glancing at my watch, I clucked at the time. It was almost ten PM, and I had a procedure early the next morning. Time to ask around for our host, give him my compliments and find out how to get that painting. When I looked up, the man in black was gazing in my direction. Staring at me, his own mouth slightly open, with an expression like he'd been whacked over the head.

Without even saying anything to the man who was carrying on self-importantly about something, he strode away from the surprised suits and was at my side in seconds. His

face was much more controlled by the time he was in speaking range.

I opened my mouth to say something, but fell silent when he took my hand and raised it to his lips. The combination of his lips on my hand and his eyes looking deeply into mine lit off a simmering heat inside my stomach.

"How do you do? I'm Keven Braddock," he said, holding my hand and smiling. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you."

My neck heated, but I forced myself to ignore it and smiled brightly at him. "Sandy Craig, Mister Braddock."

He shook his head. "Just Keven. May I call you Sandy?" At my nod, he turned and led me back toward the corner where all the suits were. At a wave, they dispersed and left a bubble of space for the two of us.

"You didn't need to run off your friends to talk to me," I objected.

His dark, angular face looked both rugged and handsome, especially when he smiled like that. "They're hardly friends. Those were wealthy men wanting to bankroll a show in New York for me."

I was aghast. "Then you shouldn't have sent them away! Business is much more important than talking to me."

"Oh, I don't think so," he said simply. "Shows come and go, just as backers come and go. Trust me, they'll still be eager to finance me, and make a hell of a lot of money off of me, when I call them tomorrow. Right now, talking with you is much more important."

"Much more important?" I asked incredulously. "Why?" I demanded. I suddenly felt out of control, this whole conversation upsetting my balance. I'd never had anyone else affect me this way, but then again, I'd never had someone look at me this intensely, much less drop everything to focus on me. "This is your show and you're an important man. The important man. I'm just a visitor."

"Because it feels right," he said with a grin. "I don't suppose you'd consider modeling for me?"

"What? I..." This was so confusing, I felt flummoxed. With a dozen or so words, this man made me feel more like a confused child than my mother's hour-long tantrums



ever had.

"Wait," he said, his fingers covering my lips. It was like a spark jumped between us. "Let's talk about it over coffee. I know a little place nearby that makes the most fabulous latte."

"But the show," I protested weakly. "You're the artist, the star, the man everyone here wants to meet. You can't just leave!"

"It's my show," he said, his smile blinding, "and that means I can do as I damned well please."

He was so gung-ho, it was a little frightening, but a huge part of me was weakening fast. My head was telling me "one cup of coffee can't hurt anything," but the little girl voice was so innocent it set off alarms, frightening me.

I was saved, if you could call it being saved, by the arrival of his ex-girlfriend. The motion of someone approaching fast made me turn my head and there she was, barreling up behind Keven with a champagne bottle raised high!

"Look out!" I shouted, pushing him out of the path of the oncoming bottle. That shove unfortunately sent him right into Karen, and they fell to the floor with a crash, limbs entangled. She beat ineffectually on the top of Keven's head with her fist, having dropped the bottle.

I tried to figure out the best way to get him out of that mess, but the crowd beat me to it, streaming forward and surrounding the fallen ex-lovers. I quickly lost sight of them as the tide forced me back. Cursing under my breath, I tried to get back to his side, but finally decided it wasn't going to happen.

As I took a deep breath and watched the chaos, the heat that had started inside me cooled, fear and common sense took over. I didn't really know him and going out with him would likely mean all sorts of complications in my life. Yes, I conceded, there was chemistry there - boy, was there chemistry - but I was a doctor, busy and focused. I didn't have time for dating, or romance. I'd replaced men with battery-powered plastic years ago and I knew that going back was almost certainly the wrong choice.

I gulped and fought back the urge to dig into the crowd anyway. With more control than I thought I had, I walked out the front door and waved to the valet for my keys, already feeling oddly depressed.

In the morning, I was in a much better mood and had put the uncomfortable events of last night behind me by the time I walked through the front door to work, the Hammerstein Clinic for Reconstructive Surgery. Seeing my name listed as a junior partner still sent a glow to my cheeks. It reminded me that all of this around me, my work, and the career I had built through hard work and sacrifice, that was what was important in life.

Danny and Holly had made this place a force to be reckoned with in the field. And the fact that these two brilliant surgeons thought highly enough of me to offer me a junior partnership was a potent ego rush. The three of us were the only partners, though there were more than half a dozen associates of one kind or another and support staff.

Trina was manning the front desk, as usual. I stopped to smile at her while she was talking on the phone. A petite little thing, she couldn't have been more than five feet two and was as light as a feather.

Trina finished her phone call, and her smile at me slipped a little. "Good morning."

"Uh, oh. Trina, what's wrong?"

Tears slowly made her eyes shine. "Steve and I had a big fight last night. Sandy, I'm scared. I think I might have ruined everything."

I walked around the desk and pulled her out her seat and into a hug.

"Steve's a great guy, Trina. You both love each other and I can't see you doing anything to ruin that. What happened?"

She pulled back and sat back down, searching for a tissue in her purse while I parked my butt on the spare seat. "He's been spending more and more time out with his friends and I've been feeling ignored. So last night I brought it up. He insisted there was nothing going on. I suppose he was thinking I was worried about there being another woman."

"Are you worried about that?" I asked.

Trina shook her head. "No. Well, not really. He's never given me any reason to suspect he's been unfaithful. He just got so defensive about it and I got a bit paranoid. That

enraged him and I got defensive. And, of course, we argued. Um, it got pretty heated. He stormed out after about ten minutes, and now he won't take my calls. I screwed up bad and I've lost him." Her tears started pouring out again.

Without getting up, I pulled her head to my shoulder. "Shhhhh. It's not that bad. Everybody fights sometimes, even over minor things. If you like, I'll talk with him. I think if you keep trying though, you'll both get this sorted out."

Her eyes shone with hope. "Do you really think so? Would you talk to him?"

I smiled and kissed her cheek. "There's nothing that I wouldn't do for you, Trina. I don't let my friends down. I'll call him today and maybe even meet him for lunch. I can't promise anything, but I don't think all is lost. Let me watch the desk and you go freshen up before one of the guys sees you and wants to go punch Steve's lights out." That earned me a shaky smile as she left for the ladies room.

When she came back out, she looked a hundred percent better. I gave her another hug and made my way back to my office. A glance at the clock told me that I was behind schedule, but not badly. It's not like Mrs. Henderson was going to start without me, and as I had told Trina, I didn't let my friends down. I reviewed her case file and double-checked all the preparatory notes. When I was satisfied, I slipped out of my clothes and into surgical scrubs complete with hair and foot booties - what a fashion statement. Looking suitably professional, I tucked the file under my arm and went to surgical room two.

My patient was already there and so was my team. I smiled at Ben Crenshaw, the hulking black man that looked more like a linebacker than a surgical nurse. Then I gave a two-fingered salute to Anna Gomez, our resident anesthesiologist, while I set the file on the counter and started scrubbing up with the assistance of the scrub nurse, Rita Smith.

"Good morning everyone." After gloving up, I leaned over Mrs. Henderson. "And a good morning to you, too, Helen. Are we all ready?"

With a swallow, Helen nodded. "Yes, just do be careful."

I smiled and shook my head. "I'll treat them like they were my own. I've been exactly where you are right now, and I promise you that I'm confident you'll be fine. Anna is going to help you sleep and when you wake up, you'll be a new woman, a happy new sex kitten." I gave her a little growl and wriggled my eyebrows at her.

Helen smiled and relaxed. Then I stepped over to look at the instruments and the implants. Ben had worked with me for two years. He knew what I wanted and needed as well as I did. All the tools of my trade were laid out in their gleaming splendor and he had the implants I preferred. Some implants made the breast feel stiff and unnatural, but I insisted only the very best ones - those that were as malleable as the real thing. I also insisted on having six implants on hand during surgery. The size I thought I'd need and one notch up and down. When I made the cut and slid them in, I'd be able to move up or down to make them perfect.

"Spot on, Ben. You know me like the back of your hand," I said with a smile.

"But not as closely as I'd like to know you, hot momma." He returned the sexy growl and wriggling eyebrows I'd used earlier to calm Helen.

I laughed. Ben was a sweet guy, but I could never see myself sharing his bed, and he knew it. He was too much a friend and there just wasn't that kind of spark.

"You big ole tease. You'd freak out if I even acted like I was interested in you. Besides, I happen to know your girl would geld you if you if you even thought about touching another woman."

"She would do that," he admitted ruefully. "And they'd never find the missing parts, either."

We both laughed and went back to the painstaking preparation. When Anna signaled that Helen was ready, I stepped up and pulled the sheet down to expose her chest. Her breasts were small, but nicely formed. An A-B, just a little smaller than what I'd had before I let Danny convince me to step up to a C cup. Not that I didn't like the new me. I'd been shapely before, but my chest never matched up with my own self-image. Now the three of us were doing just fine. It also helped to have been under the knife. I knew exactly the sort of fears that Helen had, the same uncertainty. Every doctor should be a patient at least once.

Putting it all out of my mind, I made my first cut and started the process toward making another woman happier with her own appearance. Besides the breast enhancement, I had some other small adjustments to make with her curves. Nothing major. It wouldn't be any time at all before she was back up and at 'em, making men her age drool.

Hours later, after I accounted for every instrument and pad, I had Helen fully closed up

and on her way to recovery. Tired, I stepped into the changing room and washed my hands. Then I put the bloodied scrubs into the bin and put on fresh ones. When I was done, I let Ben clean up, and I started getting the room ready for its next patient.

Danny came in through the door that Anna had used to wheel our patient out. He was in the suit that was almost the uniform of doctors everywhere, but even at fifty-something he looked better than most. His white hair reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Albert Einstein, with the locks refusing to cooperate in any way. When he stuck his tongue out at me, it always made me laugh so hard that my sides hurt because of the resemblance.

I shook my head. "Holly let you out of the house like that again? With that wild-man hair?"

With a boyish grin that belied his age, he leaned back against the wall. "Like anything can control it. We have people to clean up after us, Sandy. This isn't the emergency room where we need the room ready right away for the next customer."

"Like you don't do the same thing," I retorted with wry amusement. "Speaking of the emergency room, how did things go last night?"

His smile faded to a serious, slightly sad expression. "A car wreck. A really bad one. Holly took the mother and I took her daughter. Flying glass and debris cut them both to shreds. The girl was ten and her face was laid open with incredible trauma to the underlying tissue. It was painstaking work, getting all the glass out and putting things back in place so that the scarring would be minimal. You know what I mean. I just thank God her eyes weren't damaged."

I nodded, feeling my gut twist in sympathy. I hated car wrecks. You never saw them coming. One minute everything was fine and the next, lives and bodies were shattered.

"They were lucky you two were on call. Will they be okay?"

He nodded and held the door open and gestured back out to the hall. "Holly did her usual miracle work. You know she has a much finer touch than I do. With a bit of luck, they will only have to deal with mental scars without being traumatized by any physical ones. Come on. I want to get the play-by-play from last night."

I rolled my eyes and preceded him out. "Jeeze, I'm still not sure if you did me a favor or not."

"Hmm?" he asked with one eyebrow quirked in surprise. "Tell me more"

"Get me some coffee and I'll tell you the whole sordid tale."

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Ten minutes later we were sitting in his office, which was about half again bigger than mine, as he no doubt deserved. He was the boss, after all. I sipped my hot coffee and stretched my back in the comfortable chair.

"Sordid, eh?" he asked with a chuckle. "What set off the renowned flame-thrower?"

"I didn't flame anyone last night," I said defensively. "He fell victim to his ex-girlfriend. Well, she and I did have words first, but I don't think that had anything to do with it."

"He?" Danny prompted. "This sounds interesting. Did you meet a nice young man that struck your fancy?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

"No," I said, exasperated. "He was quite forward and, frankly, it unsettled me a bit." Okay, I'd admit to myself, it unsettled me a lot, but Danny didn't have to know that. "Why is it that anytime you hear about me and some guy it has to be attraction?"

"Hope springs eternal, my dear," he said honestly. "I keep dreaming you'll meet someone like I met Holly. In any case, tell me all about the evening."

"How the hell could Holly marry you, anyway? You're incorrigible and she got stuck with a name like Holly Hammerstein."

"You're stalling," he said with a smile. "How was the show?"

I shrugged and gave up. "The crowd was good, the paintings were fabulous and the artist was dark and scary." My insides got all warm just thinking about how dark and scary.

"Tell me about this young man."

With a sigh, I set my coffee down on the desk. "I met the artist, Keven Braddock. I think I made an impression, though for the life of me I don't see how it could have been a good one." Then I proceeded to tell him what he said, what little I'd said, and everything that followed.

Danny tilted his chair back and listened in a way that made me adore him. He hung onto every word I said. When I was finished, he sipped his coffee and considered the ceiling for a moment. Then, tilting his chair back down, he looked me straight in the eyes.

"As to why he was attracted to you, Sandy, that's easy. You're a knockout. As for what I think about you, I think you've got it bad." he finally opined.

"What?" I asked in outrage. "I am not. I do not! It was just one of those things. There is no way he was giving me the eye with all those hotter, younger women hanging around waiting to be a model for him." I shoved away the fact that he had asked me to model before I started wondering what he wanted me to model for or what kind of outfit would be involved, if any. "It doesn't matter, anyway," I continued. "I'll never see him again, and that's probably best. Bad boys are much more trouble that they're worth."

"I wouldn't be so quick to say you'll never see him again," Danny said, looking at his watch. "I expect him along any minute to go out to lunch with me. Trina's going to send him right back."

I sat upright and squeaked. God, I hated making that noise. "No! You're yanking my chain!" Crap. If I could hear the tremor in my voice, so could he. Why the hell did that artist, okay, that dark, handsome artist, make me so nervous?

"Nope," Danny said with that shit-eating grin. "I actually expected him a few minutes ago, so he's late."

Shooting Danny a look that was part panic and part pure pissed off female, I lunged out of the chair and made a bee-line to the door. There was no way I was going to be caught in here after last night and have to explain why I ran off, especially not when I wasn't even sure why I had.

As I reached for the door, someone knocked and I froze. Looking around like a deer caught in the headlights, I prepared to run for the windows.

"Come in," Danny said loudly. The rat bastard!

## Chapter Two: Deeper into uncertainty

Since I was trapped, I stepped back and put a smile on my face. Danny was going to pay, and pay big, for this later.

Keven came in smiling. At first, he looked genuinely surprised to see me, and my half-formed suspicions about Danny setting me up disappeared, but then a sly grin spread across Keven's face. Quickly stepping over to me, he took my hand and raised it to his lips just as he had done last night. Once again, the sensation of his breath warming my knuckles stirred the same chaotic emotions inside me and re-ignited the slow-burning heat from last night. His deep gaze over our hands made me shiver.

I broke away from his gaze before I lost my composure and behaved like a love-sick teenager, lost in his eyes. I didn't dare trust myself to look at Danny. He would ignore my smile and interpret the heat in my eyes as lust, and I was afraid that he might be right. With what little dignity I could still muster, I took back possession of my hand.

"Welcome to the Hammerstein Clinic." I gestured to Danny. "This is my boss, Doctor Danny Hammerstein. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you men to your business."

"Oh, I'd rather you wait for just a moment," Keven said smoothly with a glance at Danny. "If the good Doctor H. can spare a few minutes before we meet, I'd like to reschedule our coffee date, since we were so rudely interrupted last night."

The word "date" sent a shock through my system, though I know Keven didn't mean it as that kind of date. Or did he? I shored up the smile on my face and tried not to let him see me sweat.

"Why don't you have a seat, and I'll get you a cup of coffee." Danny suggested. "And if you would join us, Sandy, this business includes you, too. You can talk over last night while I go make some fresh coffee."

I gave him a deer-in-the-headlights look, but he only smiled and closed the door behind him on his way out. Then it occurred to me that he could have just used the coffee maker in his office. The bastard did this to me on purpose! My suspicions came roaring back.

"Please, have a seat," Keven said, taking one of the leather chairs for himself and gesturing to the other. I now knew how the fly felt when the spider said, 'Step into my parlor.' Still, I was limited in what options I had at the moment, given how Danny had



choreographed this meeting like he did.

Taking my seat, I took a moment to marshal my thoughts and rein in my emotions. "I'm really sorry about last night."

Nonchalantly, he waved his hand. "I can't hold you accountable for what someone else did. However, when the ruckus finally cleared and I discovered you'd left, I was very disappointed." His dark eyes searched my soul again and I could almost feel the sparks between us. It occurred to me then that to rein in my emotions I first had to actually have my hands on them. At the moment, I felt I was simply hanging on for dear life. "I suppose I can't blame you for leaving, but I was going to track you down today. I find it telling that I didn't have to search long at all."

He said it in such a matter-of-fact manner that it sent a shiver up my spine, one I couldn't suppress. It was like a big-game hunter telling his prey that he would track her until he found her, no matter how long it took. Part of me started whispering "stalker." I tried to keep from wondering what the hunter would have done once he caught his prey. Then I remembered that I was his prey.

I considered telling him I had planned on calling him, but that would have been a lie, and he'd know it. "It was all moving a bit too fast for me," I said after a moment.

He nodded, not speaking but not looking disturbed by my revelation, either.

"We'd only just met," I continued, off-balance at his leaving the ball in my court. I'd always had a problem with wanting to fill silences. "I suddenly felt myself being overwhelmed and I guess I wasn't expecting it."

Keven smiled. "So I wasn't the only one that felt the pull. That's good to know. I wasn't sure if you felt it, too. I don't know if I've ever felt such a powerful attraction before, much less feeling bowled over by it so quickly."

I quietly cursed myself for letting that slip. What the hell was wrong with me? I was acting as bad as a teenager trying to keep someone from knowing I had a crush on them. When I was around him, my composure and experience just flew right out of my mind. I was a tongue-tied girl again. Danny was right, I realized. I had it bad.

"Look, don't get me wrong," I said, trying for some distance and perspective, "but we don't know each other at all. This is just a physical attraction."

He quirked an eyebrow. "So, you find me attractive?"

I closed my eyes. This conversation was going downhill fast. I just couldn't seem to stop myself from making it worse. Then I opened my eyes and, grudgingly, nodded.

"I don't suppose we could just start over, could we?" I asked without any real hope.

His roguish grin raised the temperature in the room by at least ten degrees. I felt like Little Red Riding Hood looking at the Big Bad Wolf. The devil on my shoulder promptly made me regret the analogy by wondering if it would be better to break with tradition and let the wolf eat me after all.

"No, I don't think so. This is going much too well to start over." He rubbed his artfully stubbled chin and continued smiling at me. "Still, you're right about it being a mutual attraction. The moment I saw you in that green dress, I couldn't pull my eyes away, and I didn't want to. A little voice in my head told me that I needed to go introduce myself right away."

I chuckled. "You have one of those little internal devils, too? Mine mugged my little angel." There I went again! I was digging myself deeper and deeper. I needed to get out of here before I just invited him over to my place right now. That little tart of a devil promptly told me what a good idea that was and it took all my strength to keep from sticking my foot in my mouth once again.

"The only angel I've seen in years is sitting across from me right now," he said with that same panty-melting grin as before.

While I was still trying to figure out what to say to that, Danny came back in with fresh coffee for all of us.

"There you are! What took you so long," I almost snarled at him, having to force myself not to snap.

"Sorry it took me so long," Danny said insincerely. "I stopped to talk with Trina about some scheduling details. I hope you two were able to reschedule yourselves as well."

"Actually, not yet," Keven said. "How about we have dinner to talk about it in more detail, Sandy?"

"Well, I'd love to, but I have an early day tomorrow," I said as a reasonable way out

presented itself. "I'll have to look and see when I have some free time." Even as I said the words, I knew that I wasn't really sure if I was grateful for my early day tomorrow or pissed off about it.

If anything, Keven looked more intrigued than he had before. I don't think he was used to having to chase skirts very far. I would have bet my Porsche that most of them came running right to him. That gave me pause. Was I turning myself into a challenge? Maybe I shouldn't have been so fast to duck out. The internal conflict was becoming harder to keep off my face, but I didn't know what I really wanted.

"To borrow a phrase," Danny interrupted smoothly, "it's all been taken care off. I was reloading the schedule with Trina so I could pick up your morning procedure."

I blinked at him, completely taken aback. "What? You're bumping me?" Then I felt my blood start to boil. "Why the hell are you bumping me?"

Danny leaned over and stage-whispered to Keven. "This is one of the features that comes standard with our fire-haired Sandy. We lovingly call her 'the flame-thrower.' Just go with it."

I glared at Danny and then speared Keven with a matching high-voltage stare. "I'm sure you both think this is very funny, but I am not amused. If either of you think I'm just going to roll over and go along with this, then you're very much..."

"Your boss?" Danny interposed. "Why, I do believe you're right. I am. So, that makes me the man that schedules all the surgeons and surgeries." His voice was light and his eyes gleamed with buried humor, but the message was there.

With a sigh, I crossed my arms and glared at Danny. "I don't like being your violin, but you play well, and I get the message."

I transferred the glare to Keven. "Seven PM sharp. I'll leave the finer details to you, but I like seafood."

"And since I'm so deeply in the doghouse, I'll be on time," he said with an unrepentant smirk. "Now Sandy, I just want you to remember that all I did was ask."

Reluctantly, I nodded and tamed my glare back. "I'm sorry. Like Danny said, I have a temper."

"The good thing is that it's not usually a long-term problem," Danny said. "It's usually a flash fire. She'll be her usual sunny self very quickly. Now, on to business."

"Do you still need me or can I go sulk in my office?" I asked Danny sweetly.

"I still need you, so no sulking. This really does concern you. I've decided that the partners all need to have portraits done, and that was why I sent you to spy on Keven's art show." Danny turned his gaze on Keven. "And I asked you to come over so we can work out the details over lunch. Sandy gave you a glowing review, by the way."

Keven nodded, smiling. "I'm always pleased to hear that the critics I care about give me good reviews. Since you're clearing our good Sandy's schedule, I'll do the same if we can come to a suitable agreement. However, I foresee that we might have some difficult negotiating ahead."

"Really?" Danny said, showing some surprise. "Should we go over them during lunch?"

Keven shook his head. "No, I think we should negotiate the basic terms now. If we can agree, then we can talk over the details during lunch." He smiled at Danny and then looked at me in a way that made me almost shrink back in the chair, it was so intense.

I felt like a mouse being drooled over by a hawk. My mouth promptly went dry. "Name it and we'll see if it's possible," Danny said agreeably.

"I don't want money for the work," Keven said, his eyes locking with mine. "I'd like for Sandy to model for some other paintings as compensation."

I licked my lips and glanced at Danny, my feelings warring inside me.

"No," Danny said firmly before I could figure out how to respond. "Sandy is my friend and a partner here. If she wants to model for you, that's her business, but I can't and won't urge her to do so on behalf of the partnership. She's not a bauble, to be bartered for some nicer bauble."

"If I model for you, how much would it save the partnership," I asked, trying to keep the internal tremble I was feeling out of my voice. It was mildly satisfying to see the surprise on Danny's face. "And what kind of modeling, exactly, are we talking about?"

Keven leaned back and crossed his leg casually. At least, I realized it was meant to look casual. I could see an almost palatable aura of tenseness around him. "I would never

ask a lady to model in anything other than what she feels comfortable with, so you don't need to worry about being asked to take your clothes off." One corner of his mouth quirked in a smile, and I just knew there was something he just couldn't resist saying. "Unless, of course, you'd like to take your clothes off for me."

The heat crawling up my neck and face told me that my Irish heritage had betrayed me again and I was blushing furiously. The accompanying twinge in my belly told me that at least part of me was not opposed to the idea in principle. Then again, when had a sexual organ ever had principles?

"I think it's a bit premature to be talking about taking my clothes off," I said, "and you didn't answer part of my question. How much modeling verses how much savings for the partnership?"

Rubbing his chin with his fingers, he considered that for a moment. "Well, that depends on a number of factors that haven't been decided yet. Size, quality and other variables that Doctor H. and I need to discuss. A ballpark figure would be one hundred and eighty thousand for the two portraits Doctor H. mentioned earlier. One of Danny and Holly, and another of you."

As a partner, I knew the approximate cash flow and net worth of the partnership. We could easily afford it, though it was still a significant chunk of change. "Is that your usual rate? How much was the painting of the kids on the bicycles, the painting at the front of the gallery last night?"

Something must have bled through when I was talking about that painting because he abruptly straightened and leaned forward. "The racing one? You like it? It was a very fun painting to do. My brother's children are so full of life."

I nodded. "I do like it, but right now we're just talking purchase price. If I wanted to buy it today, how much would it be?"

"If I were selling it, it would go for fifty-five thousand. But it's not for sale," he said.

I masked my disappointment. "Why not? And why so much? I can buy a lot of paintings for a much less than that."

Keven grinned at me. "True, but how much is it really worth? Simple economics and opportunity cost. I put in my time as a starving artist and now my paintings draw that amount, and more, as my fame grows. I'm not trying to blow my own horn here, but

that's the way prices in the art world are. In a few years, if my career stays on track, that one painting would be worth many thousands more than someone paid for it now. So, you see, you're not just buying the painting, but the name that goes along with it."

"I see. I guess I never understood that about art before," I admitted. "Is it not for sale so that it can go to your brother's family?"

A cloud came over his face. "No. It's not for sale because it's set aside for someone as a gift. My brother and I had a falling out when we were younger, and we no longer speak to each other. I talk with his wife and my niece and nephew regularly, though, and visit them when he is away. That's when I saw them racing."

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "You two discuss details, and I'll model for you, but I decide if the particulars are acceptable. How many paintings do I need to model for?"

Keven smiled like he had just won the lottery. "Six. We don't have to do them all at once, and we can work out the details of each project beforehand. For example, we can discuss the first one over dinner tonight."

I nodded and stood up. "Then I'll leave you two to talk. I need to go check on a patient, and I think I'm just distracting you both from your business now. Danny can give you my address and I'll see you at seven."

Keven rose smoothly to his feet and again took my hand and brought it to his lips. "The remainder of the day will be an eternity. Until then."

I nodded at Danny and managed to maintain my composure until I was safely in the hall. Then I slumped against the wall and covered my face in my hands, letting loose the emotions inside me, allowing them to chase each other around the center of my being. What in the world was I doing?

Then, with a deep breath, I pulled myself together and started down the hall toward the recovery room. The last thing I needed was someone to see me like this. I shook my head. I was a professional, a doctor. I had too many irons in the fire to let this man, any man, turn me inside out like this. That prompted a flashing vision of him on top of me, his body touching mine and his lips caressing the soft underside of my chin. Involuntarily, my body arched just like it did in the sudden daydream, the sudden wet heat flooding me. Oh God, I did have it bad!

I staggered into the janitorial closet and closed the door behind me. Sagging into the

chair inside, I slumped over the small table. I couldn't go on like this. My body was betraying me. It wanted to do things to him that were illegal in a few states. Hell, it wanted him to do things to it that were illegal in even more.

One ragged breath followed another as I forced the vision out of my head and fought for distance and calm. I had thought everything was fine in my sex life, but I'd quite obviously been deluding myself. I had to admit the problem before I could deal with it. I craved his touch. I wanted to give in to it. Part of me needed it in a primal way that I had never felt before. And there was no way I was just going to throw myself at him and be another notch on his bedpost. No matter how much one part of me might want exactly that result.

Bit by bit, I more firmly grabbed the reins, wrested control of my emotions and took command of my body. Once I felt that I could be professional, and stay professional, I stepped back out of the closet. Ben was just coming down the hall and cocked his head at me.

"There you are. Mrs. Henderson is awake and ready for you. Um, what were you doing in the broom closet?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said primly. "Let's just say I had some thinking to do and wanted the privacy."

"Okay..."

I smiled at him and patted his shoulder. "Nothing to worry about. These aren't the droids you're looking for. Move along."

His eyes crinkled as he laughed. "Whatever you say, Obi Wan. I'm no match for your Jedi mind tricks."

With a grin I went to check on Helen. She was awake and looking good. I reassured her that everything went perfectly and then left her in the capable hands of the recovery nurse.

A glance at my watch told me that lunchtime was looming, and I needed to get out of here. Perhaps I could kill two birds with one stone. I flipped open my Rolodex and found the number for Trina's boyfriend and dialed it on my cell. If he was ducking her calls, he'd duck the office number, too.

Two rings and he picked up. "Hello?"

"Just the man I was looking for," I said in a pleasant tone. "We need to talk, Steve-O. If you have any lunch plans, change them."

He sighed. "I should have known she'd go crying to you. You women talk about everything."

"That's right," I agreed. "We tell each other everything. I know more about your sex life than you wish I did, too. Now that we've established that I'm clued in, I want to meet you for lunch. Right now. It's important."

"Look, I'd really rather not fight about this again, Sandy."

"Then don't," I said reasonably. "I'm not going to argue with you, but I need to make sure that you and Trina understand where each of you is sitting. Don't make me come down there, pal."

"Fine," he said, giving in. "I'll meet you at Coronado's in forty-five minutes. I have to wrap up what I'm doing, and if you're going to read me the riot act, at least I can have enchiladas."

"Thank you. I'll get a table on the patio. See you then," I said before hanging up. I locked my door, stripped off the scrubs and put my street clothes back on. Then I headed for the front door, searching through the numbers in my cell phone.

By the time I was getting in my car, I had secured a patio table through shameless use of my womanly charms. I smiled smugly at myself in the mirror. Who wasn't in control?

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I was just ordering my tea when Steve arrived. He added another tea to the order and sat down.

"I'll be having the enchilada plate," he told the server. "No rice, double beans. And no onions."

"Same here," I chimed in. "Except I want two sets of rice and pile the onions on. Oh, and add in a bowl of chili cheese and chips."

After the server departed, I fixed my eyes on Steve. I could definitely see what Trina



saw in him. Big, ruggedly handsome and usually a nice guy. "Let me start out by telling you something important, something that you need to hear and need to remember. Trina loves you."

He shook his head. "I know she does, but dammit..."

I raised a hand and cut him off. "What I'm not going to do is tell you that she's right or tell her you're right. I'm not here to settle your disagreement. I'm just here to make sure you don't lose track of the big picture while you're pissed off."

That took the wind out of his sails and he used the arrival of the tea to get his thoughts in order.

"What the hell does that mean?" he finally asked without head. "I'm dense, so use small words."

I smiled and shook my head. "You're not dense. You're a man. While the two are similar, there are differences."

Steve seemed to finally relax as he gave me a small smile. "Here we go."

"Look, people fight. So you and Trina had an argument. Whoop-ti-do. That happens to millions of couples every hour of every day. The big deal is that you're not talking about it anymore. You're dodging the most important person in your life, and that has to stop. It's hurting her."

"I'm not trying to hurt her," he defended himself. "I'm giving us both space to cool off."

"My therapist tells me that men and women think in different ways," I said.

"You may think you're just giving her time to cool off, but what you're telling her by doing that is that her position in the argument is the one that has destroyed your relationship and there's no possible reconciliation. She's devastated."

"What?!?" he asked, truly astonished. "That's crazy!"

"No, it's not crazy," I said patiently. "That's the way women think. As long as we can talk about something, it's still in play, still negotiable. Women are born negotiators, in case you missed it. We're willing to talk about lots of things, even unreasonable things. It's when one of the players walks away from the table that we see the line drawn in the sand. By not talking to her any more, she thinks that the two of you have reached a

non-negotiable impasse. Just think about it until the food gets here."

I sipped my tea and watched him thinking. It occurred to me that I was going through that same negotiating process with Keven, though I hadn't put it into those exact words before. I was negotiating both with him and myself, with Keven to see what I was willing to do, with myself to see what I was willing to compromise about.

On the flip side of the gender issue, I needed to keep in mind that men were more direct. Men thought and then acted, where women thought and then emoted. Action vs. emotion. If Keven's direct and strong actions so far meant what I thought, then he was as struck by me as I had been of him, and probably had just as little understanding of what was happening. At dinner, I needed to keep a firm hand on my emotions and not let us get stampeded into something we didn't want. Or at the very least, that I didn't want. Now I just needed to decide what that was.

I was so lost in thought that the plates of food being delivered startled me. With a smile at Steve, I gratefully accepted his contemplative silence to allow my own situation to percolate in peace. I wanted Trina and Steve to make up, but right now it wasn't what was really worrying me. I knew that they'd figure out their situation. I wasn't so sure about me and Keven.

The food was wonderful, as always. Part way through, Steve started talking about the things he and Trina were planning to do in the near future, and that reassured me that he had gotten the message. If he didn't call her before I got back to the office I'd eat my cell phone. I listened and made noises at the right times for the rest of the meal.

When the check came, Steve insisted on paying, and I didn't argue. I toyed with whether to ask him about my own situation, and decided that I could ask a few questions. Steve was a nice, very discreet guy.

"Steve, there's a man that I met recently that seems really gung-ho about going out with me. He seems really single-minded about it. Should I be worried?"

"Does he frighten you?" he asked, his eyes sharpening.

I hesitated and then shrugged. "Maybe. Not really. Sort of. I don't know, I guess. I've never had someone that seemed so determined to get to know me."

He smiled. "Ah, a firm, definite, tentative, maybe, huh? Well, let me give you my male perspective on this, and maybe you can decide on your own how you really feel. Do you

know if he's successful in what he does?"

"Oh, yes," I nodded. "He's very successful in his field." I took a few minutes to fill him in on all the pertinent details.

"You'll have to decide if he's stalker material, but in my opinion, his behavior falls into the category of seeing what you want and going for it. I'd say see how he is over dinner. Spending a couple of hours with him will settle your mind on what kind of person he is and what he wants. You can always double date with Trina and me."

I smiled and shook my head. "No, I think I can handle this myself. Besides, you'll probably be busy tonight." I grabbed my purse and stood up. "Thanks for talking to me and for the advice. Now, call Trina and send flowers. Trust me."

As I made my way into the parking lot I drew a deep breath and settled into my car, lowering the top. I started the Porsche and let the rumble of the engine calm me with its simple, stable noise. I was going to do this. I was going to seriously think about letting someone into my life that could disrupt all the priorities I'd already settled on. I must be out of my mind.

My thoughts were interrupted when the passenger door opened. I turned my head to see what Steve wanted and froze in shock. The man that flopped into my seat was a dark-complexioned stranger with short black hair.

"What the..." I started to say before he silenced me by pulling a gun out from under his coat.

"Shut up and start driving," he snarled in a heavy Brooklyn accent.

## **Chapter Three: Emotional roller coaster**

All I could see was the bore of the pistol pointed at my midsection. The barrel looked wide enough to drive a bus through, and it was pointed right at me. Then, with an odd moment of clinical detachment, I noticed the blood on his hand, red and fresh.

He jarred me out of my thoughts by jabbing me hard in the side with the pistol. "I said, 'Drive,' dammit!"

With my hands shaking in fear, I started the car and put it into reverse. Somehow I managed to avoid hitting any other cars, though I wasn't sure how. As I started forward into the street, I caught a glimpse of another man running into the parking lot with his hand in his jacket. His eyes seemed to fill my rear view mirror, cold and without emotion. Like a snake's eyes. He peered into my soul, but not in the positive way Keven did. I promptly, and without any rational reasoning, decided he was even more dangerous than the gun-wielding manic beside me.

"Turn right," the man with the gun said, "and make it snappy if you want to live."

I was afraid I was already dead and I had no real choice. I pulled into the street and turned right.

"Please don't kill me," I whimpered, giving voice to my fears.

He turned to me as he heard the sharp fear in my voice, but otherwise ignored my plea. "Go straight ahead and turn toward the freeway," he said instead. "Get on the freeway, and head toward the city limits."

Shivering to myself in quiet terror, I complied. The man continued to stare at me, holding the gun steadily pointed towards me, even while he pulled his other hand out of his pocket and spent a minute fiddling with the seat controls, pushing the seat back. I knew I needed to find some way to get him out of my car, or at least find a way to get him to stop pointing the gun at me.

"You're bleeding," the doctor, the only calm part of me said. "I should take you to the hospital."

He chuckled mirthlessly. "People die in hospitals, lady. Just drive the fucking car."

"I'm a doctor. At least tell me what happened to you. Were you shot? I may be able to help."

"Yeah, I was shot, but I'll live. Trust me on this one, 'cause I've been shot worse before."

"Did Snake Eyes shoot you?" I asked as I pulled onto the freeway.

"Snake Eyes?" he asked, a frown on his face.

"The man who ran into the parking lot behind you."

My unwilling passenger began cursing and half turned in the seat to look behind us.

"Sonuvabitch! He'll be behind me somewhere. That bastard never gives up." He looked back at me. "Get off the freeway."

"We just got on," I protested.

"Just get off the fucking freeway!" he shouted. "Do what I fucking tell you!" There was a hint of real fear in his voice. He must have been nervous, because he moved his seat even further back and grabbed my purse.

"Just take the money," I said. "Please. There should be enough in there for you to..."

"Shut up." He opened my wallet and took the cash. Then he stared at my license. "How the hell is it you can get a decent DMV picture, and mine looks like I just got outta bed?"

I didn't answer, completely bemused by the question, the kind a friend might ask, the kind that made the madman seem human. He closed my wallet after a moment and dropped my purse at his feet. Pulling off at the next exit, I stopped at the red light and looked over at him as I braked. He stared back challengingly. Looking past him, up the street to the right, I sucked in my breath and pointed past him. "Is that Snake Eyes?"

My captor twisted in the seat and his head darted as he searched for his pursuer. I slipped the car into park and quietly popped my door open. In a flash, I had the car turned off, the keys in my hand, and I was hauling ass around the panel van beside us. A shouted curse behind me made me tense up and expect excruciating pain between my shoulder blades, but there were no shots.

Directly on the other side of the van was my dream come true, a motorcycle cop staring at me like I'd lost my mind.

"A man with a gun is right behind me!" I shouted, running around the motorcycle. "Help me!"

The cop never hesitated. He stood the bike on it's stand and hopped off, pulling his gun just in time to confront my kidnapper as he belatedly came around the van. "Police! Drop the weapon!" he shouted.

A look of despair came over the bleeding man, but he brought his gun up anyway.

I screamed and turned my head, expecting to die. The crash of the gunshot almost made me wet myself. Though my ears rang, I felt no pain, so I opened my eyes in time to see the cop kicking the gun away from the fallen man and calling for backup. He then twisted the twice-shot man's hands behind him and cuffed him.

Part of me wanted to do nothing more than fall down and cry, but something bigger in me simply couldn't do that, wouldn't let the terrified part of me do that. So instead I walked shakily back to my car, opened the trunk and got out my first aid kit. I ignored the asshole honking his horn, resisting my sudden desire to throw a rock through his windshield. The panel van had pulled away, leaving me plenty of space as I set it beside the downed man.

"Stay away from him, Miss," the cop commanded me sharply.

"I'm a doctor," I said firmly. "I have to help him." Even as I said that, some small voice inside of me raged that the doctor in me so rigidly controlled who I was that I couldn't even react like a normal person would. For an instant, I was shocked motionless by this insight, but I ruthlessly shoved the thought away and went to work.

The cop muttered something at me that I didn't really hear and grabbed his radio mike to give the dispatcher more information. In the distance I could hear muted sirens getting louder.

I stared down at the man who had only moments before held my life in his hand. Now our roles were reversed. I knelt beside him and ripped his shirt open. He blinked at me, his eyes already losing focus. He was going into shock. "Hey!" I screamed at him, "Focus on me. Stay with me."

He smiled at me, though his teeth showed a hideous red. "I don't think so, Doc," he said, coughing up blood matching the rest pooling under him.

"Don't talk." One of the shots had hit him right in the chest, and it was bad. Unless the ambulance got here quickly, he was going to die. He was probably going to die anyway.

"Keep your head down, Doc, and don't talk to strangers," he said almost too quietly for me to hear. "Watch out for that bastard." As if satisfied that he had given me the wisdom of the earth, he gave me one more smile and closed his eyes.

By the time the paramedics arrived, despite everything I could do, he was dead.

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The next little while was a three-ring circus. Cops swarmed the scene, and I found myself sitting in the back of a police car with a blanket around my shoulders, a cup of really bad coffee in my hands. A plainclothes detective stood beside the car asking me for every detail I could remember, starting with the moment the dead guy showed up in my car. I wiped my bloody hands with a handwipe, futilely trying to remove the blood. Gloves made this type of thing so much less messy.

My voice sounded mechanical to my ears, almost monotone, as I answered the officer. I drank the coffee and tried to feel something, but all the emotion seemed to have bled out of me like the blood-soaked, sheet-draped body lying beside my car. With minimal curiosity, I watched a uniformed cop give the passenger seat a cursory look before moving my car out of the road.

"Don't you need to tow my car to search for evidence?" I asked the detective.

He shook his head. "If the officer had seen anything he'd have bagged it. The only other reason we'd need evidence now is to find the guy that took you hostage and charge him." With a brief glance at the body, he shrugged. "I don't think that'll be necessary now."

That made more sense than I expected, despite the many episodes of CSI I'd watched, and I drank more coffee while the detective ran me through the events again. I wondered how much longer it would take till Danny arrived. I'd called him to come get me as soon as I'd been allowed to. I knew I wasn't going to feel safe driving my car. I briefly wondered if I ever would again. For now, I'd simply get it towed home. I'd think about what to do later.

I didn't have to wonder long, because just then Danny stepped up to the car and pulled me out, crushing me with a bear hug. I felt his love and concern for me in that hug, and I tried to say something, but I suddenly couldn't speak as the dam of emotion tore loose, and it was all I could do to hold him and cry. He brushed his hand through my hair as I wept, telling me everything was okay. I remember saying "Thank you" to him and telling him "I'm sorry" over and over, although I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be sorry about.

When I finally ran down, I felt like a wrung-out dishrag. At a nod from the police detective, Danny led me over to where the police had moved my car. Parked next to it

was the biggest Harley Davidson motorcycle I'd ever seen. It was nothing but black and chrome, and sitting on it was Keven Braddock.

When he saw us approaching, he stood up abruptly and walked to meet us. Stopping in front of us, he reached out, cupped my chin in his hand and looked into my eyes, reading my soul. Unlike Snake Eyes, his gaze didn't frighten me. I saw the worry and fear buried inside him, hidden from those around him that couldn't peer into him the way I could. In an instant, I felt a bond form between us that strummed like a plucked harp string. Then he pulled me from Danny's grasp and held me.

This morning, I would've been afraid to be in his arms, but now I somehow felt I was where I belonged, and I was only grateful. His beard rubbed against my cheek as he held me and he whispered in my ear, "You're safe now. It's over." He sounded so confident, so certain, that I believed him deep inside and sagged with relief. The scent of him comforted me in a way that I could never have described. He was manly - strong and protective all at once. The part of me that normally objected to being protected, or even feeling the need for protection, was pretty weak after the day's events, so I just luxuriated in the warmth and courage Keven provided.

He finally let me go enough to clap Danny on the shoulder. "Why don't you take Sandy's car home with you? I'll get her home and settled in."

Danny's eyes silently questioned me and I just nodded. I didn't have the strength to consider alternatives or to resist. "Okay, I'll do that, then," he agreed. "Holly and I will bring the car over tomorrow. Sandy, just stay home for now. We'll cover everything at work for a few days."

The flame-thrower inside me wanted to object, to tell Danny that wasn't necessary, but she couldn't get the energy to actually speak. I must really be wiped out I thought to myself. Nodding again, I let Keven lead me to his motorcycle.

As Keven put a helmet on me, I marveled at the relative lack of fear I had about riding the big bike. He put on his own helmet and climbed aboard. "Sit behind me and hold on around my waist," he instructed me. "Hold onto me as tight as you like."

I climbed on behind him and found the places to put my feet. Then, with a shiver, I slid my arms around his waist and pulled myself against him. The heat of this morning was dampened but not gone completely. His stomach was a hot slab of muscle under my hands. I closed my eyes and rested my chin on his shoulder as he started the bike.



The trip to my house was a blur. Although I pointed out turns as we came up on them, I felt as if I was in a trance. I was startled when the bike cruised into my driveway where I normally parked my Porsche. With unsteady legs, I climbed off and tried to figure out the helmet strap until he gently moved my hands and loosened it himself.

After Keven set the helmets on the seat of the bike, I started toward the front door. It seemed like it was a hundred miles away, and I was so tired that I stumbled over my own feet. I squealed like a child when he effortlessly picked me up in his arms and strode to the front door.

"You don't..." I started.

"Shhh. You've had a rough day, so let me take care of you," he said in a voice more gentle than I'd expected.

With hardly a dip, he pulled my house key out of his pocket. I hadn't even thought about that when we started to my house. I was glad he'd gotten it somehow because I was really a wreck. He opened the door and held me so I could turn off the alarm. He closed the door and then took me right into the living room to set me on my feet.

"Can you make it to the bathroom on your own?" he asked in a concerned tone. "A hot shower would probably do you some good. Come back down when you're clean."

"Yes," I groused, "I can take a shower by myself."

Keven quirked an eyebrow and smiled. "I asked if you could make it there, not if you needed someone to scrub your back. That would be getting a little ahead of ourselves, don't you think?"

I rolled my eyes and went up the stairs. I made it all the way up without falling back down the stairs, thank God. That would have been embarrassing. Stripping off the bloody clothes in the bathroom, I dumped them in a corner. I'd put them in the washer to soak and give them to Danny to take back to the office tomorrow. The cleaners we had were good at getting blood out.

The room quickly filled with steam as I let the hot water run all over my tired body. Keven had only been joking, but a part of me thought it would be nice to have him behind me, scrubbing my back. I'd lost patients before, back when I'd been a resident in the emergency room, so I knew the feelings. It was part of the human condition to

want to reaffirm life after death, but instinctively I knew that was the wrong thing to do now. It might make things... Hell, I didn't know what it might make things.

I found myself shaking and my knees buckle as the weight of the whole ordeal began to overtake me. I was very glad my shower had a built-in seat or I would've ended up on the floor. Suddenly, I was a jumble of nerves and emotions. Even though I had seen my share of death and dying, I had never really had my *own* mortality shoved so clearly into my face like this, and it frightened me deeply.

Sitting on the seat, I held my knees and sobbed softly. Part of me, the doctor, knew these moments were normal reactions to trauma and would come and go, but it was more intense than I'd expected. I knew that I would be a better doctor when I saw it in patients I would have in the future. Danny contracted with a counselor, a psychiatrist, and I could already see a coming confrontation about me going to see her. Danny and Holly insisting and me resisting. Three guesses how that would come out. That brought the first real smile to my face that night, knowing I had their love and friendship to support me. I could still feel Danny's hug from earlier. Then there was Keven... Ohmigod, Keven... He was still downstairs!

I turned off the water and dried off with one of my big, fluffy towels, then went into my bedroom. Panties, shorts and an oversized tee shirt made me as presentable as I felt like being. Now, I needed to go downstairs and see what he had been doing in my absence. It had been years since I'd had a man wandering around my house, and I felt the burning desire to see what he was up to.

Padding quietly down the stairs, I let my senses stretch out, searching for him. The scent of something cooking led me into the kitchen and I stopped in the doorway, slack-jawed. His back to me, Keven was flipping what looked like shrimp in a sizzling skillet, just like you see on the cooking shows. He could paint *and* cook?

I must have made some kind of noise, because he half-turned and smiled at me. Not the hot smiles that made my insides melt, but just a friendly smile. "I decided that you didn't need to go out, and you certainly didn't need to cook, so I'm taking a hand and making us dinner. I hope you don't mind."

"Knock yourself out," I said, sitting at the table. "You'll probably do a better job with the shrimp than I would have. I'm a mediocre cook, at best."

He set the skillet down and poured me a glass of wine from the open bottle on the counter. I took it from him gratefully and watched him closely as he went back to

cooking. I'd never really known any man to be naturally domestic before, and it was interesting to watch him in the kitchen.

"This should be ready in just a minute," he said, wiping his hands on a towel and sipping his own glass of wine. "You have good taste in wine, by the way. Stansbury Vineyards makes some stellar vintages."

"If you say so," I shrugged. "It was on the front row at eye level, so I bought it. I keep buying it now because it tastes good. I don't really have a taste for fine wines."

"If you like this you do," he insisted, sipping his and setting it down to tend to the food.

While he prepared the plates, putting the shrimp on a bed of noodles and covering the whole in a creamy Alfredo sauce, I tried to figure out how to broach the situation. I wanted him here, but I didn't want him in my bed tonight. Okay, I did want him in it, in me, but it wasn't going to happen. Not until I knew it was right. I refused to sleep with someone because I was weak. I hoped.

The first bite confirmed that he was a much better cook than I would ever be. It was delicious. "This is good! I mean really good!"

Keven bowed his head marginally in acknowledgment. "It comes from years living as a starving artist. If I wanted to eat anything other than frozen dinners I had to learn to cook for myself. In a surprisingly short time, you learn to cook all kinds of things that way. Living single, I'm sure you cook better than you let on."

I smiled and shook my head. "No, I'm afraid simple dishes are my limit. Those shrimp were going to be steamed because I could never fry them up like you just did. Cooking is one of my failures as a woman."

His eyes gleamed at me. "I'm sure, with proper coaching, you could pick up the finer points very quickly."

"Uh huh." I lowered my eyes and took a bite of the scrumptious shrimp and chewed it thoughtfully before raising my eyes back to his. "Look, I appreciate you coming over but we need to discuss some ground rules."

The chair he was in creaked a bit as he leaned back and nodded. "It's your house so we go by your rules. I'm here because you've had a terrible experience, and I refuse to see you left alone when I can be here for support."

"Why?" I demanded. "You met me less than a day ago. Danny and Holly, sure, I can see them coming and being here with me, but you don't know me at all."

"But I do know Doctor H. Even if we've not seen each other often over the last few years, he and Holly are dear friends of mine, and Danny's told me how much you mean to them. That, in and of itself, is reason enough; but, I feel the need to protect you, too, even if I don't know every last little detail about you."

I wanted to more closely examine his idea that I was something more to Danny and Holly than just a talented partner, but Keven's first words distracted me. I stared at him. "You know Danny?" At his nod, I took a deep breath. "Then why did he send me to meet you at the gallery last night in his place? He must have already known you and your work would be..."

Keven sat calmly, without saying anything, and watched the blood start to redden my face.

I really was an idiot. Danny hadn't set me up today, he'd set me up last night. And Keven was in on it. I ground my teeth together and glared at him. "You knew all about this, didn't you? The two of you cooked this up so I'd come meet you?"

Unperturbed, he shook his head. "No, Sandy. All I knew last night was that he called and canceled. I didn't even know they had a partner, and I didn't know he was sending you. Besides, this sounds more like Holly."

Yes, that sounded reasonable, but, "If Holly wanted to set me up like that, why didn't she ask me to go before the emergency?" The moment I asked the question I knew the answer: it hadn't occurred to her before, but when the situation presented itself, Holly had realized she could use the emergency to set me up. She'd certainly tried it before, dragging me along to places where eligible men were to be found. Thank God she wasn't like some people you read about, always trying to marry off their friends, but still.

"Perhaps it was a spur-of-the-moment decision," Keven echoed my thoughts with a shrug. "You'll have to ask them. All I'm saying is that until I met you at the clinic, I had no idea you were associated with them in any way. Now, you can choose to believe that or not." His eyes flashed a bit at that, showing me that he had a bit of temper himself. What I didn't see in his eyes, though, was deceit.

Slowly, I deflated, forcing my anger out of me like sweat from my pores. Grudgingly, I

noded. "Okay. So we're both innocent, and we were both set up. What does that mean?"

Keven chuckled. "Do you think it matters so far as we're concerned? I don't. The spark isn't there because of what Holly and Danny did or didn't do. It's there because of who we are. This isn't about them, unless we make it about them." He raised his glass in a salute to the wall. "Not that I'm not grateful to them, though."

I considered if I should join him in the toast and decided I'd rather be pissy. I dug into the food. "That brings us back to us," I finally said.

"The fact there is an 'us' in your mind is a good sign," he said roguishly.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny," I said, not laughing. "I mean the rules of engagement." I forestalled the obvious smart comment with a raised fork. "And, no, I don't mean we're getting engaged. I mean I intend to go to bed alone tonight."

He kept that grin of his in place and nodded. "Of course. I would never take advantage of a lady, and most especially not right after what you've been through today. Your virtue is safe with me, until and unless you surrender it of your own free will, and only when you want it, not just because you feel the need to re-affirm you're alive. I won't make you regret it."

Part of me started thinking about just that, wondering how it would feel when I did surrender. I flushed when I realized I hadn't been thinking in terms of "if", but in terms of "when". Unconsciously, I'd already made up my mind that I did want to surrender, that I was going to let Keven both into my life and into my bed. I'd be damned, though, if it would be tonight.

I watched him while we ate in silence, looking for any sign that he knew what I'd decided or for any hint of smugness. I saw none, though his dark eyes smoked at me even while he devoured his food. A part of me appreciated the feeling of being desired; just I appreciated the fact that he could do it without filling the comfortable silence with needless words.

When we finished eating, Keven took the plates to the sink and started them soaking. I felt the urge to go do the dishes, but a look from him made me re-evaluate. He was laying claim to the kitchen, and his eyes dared me to challenge him on it. Not that I didn't like a good challenge, but I felt like I'd had enough for one day, and I simply didn't feel like fighting tonight.

Retreating to the living room, I put some soft jazz on the radio and sat down with my wine, waiting. Keven joined me a minute later, bringing the bottle and his glass. I raised an eyebrow as he topped me off. "Planning on getting me drunk and having your way with me?"

Setting the bottle down, he smiled assuredly at me. "Not at the same time. Tonight I plan on getting you drunk. Having my way with you will have to wait for some other night. I gave you my word and, even if I hadn't, I wouldn't use your vulnerability against you. When we make love it will be with your whole-hearted approval."

So, he was sure we would do it, too. I should've felt offended that he was so certain, but that would be kind of hypocritical. "So, if I set this glass down and asked you to make love to me right here, right now, you'd say 'no'?"

"That's exactly what I would say. I'm not saying I wouldn't want to, or that I wouldn't regret that decision for the rest of the night, though." His eyes caressed my body and I knew that he did want me.

"Then I won't tell you that," I said, taking a deep gulp of my wine. "I'll just drink, talk, and see what happens."

The jazz slowly seeped into my flesh. The alcohol made everything a bit blurred in a way that I welcomed. Despite saying I was going to talk, I was silent and he drank with me quietly, filling my glass whenever it seemed light.

Things were going so well. At least they were until I started crying, the tears coming from nowhere, making the room even more blurry. I commanded them back and was just as successful as if I'd ordered the sea to retreat. I covered my face and struggled for the composure that eluded me.

I never knew he was beside me until the glass was taken from my hand, and he pulled me gently into his embrace, holding me against him, shielding me from the world. His hand caressed my head and he whispered meaningless things in my ear.

Surrendering control, I rested my face against his chest and wept. The emotions rose up and claimed me, reducing me to helplessness. I have no idea how long I cried, my tears drenching his shirt. His arms around me first felt comforting and then started to feel erotic, as the emotional turmoil and pain gave way to a fragile peace, and the heat of him, and his scent, seeped into me. Even drunk, I was sure that the wine had

something to do with it, as well.

Wiping the tears from my face, I looked up into his eyes and felt his conflicting emotions. Anger, though not directed at me; concern about me and how the day's events would affect me; and lust for me all warred inside him. On top of all of that, though, was control. Discipline.

"What if I ask you to take me to bed right now?" I whispered to him. "What if I beg you to make love to me? Would you deny me?"

Keven kissed my forehead softly. "As much as I want to make love to you, as much as I hurt saying 'no', I can't."

"That's not fair," I said grumpily. "I haven't wanted sex for years and the first time I do, I get a man with honor and scruples, and I get told 'no.' I take it all back."

I could feel the chuckle deep in his chest. "No, and I think you've had enough to drink, too. I'm going to help you to bed, and then I'm going to retire to the sofa."

When he helped me up, the world moved in ways I wasn't used to seeing it move. I held onto him tightly, to avoid falling over, which just made me fall over the other way.

Laughing, he picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. I shrieked and started laughing, too. Just like the crying, peals of humor flowed out of me. That was followed by a flash of lust as I felt his hand on my ass. Not on my legs, but on my ass.

"I thought you were keeping your hands to yourself," I said accusingly.

"It's all purely platonic," he assured me. Yeah, right.

He figured out where my bedroom was without my input and took me into my bathroom and stood me on my unsteady feet. "Let's take care of your teeth and then put you to bed."

I brushed my teeth while he held me up, almost making it a game to see if I could lean over far enough to make him grope me. No such luck.

When he started to take me back out to the bed, I held up a hand. "I need to go potty," I slurred. "Either help or turn around."

Keven laughed and turned around.

"Spoilsport," I muttered, pulling down my shorts and panties before sitting down mostly on the toilet. As I relieved myself, I watched his back. This was the closest I'd been to a man for so long without clothes on. Well, I wasn't naked, but I was close. Then my devil started talking to me again, whispering seductive things in my ear. I cocked my other ear to listen for my angel, but I think the bitch had passed out. Pussy.

What the hell. I peeled the tee shirt off my head and dropped it beside me before kicking off my shorts and panties. Sitting behind him, totally naked, I smiled at myself and my own audacity. It had to be the wine, because a part of me knew this was insane.

When I'd dried myself, I took a breath for courage and tapped his leg. "Okay, I need help standing up to wash my hands."

Keven turned around and stopped in shock, staring at me. The heat of his gaze stoked the fire inside me and I felt my nipples stiffen in almost painful arousal. The lust in his gaze was there for anyone to see and in moments, I could see other, prominent evidence that I'd hit a home run.

"That is so unfair," he said, a catch in his voice. "I thought it was the guys that were supposed to keep trying to turn 'no' into 'yes'." I could see his hands quiver a little as he took my hands and lifted me to my feet.

Then, as we stood toe to toe, I pulled him to me and melted into his arms, allowing my mouth to devour his. God, the man knew how to kiss! In seconds, I was totally drenched. The feel of his arms around me, pulling me into him, set me on fire. His erection rubbed against my belly in a way that made me want to rip his clothes off him right now, and my breasts were squashed flat against his chest.

For a moment, I thought he'd given in to me, but then he pushed me back and held my shoulders in his hands. "Oh, no," he said huskily. "No means no, Vixen. Let's wash your hands and get you to bed. Alone."

He turned me to the sink and slid his hands down my back to my hips, steadying me.

"No," I almost wailed. "This so isn't fair! I want you! I need you! Please!" Involuntarily, I rubbed my ass back against him.



"You're right about one thing," he said heavily. "It isn't fair, but it's what's going to happen. Wash up."

Reluctantly, I washed and dried my hands. Then he helped me out to the bedroom and turned down the sheet for me so I could slide in. I looked at him, standing there full of desire and need, and knew that he was right. This shouldn't happen tonight, despite how much I longed for his touch. That thought sent another jolt of electricity through me that almost made me beg once more, but I managed to keep from losing my dignity again.

"At least, if you're going to insist on being a gentleman, give me one more kiss before you go downstairs," I said softly.

Wordlessly, he took my face in his hands and kissed me gently, almost lovingly, before he let me go. "Goodnight, Sandy. If you need anything at all, shout and I'll be right up."

At the door he paused for a moment and looked at my sheet-draped body and then turned out the light and closed the door behind him.

Already, the arms of Morpheus were pulling me down, but I managed to think for a moment how lucky I really was before sleep took me.

## Chapter Four: Losing control

I woke up parched as the proverbial bone. Throwing the sheet back, I stumbled into the bathroom and used my hands to drink right from the tap until I'd slaked my thirst. Drinking causes dehydration - I should have remembered that last night.

Last night? "Ohmigod..." I said aloud. I did not throw myself at Keven. I did not take off all my clothes and beg him to have sex with me. He must think I'm the biggest slut ever and after that performance, I couldn't say he was wrong. I'd been like a minx in heat. What the hell was I thinking? Oh yeah, I wasn't.

I showered and dressed quickly, both eager and reticent about going downstairs. Jeans and a green blouse would work. I normally didn't wear shoes at home, so I wouldn't worry about them now. The clock told me it was after 9 AM. I *should* be at work and in surgery. A flashing vision of the carjacker's blood on my hands made me stop and take a deep breath. I didn't have time for this crap.

Keven was sitting in the living room with one of my notepads in his lap. He had a pencil flying over the paper, sketching something. As I entered the room, his dark eyes rose from the paper and he smiled. Closing the notepad and setting it aside, he rose to his feet and walked up to me, taking my hands in his. "How do you feel this morning?"

I looked down, noticing small scars on the back of his hands and I wondered what had caused them. "I feel like an idiot - like some bimbo." I looked back into his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Taking my chin in one hand, he shook his head. "Don't. You're neither an idiot nor a bimbo and you *don't* have anything to be sorry about. You had a terrible shock yesterday and human beings react to shock by being human."

I wiped a tear from my cheek and smiled a little. "So, it's normal to throw yourself at some guy that you barely know like some tart? I shouldn't have done that. I... I know you want me and there I was torturing you like that. You wouldn't have been out of line to take me, you know."

Cocking his head to the side, he let out that roguish grin. "Oh, being tortured like that has its benefits, too, but I would've been out of line to give in to temptation. Tell me, would you have regretted sleeping with me when you woke up? Honestly."

Taking a deep breath, I deflated. "Probably."

"Then I did the right thing. If we'd had sex last night, you wouldn't respect me this morning."

I barked a short laugh and slapped his shoulder. "I thought that went the other way! You're incorrigible!"

"Yes, I am," he agreed, "and hungry. Let me make some breakfast and then we can discuss paintings."

"I won't argue about food," I said, following him into the kitchen after he picked up the notepad, "but I'm surprised that you don't want another chance at me, now that I'm sober. I wouldn't say no."

Those dark eyes took a moment to devour me again, sending a shiver up my spine. "Oh, I haven't lost interest but this is too important to rush. I don't want to make love

to you because you're afraid, drunk or feeling guilty. When the time and place are right, we *will* make love, Sandy. Count on it."

I cooled the simmering heat he roused in me and nodded. "Absolutely."

"Mutual respect is very important in a relationship," he said piously, making me roll my eyes.

He started making breakfast, so I let him concentrate and snagged the notebook. He quirked an eyebrow at me, but didn't object. Flipping open the cover, I stared at the first sketch. A woman, I assume me, was lying on a bed, her body half covered by a sheet. My arm was stretched out, beckoning someone to come to me. My body language screamed desire.

I looked back up at him in shock. "This is me?"

Keven nodded. "Fair warning, if you go any further, you'll see where my imagination took me last night and this morning."

My fingers itched to flip the sheet and look on. "You mean, like pornographic drawings?"

He nodded. "Well, more explicit." Then he and turned to the stove, cracked the eggs and starting them to cooking, leaving me in peace to decide whether to give in to my curiosity or not in privacy.

Swallowing hard, I closed the notepad and set it aside. I badly wanted to look but I didn't feel like I should. It felt like invading his thoughts and fantasies. I'd look once I felt more comfortable with him.

A few minutes later, he set an omelet in front of me and sat down, eyeing the notebook. "Well?"

I took a bite and found steaming ham and cheese. "Delicious." He mock-glared at me. "No, the drawings."

I met his look with one of innocence. "Was I supposed to have an opinion on them?"

"Don't make me take you over my knee and paddle you," he threatened with an upraised fork.

"Ooooo, now that sounds promising," I said with a throaty chuckle. "I've noticed you do like to have your hands on my ass."

He smiled and nodded. "And a very nice ass it is, too. Now, what did you think?"

"I only looked at the first one," I admitted. "I just didn't feel right about looking at the others just yet. I think we need to get to know each other first. The first one looked like me, only sexier. I liked it."

"Oh, you're that sexy and more. With paint, I'll be able to capture that a lot more closely than with just a pencil."

My fork slipped from my suddenly nerveless fingers and clattered on the plate. "You're going to paint me like that?" My heart thumped in my chest.

"Yes, but no one will ever see it unless you agree," he said calmly. "That would be a betrayal and I'd never do that. Nudity and the type of allure you exude would make an exquisite masterpiece."

I swallowed and picked up my fork, studiously eating while I thought about it. "Does that count as the first modeling?"

"Only if you decide you want it to be a painting I can display."

I thought about and shrugged. He was right. Art and nudity went hand-in-hand. "I can live with that, I suppose. You'll probably make me look better than I would have anyway. I suppose you can show those, though I doubt you'll be hanging any pornographic paintings, so that seems safe enough."

He nodded. "True enough. What would you like to do after we eat?" he asked, changing the subject.

"You don't have to hang around and pamper me," I said, finishing off the rest of my food. "I'll be okay."

His dark eyes flashed. "I promised Doctor H that I'd be right here for you and I'm not just going to skate off when you need me. You might as well accept that I'm going to be underfoot, at least for today."

Part of me thought that was sweet; the other part was pissed that he thought I needed

to be coddled. His laughing at my mixed expression didn't help. "Do you need to get a change of clothes?" I asked, deciding to ignore the provocation. "We can go by your place and let you clean up first. Then I'd like to go to the clinic. I want to see my patients."

Keven nodded. "I think I do need to shower and change clothes. Let me get the dishes started and we'll go."

I was surprised he didn't argue with me. I'd expected to have to browbeat him into letting me out of the house, much less anywhere near work. My hand picked up the notebook while he was doing the dishes before I really realized what it was doing and I had to force myself to push it across the table. My mind's eye had all kinds of ideas of what it contained and I wanted to see it. I imagined our bodies tangled together in the sheets, his lips...

With a groan, I abruptly stood up. He looked back at me with a question in his eyes. "That notebook is a tool of the devil," I announced. "I keep picking it up and wanting look inside. Please take it with you when we leave."

His laughter followed me back up the stairs as I went to finish dressing. This was so embarrassing.

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Keven shadowed me as we walked into the clinic lobby, holding onto the notepad and a pencil. I'd asked him to leave it at his place, but he said he might have some time to draw while I did my rounds. I decided it wasn't worth arguing about.

Trina jumped up and ran to me, hugging me tearfully. I just held her and shed some tears of my own.

"Ohmigod, Sandy! I was so worried about you! Steve should have walked you to your car!" she said.

"That's not fair, Trina. It was noon in a public lot. He had no idea some maniac was going to do that. I'm happy you're talking enough to know that," I said with a smile.

"We made up," she admitted happily. Then she frowned. "Danny said you were taking a few days off so you're not supposed to be here."

"I'm not supposed to do lots of things I do anyway," I said more cheerfully than I'd

expected so soon. Trina was good for me. "I may not be operating for a few days, but that doesn't mean I won't be checking up on all you slackers."

She laughed and held out her hand to Keven. "Mr. Braddock, it's good to see you again. Are you here to see Danny?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm shadowing the good Doctor Craig. Someone has to keep her out of trouble."

I snorted at them as they laughed at my expense. "Very funny. He's my ride until Danny forks my car back over."

Trina looked surprised. "He still has your car? I thought he'd take it back when Holly went to stay with you last night."

I could see this one coming. Not that I could stop it, mind you, but I knew where this conversation was going to go. "Holly didn't spend the night with me."

Trina's brow creased in worry. "You shouldn't be alone! I can't believe she left you by yourself!"

Sighing, I gave in to the inevitable. "I wasn't alone."

Trina was confused for a moment and then her eyes widened and her gaze flicked to Keven, making the leap that I had seen coming. Then she blushed. "Oh. Well. I guess that's okay." She grinned.

It had to be said, not that she was going to believe me. "It wasn't like that. He was the perfect gentleman."

"I'll *bet* he was," she said slyly, slipping back behind her desk. "We'll talk about this... later." She wiggled her eyebrows at me.

Butter wouldn't have melted in Keven's mouth. Smug bastard. Did nothing set him off balance?

With a wicked smile, I leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially to Trina just loud enough so that he couldn't miss overhearing. "He's all that and a bag of chips. Hung like a Shetland pony and the stamina of an Olympic athlete."

Trina's eyes grew huge and she blushed even more deeply as I laughed and walked past the desk and into the offices. If the rumors were going to make the rounds anyway, why not at least put my spin on them?

When I spared a glance for Keven, he didn't look at all distressed. On the other hand, he didn't look smug either. He had to be the most composed person I'd ever met. I'd have to keep working on making him lose his cool.

A glance told me both Danny and Holly weren't in their offices. "I'm going back to the surgical area for a few minutes. It might be best if you wait here until I see if Danny or Holly can come out and talk."

He nodded and walked into my office. I frowned at his back for a second and then walked into the surgery area. Something about him looked wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I shrugged and let it go. I'd figure it out sooner or later.

Stepping into the observation room, I saw that only one of the operating rooms was in use. Danny had his back to me and was working on one of his patients. He'd be busy for at least an hour, I decided. The blood on his gloves sent my stomach into a spin, but I forced the nausea down ruthlessly. Blood was part of the job and I couldn't let this thing get to me like that. Time to go look for Holly.

I spotted her as soon as I entered the recovery area. She was talking to the nurse while the patient I was supposed to have operated on slept nearby.

She pulled me into a hug when she saw me, simultaneously scolding me. "You're supposed to be resting at home, not up and at work."

"You know I can't just sit around," I whispered to her. "I needed to get out of the house."

"Did Keven just let you wander off? I'm going to have words with that young man."

I laughed and pulled her toward the door. "No, he hasn't left my side. He's waiting for me in my office." Then I scowled at her. "And was it your idea to set us up?"

"It wasn't a setup, dear," she said with a smile. "I just arranged for you two to meet. Danny tells me that it seems to have been a good thing."

"You two!" I said, rolling my eyes. "What can a girl do?"

Keven stood up from behind my desk as we came in, folding a piece of printer paper and slipping it into his pocket. "Holly, it's been too long." He walked forward and kissed her hand. "You're looking more beautiful every year."

"Flatterer," she said, though she had the grace to smile. "Thank you for looking after Sandy. She's like a daughter to me, you know."

His eyes crinkled in humor as he smiled at me. "It has been my pleasure. I'm sure you'll hear all about it."

It took me a moment to figure out what he meant and then I blushed. This impulsiveness was going to be the death of me. Everything I did seemed to come back at me in ways I hadn't considered. I coughed to cover my moment of embarrassment. "Let me pour us some coffee."

Holly nodded. "Coffee sounds wonderful. I need to go sign some papers for Trina. I'll be right back."

When she was gone, Keven sat down in one of the visitor's chairs. "Well, I think this post-sleepover visit is going smashingly."

"You!" I said, smacking his shoulder. "This is all your fault." I smiled as I sat on the edge of the desk to take any sting out of my words. "If you could find some way to make this more embarrassing, I think you would."

For a moment, just a flash of chagrin took over his features. Since he never seemed to look taken aback, that set off all kinds of alarms inside me.

"What did you do?" I asked, filled with dread. Suddenly it clicked for me. He'd walked into my office with two empty hands. "Where is the notebook," I asked looking around frantically.

"I, um... Well..."

The blood drained from my face. "No! You *did not* leave it at the front desk!"

"Well, you did tell Trina you'd give her all the little details, so I thought a picture is worth a thousand words," he said, regaining some of his normal unperturbed demeanor.



I considered screaming or smacking him, but he was right, I'd opened that door with my own innuendo. Instead, I sat bolt upright. Holly! I couldn't let her see those! I had to get that notebook back into my possession as soon as possible!

Without a backward glance, I rushed into the hall and ran for the front desk. My worst fears were realized when I got there and both of them were bent over the notebook whispering excitedly at each other. Ohmigod! They both thought I'd done - whatever he had drawn me doing. I flushed so red that I felt the heat rolling off my face.

They had a moment's warning just before I snatched the notebook up and slammed it closed. As innocent as two angels, they looked up at me. And then they grinned and started laughing together. That made me flush even more.

Trina cast a sidelong glance at the notebook. "Sandy, I had no idea you were so... athletic."

"I was lying," I blurted out desperately. "We didn't sleep together."

"Of course you didn't, Dear," Holly said, straightening up with a knowing smile. "I know a good girl like you would never sleep with a man she'd only known for a day. I'm sure that there are plenty of women he could have drawn that have a birthmark just like yours."

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open. I almost told her how he'd seen me naked and realized it was useless. It sounded so stupid in my head that it would sound ludicrous out loud.

"I'm going to kill him," I announced, stalking back toward my office, a sudden fire in my eye. "He's so dead."

Holly caught up to me just as I burst into my office. "Whoa! Hang on, Sandy!"

Keven's survival instincts must have kicked in, because he wasn't there. I stood just inside my office and started swearing while Holly tried not to smile. That didn't help my temper one bit.

"Sandy, calm down," she said reasonably. "If you say nothing happened, then nothing happened. I'm sure Trina won't talk about it with anyone."

I laughed. "Yeah, right!" My anger had morphed into humor. The situation was so out-

of-control that is was growing to epic proportions. And, as much as it galled me, Keven was right. I'd opened the door for this.

On cue, Keven came in the door behind Holly with three mugs of coffee in his hands. "There you are," he said, once more in control of his composure.

Holly and I took our cups from him and I fixed him with "the look." "We're not done with this, troublemaker."

He bowed his head in apology and took a seat. "I went too far and I accept full responsibility. I'm sorry."

I tossed the notebook onto his lap. "I can't let you do that," I grumbled. "I started this so we're even."

Holly gestured for me to have a seat as she sat beside Keven. "So, I hear you two really hit it off." I rolled my eyes and Holly laughed. "No, not like that! I mean in general."

"Let me clear this up," I said. "We're not presently having sex. I got drunk and stupid and he was a total gentleman."

Keven smiled and nodded. "Presently."

Holly smiled at him knowingly. "I'm pleased to hear that."

"You two are making me crazy," I growled. "Does everything I say have to have some kind of double meaning?"

That brought laughter from them that was infectious enough that I finally joined in. Who could stay angry with them?

As the laughter was winding down, Keven's cell phone chirped and he answered it. His smile faded almost instantly to an expression of shock and then anger. "I'll be right there." He stood up and slipped the cell phone back into its belt clip.

"There's some kind of trouble at the gallery. Serious enough they won't tell me over the phone. Maybe you should stay with Holly for a while, Sandy."

I shook my head. "I'm with you today. Let's go take care of your trouble together."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but he didn't. "Fine. Let's go see what qualifies as a 'disaster.' With art types, you can never really tell when it's serious or not."

I gave Holly a hug and she whispered for me to be careful. I followed him out at a trot to keep up with him. "You're an art type."

The sardonic smile he threw over his shoulder told me I'd hit home. "Let's not confuse the issue with facts. It's serious enough to have a gay man in hysterics. Though, I'll admit my wardrobe has had a similar result with him before."

"Then let's go see what the trouble is and you can fix it."

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The ride to the gallery was more tense than before. His body was as taut as a cable. Over his shoulder, I saw something that made my blood go cold.

Over the buildings ahead of us was a pall of smoke. From the way the bike sped up, Keven saw it too. Maybe it didn't have anything to do with the trouble at the gallery, but then again...

My hopes were dashed when we made the last turn and were stopped by a police barricade. Past all the scrambling emergency personnel and the fire trucks, I saw the gallery completely engulfed in flames.

## Chapter Five: A hot time in the old town

The police and fire departments wouldn't let us through the barricades and there were EMS personnel on hand, so we parked and watched the fire burn helplessly. Keven was angry and he stalked back and forth along the barricade like a caged tiger, glaring at the burning building. I tried to take his shoulder to comfort him, but he just shrugged me off. His voice, when he did speak, was cold and furious, but I could tell it wasn't directed at me so I let him be.

The view was an educational one for me. My description of him as a hunter earlier was wrong. He was a predator. Not the kind that I watched the streets for at night; I wasn't afraid of him. He had a temper that wasn't to be trifled with, though. When someone crossed him, he wouldn't sit back and be rolled over. He got even. No, not even. He crushed those that crossed him. And the more he stalked, the angrier he was getting.

Rather than try and draw him away, I decided a better course might be to get more information to focus him. I walked over to one of the uniformed policemen blocking off the street. His unfocused gaze of the whole crowd sharpened as I approached him.

"Excuse me, officer, but my..." Christ, I'd almost said "boyfriend." I picked up after the hitch in my thoughts, "friend over there is the artist that was having the show in the gallery that's on fire. Can he talk to someone to find out how bad it is?"

"Probably," he agreed. "Hang on." He used his radio to call someone and pass the information up whatever chain of command they used. We could both hear the response that a detective would be there in a few minutes.

I nodded to him before he could repeat what I already heard. "I'll wait over here by my friend. Thank you." I walked back to stand near Keven and let him see me. Either my presence or my expression must have meant something to him because he took a deep breath and visibly shook himself.

"This isn't productive," he said in a deceptively calm voice. "You don't need to see me snarling about this. I should take you home."

"So, you think it's right to be there when I need you and to be alone when you need me?"

Keven shrugged. "It's a man thing. We don't talk about what hurts us; we track it down and do alpha male things to it. Me snarling at you and everyone around me isn't going to help anything." He resumed his pacing.

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine with me," I assured him. "I'm here as moral support silently, then. Just don't force me away."

He stopped in front of me, his dark eyes searched my face and he nodded. "Okay."

We both saw the man in a suit with a badge on his belt walk up to the cop and then over to us. "I'm Detective Sergeant Williams. I'm told that's your building. Is that right?"

Keven shook his head. "No, I own the artwork that is on display." He glanced back at the blazing inferno. "That was on display."

"It's all gone," the detective confirmed. "I'm sorry. The good news is that everyone got

out safely. I need both of your names for the record." He pulled out a pen and notebook, jotting the information down. "Mister Braddock, can you think of anyone who might have wanted to destroy all your work?"

Keven laughed mirthlessly. "Hardly *all* my work, but I understand. It was all my new work. No, I don't think I've ever made any enemies that hate me this much. Can you tell me what happened?"

The detective considered that and slowly nodded. "Yeah, someone threw a brick through the front window and followed it up with a Molotov cocktail. The front of the building was an inferno within seconds. All the customers and staff escaped out the back while the sprinklers tried to fight the blaze and failed. We think the person or persons responsible may have thrown something else in after the first to overwhelm the fire suppression system." He shrugged. "In any case, the building and its contents were fully involved when the first responders got here and no one saw anything."

Keven nodded, anger seething just below the surface. "Was the stuff insured," the detective continued.

"Of course," Keven said. "I'd have been an idiot not to insure everything I do. The loss of all that work hurts, but it won't hurt my wallet."

"Will it help?" the detective asked.

That lit up a glare from Keven aimed at the hapless law enforcer. "Do you mean, will I be better off than if there was no fire? No. All the work was either sold already or soon to be sold. I had every reason to believe that all the pieces would be sold before the month is out. Insurance fraud isn't really a good one to pin on me, I'm afraid. I can't paint fast enough to keep up with demand."

The detective gestured at me with his chin. "What about your girlfriend?"

That brought a little humor to Keven's face and he glanced at me. "We're still discussing that."

I flushed, but didn't disagree.

The detective looked between us, a frown on his face. "What? No, I mean does she have someone that might take something out on her through you?"

That brought me up short and my eyes widened. A glance at Keven saw his expression go thoughtful. "Maybe. I... I was carjacked yesterday and a policeman killed the man. I didn't think..."

The detective's eyes sharpened considerably. "Did the man tell you something or give you something?"

I shook my head. "No, he was running from someone that I think had already shot him. He stole some money from me, but he didn't tell me anything or give me anything. Why?"

He scratched his head with the pen. I idly wondered how many pen marks he had on his scalp idly. "Because that might explain the one obvious piece of evidence we have so far."

I raised my eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. "What do you mean?"

"Someone painted a message on the side of the building, in the alley. Probably before the fire was started. It said, 'I want what's mine, Bitch.'"

My heart flew into my throat making it hard to swallow. "Me?" I squeaked, backing up a step in surprise. "This was because of me?"

Keven pulled an arm around my shoulders and I retreated into his protection. The detective shrugged again. "Maybe. Or maybe someone wants something from the lady that owns the building. Or someone wants something from Mister Braddock and is gender challenged. Or it might not even be related. It's way too early to make a guess."

"You've got our contact information, Detective," Keven said. "If you don't have any more questions, I think we should go."

As he was nodding his agreement, my cell phone rang. I answered it shakily. "Hello?"

"This is Tom with Brinks Home Security. Is this Sandy Craig?" a mellow male voice asked.

"Yes." What now?

"Our systems indicate an alarm at your home, ma'am. Both entry and motion detector. Are you at home?"

"No," Now I was really shaking. "It's not me."

"I'm dispatching the police right away," he said calmly. "And the fire department. The fire alarm just activated. You should not go home until emergency personnel clear the alarm, ma'am."

I was shaking uncontrollably now. "Thank... Thank you." I hung up. Both the men were staring at me expectantly. It took another swallow to clear my throat so I could speak clearly. "Someone is breaking into my house and the fire alarm is on."

The detective grabbed his radio and notebook, dispatching more police to my address and telling them it was linked to the gallery fire. He stared at me. "Stay here." Then he ran back toward the gallery.

I felt like someone was pulling my intestines out through my bellybutton an inch at a time. My vision tunneled and I started hyperventilating. Shock, the doctoring me murmured. I should probably lay down before I fell down. A blanket would be good, too. And elevating my feet. When the world started spinning, Keven caught me as I slumped toward the ground and then everything went dark.

When I opened my eyes, I was disoriented. An unknown man in full fire gear was leaning over me, fitting an oxygen mask over my face. He was rapidly joined by another man in an EMS uniform. I blinked stupidly, looking around for Keven. I spotted him about five feet away, looking at me with concern etched all over his face.

I held my hand out toward him and he brushed the cop beside him away to kneel by my legs and take my hand. My blanket covered legs, I saw. At least someone listened to the voice in my head.

The fireman gave him a look that just bounced off Keven. When it was someone else's trouble, he was a lot more calm than his own it seemed. The paramedic spared Keven a glance and went back to work, looking into my eyes with a small light, unconcerned with the intrusion.

I focused on the paramedic and didn't try to speak until he started asking me the standard battery of questions. I know that a doctor that treats herself has a fool for a patient, so I tried not to be judgmental. Even with the oxygen, I still felt light-headed. If I were treating myself, I'd be loading me up into the ambulance and let the doctors at the hospital take a look at me. Still, when he said he was going to put me on the gurney

and take me to the hospital, I shook my head. "No, I don't need to go to the hospital."

The paramedic started to argue, but Keven leaned over me and shook his head. I sighed with relief. He was going to back me up.

"No, let me," Keven told the paramedic. Then he looked down at me and smiled. "You're going to the hospital and that's final."

I blinked in surprise. "What?"

"You fainted and I want to be sure you're okay."

"I'm a doctor," I snorted. "I can tell what's going on."

"Okay," he said with a shrug. "You can play it that way if you like. But if you don't go with him, I'll tie your ass to the back of my bike and drive you there myself. The little roller bed looks more comfortable."

I opened my mouth in outrage and then snapped it closed because I suddenly realized looked like an idiot. Glaring at him, I grudgingly agreed to the ambulance ride. As they were loading me in, I fixed Keven with a laser-like stare. "We're not done talking about this."

He bowed with a flourish. "As Milady wills it. I am but your humble servant. And your servant will meet you at the hospital."

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I took the short ride to the hospital with what grace I could muster. They wheeled me into the emergency room and back to the triage area. I recognized it immediately. Mercy General. I pulled my turn on call here, just like my bosses. Great. The nurse recognized me right off and shunted me into the first available curtained-off area.

One of the young doctors came in less than a minute after she left. Howard something. I forced my eyes to focus on his name tag. Howard Haley. I should have remembered that.

He shook his head and smiled. "If you can't get enough of this place, you can just come in and work an extra shift, Doctor Craig." Smiling, he efficiently started looking at my eyes as the nurse took my vitals.



"I fainted," I said through the mask. "Shock of the bad news variety. I don't think I hit my head."

"You're not sure? Well, then, we'll give you the works and look to see how your scalp looks," he said. "In case you want the running tally, your pupils are the same size. Any pain in your head? Fuzzy vision?"

Stepping into the room, Keven smoothly insinuated himself into the conversation. "I caught her before she fell, Doctor. Her head never touched anything harder than my chest."

In one of those odd moments of focus, I saw the nurse checkout his ass and nod to me. Noticing my gaze, she gave me a thumbs up. Doctor Haley quirked an eyebrow at Keven. "Really, only family should be back here, sir. How did you get past Nurse Albrecht?"

Keven turned on the charm and smiled deeply. "I have a way of getting what I want, Doctor Haley. I told her that Sandy is my girlfriend."

Haley laughed. "I like the phrasing, 'you told her.' Are you her boyfriend?" I shook my head. "No."

At the same time, Keven nodded. "Yes."

Haley's other eyebrow climbed and he looked between us. "I sense a divergence of opinion on that question."

"We're still discussing the details," Keven said. "Are you going to believe the woman that fell over or me? If you need proof, I could mention some of the things that took place last night; at least I could if I weren't a gentleman."

They both laughed and I reddened. "Fine," I cut Keven off before he decided to mention anything about my unclothed state last night. "I'll stipulate that he probably meets most common definition of 'boyfriend.'"

The nurse slid out of the room, probably to tell everyone that I had a boyfriend. The traitor.

As Keven settled into a seat and Haley started examining my head, I gave in. Hell, he'd seen me naked, spent the night in my house, cooked for me, got me drunk and I

wanted him. I still wanted, I decided with another sigh. I guess that made him my boyfriend.

"Keven, what about my house," I asked, unable to keep some of the anxiety out of my voice.

Keven rolled the seat closer and took my hand. "I called Doctor H. and he's going over to check it out. The detective said he'd swing by as soon as he could. That might be hours from now, though. Still," he grinned at Haley, "this being a hospital, you'll probably still be waiting around."

Haley just grinned at him and took my vitals again. "I don't know about that. I'd like to keep her around for a bit to make sure she's stable before I cut her loose, but I think her outlook is good. She stressed out and fainted." He held up a hand. "Not that she doesn't have good ways to deal with stress, but if that stress was something outside the normal blood and gore, then it might have slipped in unexpectedly."

Keven nodded. "Yeah, I'd say this was not run of the mill, even for her."

"I'm right here," I groused. "Stop talking about me like I'm not even here."

Keven smiled and squeezed my hand. "She's feeling better already."

Haley laughed. "Her vitals are back up in the range that I want them, too. I'm going to move her to another room and come back and check on her in a couple of hours. If she's still looking good, I'll turn her loose with some medication."

"She always looks good," Keven said with a twinkle in his eye. I blushed again and Haley's eyebrows made another trip up. Oh, great. Now more rumors would be making the rounds.

I had to satisfy myself with glaring at Keven. Not that I got much satisfaction from him, the rat.

Keven insisted on talking about me, telling me that we could deal with current events when they caught up with us and deflecting any conversation about those events back to me. I still managed to turn this into a give and take by refusing to answer questions without asking some of my own, finding out more about the reclusive artist in the bargain. I suppose we needed to get to know one another better if we were going to be labeled a couple. My heart fluttered at the thought and I suppressed the rush of heat

when I thought about it.

Danny and Holly got there after about an hour. They confirmed my worst fears. My house and all my belongings were merrily burning as I lay here. The room spun a bit but I managed to accept it without fainting. Holly held me and we cried while the men went outside to talk.

"Holly, I'm scared," I confessed quietly. "That man, the one with the Snake Eyes, he really scared me and now he's after me. What do I do? What does he want?"

"You're safe with Keven," she said, her voice warm and reassuring. I wanted to believe her. "The police..."

I laughed. "The police?" My voice sounded a little shrill, even to my own ears. "The police can't protect me. He can just wait and come after me when they're gone. I'm not scared, I'm terrified. If I knew what he wanted, I'd give it to him right now."

She held my hand. "Then you need to get away for a while. Some place where he can't find you."

"Should I fly to Rio? Moscow? Beijing? I can't think of a place far enough away," I said shivering.

"Well..." Holly looked at the closed hall door. The low mummer of male voices could be heard outside it. "Danny is talking about that with Keven." She looked back to me. "You know you can trust Keven, don't you? All this playing he does aside, you know he would never betray your trust, right?"

I bit my lower lip and nodded. "And if you ever tell him, I'll call you a liar to his face."

That surprised a laugh and a smile from her. "Spoken like my dear flame-thrower. Deny everything and, when in doubt, attack. I heard the rumor going around that Keven is your boyfriend."

I shook my head and sighed. "I suppose he is. What's the yardstick for figuring that out? All I can think of is emotional connection and the way we're sniffing after each other only makes that more intense."

"Either would count," Holly agreed. "I can see that the two of you have a real pull on each other and it's not wholly physical. Even while you keep from ripping each other's

clothes off, I'd say you're still a couple. A starter couple, if you will."

I laughed and then realized that Holly had sidetracked me from my panic into this subject so smoothly that I hadn't realized I was being herded. I could have gone back to freaking out, but I decided that wasn't a good idea. "So, I should just go off with him and hide somewhere? Perhaps in bed? Rutting like rabbits in heat?"

"With you, dear, I'm sure it'd be more like cats in heat, yowling and clawing at each other," she said dryly.

I was still laughing when the men came back in. At the sight of me laughing, Keven visibly relaxed. I smiled reassuringly at him.

Danny looked grim. "I'm not going to pull any punches. I'm afraid for you, Sandy. The detective came by while we were in the hall." I sat up, all my anxiety rushing back. Keven took my other hand, sharing me with Holly.

"There was a fire at your house just like the one at the gallery. It's all gone," he said quietly.

Sagging back onto the bed, I started to cry. Keven pulled me into his arms and I accepted his embrace tightly, redirecting my tears to his shoulder. His hand rubbed my back and his soft voice whispered in my ear. "It's only things. Things can be replaced. You're safe and that's what matters."

God, I wanted to believe I was safe, but I wasn't sure I'd ever feel safe again. Slowly, I forced the faucet off and pulled back. I knew how blotchy my face was after I cried so I knew I looked terrible. I tried to turn my face away from Keven to save something of my shattered dignity but he caught my chin in his strong fingers.

Looking deeply into my eyes, he shook his head. "You don't need to hide anything from me," he whispered. "It's okay to be afraid. I swear I will protect you."

I smiled. I guess some things were inevitable. I was worried about how I looked and he thought I was hiding my fear. Not that he was wrong, but it just was a matter of timing.

"I talked with Doctor H. and I'm taking you away to a place I have out in the mountains," Keven continued. "It's away from everything and it's beautiful this time of year. We can stay there for a few days, or a week, or however long it takes for the police to put this lunatic behind bars."

Staring into his eyes, I considered putting my foot down and refusing to run away. I added in the thoughts that if we were off together my little devil would probably talk me into his bed. I have a life and my patients needed me. I piled that all together and weighed it against my terror. My fear won out handily. I bowed my head in shame, nodding. "Okay," I whispered. "I'll go."

## Chapter Six: Taking the plunge

From the silence that followed my agreement to go away, I assumed that I had caught them all off guard; they had all marshaled their arguments for my expected resistance and now had to reorganize their thoughts. That amused me in a kind of dark way.

While Keven was making a phone call, Danny opened the door and let the detective in. His expression told me his news hadn't changed for the better. "Are you feeling better, Miss?" At my nod, he pulled up a chair, looked at me for a moment and sighed. "There is no way to sugar coat this. The news is bad, I'm afraid. It looks like the same person or persons set your home on fire. The same message was sprayed on the sidewalk. Someone broke a window with a brick and tossed in another Molotov cocktail. The fire crews are working hard, but I'm afraid the house is going to be a loss."

I sagged back onto the bed. Thank God I'd never gotten any pets. "What about the guy that did this? Do you have any leads on him?"

He shook his head. "We're still working on getting an ID. The parking lot camera at the restaurant where the first guy grabbed you caught a good view of the other guy, and we're putting him out on the wire and have an all points bulletin out for him. There is a policeman outside your door right now, and if you stay in the city we'll have one with you at all times."

I nodded. "I think they want to smuggle me out of the city and hide me away in the boonies."

He smiled. "So I heard. I gather they expected armed resistance to the idea from the way they were plotting out a step-by-step attack. Since I didn't hear any screaming, I assume you decided a little vacation was in order, right?"

I smiled wryly. "I'm a woman, so I can't let them figure me out that easily. I'll go."

He smiled at my attempt at humor, and then got serious again. "I understand you're a doctor, so I know that you've occasionally had to tell someone something they don't want to hear, and give someone a professional opinion to do something they don't really want to do. Right?"

"Yes," I replied, a ghost of a smile on my lips. "I've been in that position once or twice."

"Okay, so I also know you must hate the idea of running away, of feeling like you *have* to run away, but in my *professional* opinion, I think that's the smart thing for you to do right now," he agreed. "It's exactly what I would do if I were in your position."

I stared in surprise for a few moments, for the first time, really seeing him as a person. With just a few words, this man had placed my situation in a context I could understand, and that alone made me feel better about my decision to leave. "You have a terrific bedside manner, Detective," I told him, with no sarcasm at all in my voice. "Thank you for your consideration of my feelings. You're a good man."

He flushed in embarrassment, ignoring the compliment. "The doc told me he's already working up the paperwork to cut you loose so I'd expect to be moving in fifteen or twenty minutes. I'd like for you to help me in an attempt to catch the bad guy before you vanish, though."

My cheek twitched and I tensed back up. "How?"

"It's possible that this guy has someone watching the hospital," he said calmly. "I'd like you to come back to the station with me, in my car, and then to go inside. I'll have someone watching us for tails. When we get there, your boyfriend will be around back, and we'll slide you right through the building and get you on the way out of town with them none the wiser. I'll even have another detective follow at a distance to make sure someone doesn't twig to the switch. It makes sure you're safer than if you just bolted for cover on your own. Oh, and I'd like to know where you are and how to contact you, but I'll keep that to myself until we catch this whack-job."

For a moment, I agonized over it and then nodded. The man was trying to help me. "I'll do that."

He reached out and squeezed my hand. "Good. I'll go work out the details and let your boyfriend know."

I watched him as he went to talk with Keven and the Hammersteins. Then I shook my head. He'd called Keven my boyfriend twice, and it only now occurred to me how normal that sounded. I was adjusting to this relationship thing much more easily than was normal for me, or more easily than I thought I should. I'd have to make sure and keep the pace slow when we got there. I would not fall right into his bed. I wouldn't. I hoped.

The little huddle broke up a few minutes later. Danny and Holly came to give me hugs and tell me to be safe, and then they left with the detective, leaving *me* alone with Keven. He took the chair next to the bed and held my hand comfortably. It made me relax in a way that was frightening all on its own.

"This is scary," I told him softly.

"They'll catch him," he assured me with a confident smile.

"Not that," I chuckled. "That detective is good at what he does, and I know he'll get the guy. I mean us. This boyfriend-girlfriend thing. It's feeling way more comfortable than I like."

Raising his eyebrow, he smiled. "See? That wasn't so hard. Now we know who we are in relation to each other."

"That's one of the things that makes me uncomfortable," I admitted. "For a long time now, my only relationship has been with my work. It's been so important to me, for so long, that I don't have any idea how to mesh that 'relationship' with the one you and I are beginning to share, and it's a bit unsettling."

"You don't think my work has been my relationship, too?" he asked softly. "Painting is a solitary task. I sometimes have models but they are not really interacting with me like that."

I fixed him with a smirk. "Well, you did have a girlfriend."

"Karen," he said with a knowing nod. "Well, that was a mistake from almost the first day, and I knew it. She modeled for me, and I was weak. Maybe a bit lonely, too. She pushed and pushed, and out of my loneliness, I let the relationship develop when I should have just quashed it."

"Quashed it before or after you slept with her?" I asked archly. I flushed as the

rudeness of my question struck me.

Keven didn't take offense, however. "After, of course," he said with his roguish grin. "Priorities, my dear. If a woman is going to throw herself at me, I should at least sample the goods so I can make an informed decision."

"You didn't sleep with me," I pointed out.

He nodded and toned the grin back down to a smile. "No, I didn't, and that's because however much it might have seemed like a casual relationship, I never saw it that way, not from the very first moment. I won't lie to you. I've chased my share of skirts, and a few besides. And I've let myself get caught by a few, sometimes to my regret." His gaze grew intense, his dark eyes smoldering. "The difference here is that I'm not chasing your skirt. I'm chasing your heart."

My mouth went dry and a bolt of electricity shot through me. Dear God, it was worse than I'd thought. He was after the whole package. I *really* didn't need this kind of complication in my life, as much as I was starting to want it. No, crave it.

Keven leaned forward slowly. He was going to kiss me, I knew. He was giving me the chance to stop him if I chose to, but he wasn't asking. I licked my dry lips and didn't dodge him.

Our lips touched and it felt like a spark jumped between us. The kiss wasn't urgent or possessive. It was slow, soft and warm. Comfortable. I saw that he didn't close his eyes and we looked deep into each other's soul as the kiss deepened. My insides melted, causing me to start to leak, and I wondered how much weight this bed could support.

His hand slid around my waist and pulled us together. The touch of his body to mine told me I was lost. It wasn't a matter of *if* I'd make love to him anymore. Now it was just a question of how long I could hold myself back. My body ached for him and only my mind – 'more like your stubbornness and your fear,' an inner voice chided – kept me from pulling him on top of me right here.

With gentle insistence, his tongue split my lips and I opened my mouth in welcome. It began dancing with my tongue in the age-old ritual of passion. My doubts, whether they were borne of stubbornness, fear or something else - I no longer cared - vanished in seconds. I felt the connection to him emotionally and knew it was right. It was so strong, like a river current, strong and unstoppable. The taste of his mouth was like nectar, sweet and at the same time that of primal man.



I tangled my hand in his luxurious hair and crushed his lips to mine, giving myself to him in the way only a woman can. Our mouths writhed together in a kiss that had suddenly moved from gentle to demanding. I wanted him and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he wanted me, too. His hand on my waist moved higher, pausing indecisively below my breasts. I used my free hand to put his hand on my breast before sliding my arm around him again. I needed him to know I wanted him, too.

Another little voice in my head started whispering that I was supposed to go slow. I groaned and gently pushed him back until our lips parted. His eyes were wide with desire, and I know my heat matched his. I didn't try to dislodge his hand from cupping my breast and my nipple was achingly stiff, digging into his palm through the hospital gown. "I don't want to stop," I whispered, "but I need to."

His warm breath on my cheek sent enough sparks through me that I almost gave back in and used my hand tangled in his hair to take him again, but the moment was broken by someone clearing their throat at the door. We both jumped back from each other and stared at the nurse in the doorway. She was grinning at us. "Excuse me, but the doctor has released you, Doctor Craig. I have your prescription and we're ready for you to - ahem - put your clothes back on."

I blushed furiously at having been caught making out. Necking and groping. Keven stepped into the void and smiled at her. "Thanks. Close the door and she'll get dressed right away."

The nurse backed out, still grinning widely. "There's a detective waiting, so don't take too long," she sing-songed right before she closed the door.

I slid out of the bed and opened the bag holding my clothes. Then I looked over at Keven, still seated in the chair. "Out." If I pulled off this gown, there would be no doubt left as to how far gone I was for him.

He grinned. "But I've already seen you naked."

"And that will just have to tide you over," I said archly. "The next time you see me naked will be when we're ready to spend some quality time alone. There are too many interruptions around this place. Now, out." I pointed at the door.

Unrepentant, he slid out and closed the door behind him. I slumped against the gurney and let my breath out. What was I doing? I wasn't even trying to pretend we weren't

going to make love anymore. Not even to Keven. Had I lost every ounce of self-respect I'd ever had?

I stripped off the gown and ran water over a washcloth. I had to freshen up. He'd driven me to the edge of sexual assault on his hard body and I had to get rid of the evidence. The question in my mind wasn't "could I delay sex for a few days?" anymore. Now it was "can I hold off on ravishing him until after dark?"

As I dressed, my emotions were a whirlpool of desire and worry. I realized that my mind had said 'make love,' not 'do the mattress boogie,' and I took some comfort in that, but that 'L-word' was enough to send both panic and desire spearing through me. Would this be the first step in something wonderful or an enormous mistake? I guess there really was only one way to find out.

The shell game at the police station went off smoothly, and in an hour or so I was in my car with Keven in the passenger seat. I'm not sure what machinations they had to go through to get Keven and my car, minus his bike, behind the police station, but it had all worked.

I drove and also kept an eye on the detective tailing me. He'd been back there since the police station where we'd been introduced. He faithfully stuck behind us at a distance and stopped at the city limits. That made me nervous, being on our own.

"I need to find a place to stop and get some clothes," I said, glancing at Keven as we left the urban area behind.

"For simple things, there is a Wal-Mart about halfway there. Will that work?"

I nodded. "That's fine. I need underwear, jeans and stuff. How rough is it going to be?"

"You'd better get some boots, too. It's way off the beaten path."

"It's been a while since I went camping."

He laughed. "Well, it's rough but not that rough. I have a cabin up in the foothills. There is some great hiking and all, but you'll have a roof over your head."

"Indoor plumbing and a bed..." Just starting that sentence set off a shock-wave in my belly.

"Indoor plumbing and a bed," he agreed. "All to yourself unless *you* decide you want company."

"I appreciate that," I said quietly. "I'm just still trying to figure out my feelings."

He grinned at me. "After the hospital, are you sure it's your feelings you need to figure out?"

I swatted his arm and laughed. "Can't a girl have some secrets?" His hand snaked out and rested for a moment on my leg.

I looked over and felt the heat flash between us. I licked my lips and forced myself to watch the road. No, I guess that secret was out of the bag. "Okay, so I have a pretty good idea how I feel about things. You win."

He pulled his hand back. "I love winning."

"Men!" I said derisively. "Hold onto those thoughts for a while, Slick."

At the Wal-Mart he picked up some food stuff while I found a selection of rugged clothes and underwear. I picked up enough to last a week or so.

I dithered over getting some sexy night clothes and finally gave in and added them to the cart. If I was going to give myself to him, I wanted to wrap the present really well. I could get them bought and sacked before he saw them.

When I got to the check-out I discovered I had no cash. That's right, I'd been robbed. I shuddered and handed over my check card.

The checker had just finished loading my bags back into my cart when Keven arrived with what looked like a month's worth of groceries.

"Good Lord! We can't eat all this stuff!" I chided him.

"Not all at once," he agreed, loading the stuff onto the conveyor. "But this gives us a selection so we won't be down to rice and beans in a week. Choice, my dear. It's all about choice."

"But I like beans," I confided. "And how long are we going to be out here? A week?"

He shrugged. "I can't guess, but it all depends on how accurate your assessment is of your cop friend. When he tells us it's safe for us to return, then we can come back. Not before then, however."

I frowned and tapped my foot. "I don't like being away from my patients that long, and I don't like open-ended time-frames, either."

"Do you like goons hiding out and waiting for you any better?"

A good point, I admitted. "No, but I'm not going to live like a prisoner."

Keven nodded. "Then let's run with it for a week or two and see how things settle out. They may have him in a few days and it will be a moot point."

I grimaced, but bowed to the inevitable. "That's as good a place to start as anywhere, I guess."

When the food was all bagged we went back out to the car. I started to pop the trunk but he blocked me. "I have stuff in the trunk, so this will have to go in the back seat."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's in the trunk?"

"You'll find out tonight," he said disarmingly. "It's a surprise."

"After the last few days, I'm not so sure I like surprises," I said, "but I'll wait and see."

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The remainder of the drive took us far from the well-traveled roads. First we left the blacktop for a one-lane county road and then a gravel road. As low slung as my convertible was, I started to get worried. "Is it going to get much rougher? This isn't a Hummer, you know."

"It's gravel all the way up, and there aren't any major dips," he said. "The road is a couple of miles in, though. Then we get to the gate to my place and its dirt, also without major bumps or holes. We'll make it."

I tried to hide my doubts and followed his directions. The gravel road rose higher into the foothills and took us deep through the tree line. The dappled sunshine made

patterns of light and dark all along the road. Mixed with the sweet scent of the outdoors, it lulled my worries.

At the end of the road was a sheet-metal gate with a chain and combination lock. Keven hopped out and opened it for me and then locked it behind us. Now there was a flat dirt road that led to a house on the low ridge ahead of us. Well, perhaps house wasn't the right word. It was more of a lodge. Big and rough looking, it fit the mountains that framed it perfectly. Leave it to an artist to even make his house fit the theme.

I parked the car in a sheltered area under the lodge and climbed out, stretching my back. The place smelled of trees and flowers, even here in the garage. A wide set of stairs led up to the ground floor.

Keven popped out and grabbed my hand and the small ice-chest that had what little cold stuff we'd picked up. "Come on. I'll give you the nickel tour, and then I'll come back and empty the car."

I smiled and let him pull me up the stairs. The ground floor was wide and spacious. It was also decorated in a rugged way that set the tone. It was made to look like a camp house, though I soon saw that the kitchen was fully outfitted with everything from a Sub-Zero built in refrigerator to a massive cooking surface.

Keven efficiently stored the food and then pulled me into the living room with a smile that promised something special.

The huge picture window stopped me dead in my tracks. On the other side of the ridge was a small lake surrounded by trees. The terrain was shaped like a bowl with the lake at the bottom and it rose into the mountain range on the other side. The view was breathtaking. I was so overwhelmed that I almost didn't feel Keven wrap his arms around me.

"There's a gravel path up front that leads down to the lake. It's sheltered by the trees and it's private. The whole lake is private, and we won't see anyone up here but us. The lake is spring fed and crystal clear."

I relaxed into the shelter of his arms. "I didn't get a swimsuit," I said regretfully. It sounded wonderful.

"Since it's private and secluded, I think we can safely say that it's swimsuit optional," he whispered silkily into my ear, his breath tickling the small hairs on my neck.

I turned my head and smiled at him. "You just want to see me naked again."

"Well, you did say that the next time you get naked we would be spending quality time," he said disarmingly. "And I'd say swimming counts as 'quality time', wouldn't you? Surely you didn't have something else in mind."

"Let's finish the tour, eat something, and talk about shedding our clothes," I laughed.

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The place was massive. It had a master bedroom that was to die for and the guest rooms were almost as nice. The upper deck had a hot tub and even a shrouded telescope. Everything was in the style of a camp house, with every possible amenity imaginable.

Even with all the cool things, the one room that caught my attention was his studio. It was at the end of the house on the second floor and had a three-sided view of the pristine wilderness. It also had every known supply a painter would need from blank canvases to bushels of brushes to about a billion tubes and bottles of paint. The floor was covered with a plastic sheet - to protect the wood, I supposed.

I looked at him standing in the doorway. He looked like he was itching to come in and start painting and he was eyeing me. I smiled. "So, I suppose you'll want me to pose for you while we're out here."

He nodded. "Yes, but I don't dare come in there now, or we'll never get something to eat or get to the lake before dark. It'll just have to wait."

"Keven... How much did the fire hurt you?" I asked softly.

He took two steps and was next to me in a second, lifting my chin and looking into my eyes. "Time. Time and passion. It was all insured, so I'm not in any financial straits. It hurts to see all that vision burn, but in the end it might even be more productive for my career, so don't worry about it."

I frowned. "More productive? How?"

He smiled at me and stepped back before that smoldering ember of heat in my belly burst into flames. "The critics got a good look on the first night and now they'll be nattering on about it for weeks. Also, anything you can't have is automatically better for

being out of reach."

"You made a grab for me," I said, stepping up to him, pausing and then walking around him to the door with a grin.

"A man's reach should always exceed his grasp, or so I've heard," he said, falling in behind me. "Sometimes he even gets his heart's desire in the bargain."

"Flatterer!" I walked down to the first floor and into the kitchen. "So, are we eating and then swimming?"

He looked out the window at the sun and shook his head. "No, we'd never make it to the lake before the sun went behind the mountains if we ate first. I'll fix us something when we get back after a nice, long swim. Come on, we'll walk down the path and work up an appetite for later."

My brain was running through the other things I could work up an appetite for while skinny dipping. Was he hoping that was going to happen? I smiled at him and tried to read his body language while he pulled a couple of towels from a cabinet near the sliding glass door to the lower patio.

No, I decided, he was being serious. He didn't have even a hint of that sly smile or look I would expect to see if he was expecting to get lucky. I think he really intended to take a nice swim and ogle me before making his move later. I grinned at his back while I followed him out. Time to take control of this and make it happen on my terms.

The path down to the lake was a work of art all by itself. It meandered and had bushes here and there, as well as flower beds at strategic points. I could see a short pier at the end of the path. On one side of the pier was a small flat-bottomed boat pulled up on shore and turned upside-down. I guess he fished, too.

The lowest part of the path had a short stretch through some trees and then wound back out into the sunlight. The scent of nature made me stop and just close my eyes, breathing deeply. I heard Keven stop walking and we stood stock still.

"It's beautiful," I said dreamily. "So peaceful, so..."

He didn't say anything, just letting me soak it all in and not rushing me. My heart swelled at his thoughtfulness. That was remarkably insightful for a man. I'd have to rethink some of my comments to Steve-O.

I opened my eyes after a few minutes and Keven was standing about ten feet away, smiling at me. I smiled back and walked down to him, slipping my arm around his waist. "You're very perceptive."

"I am?" he asked. "Of course, I am. I'm an artist."

I laughed and didn't disabuse him of that thought. The last of the walk was so much more comfortable than I'd been in so long that I didn't want it to end, but end it did. Keven set the folded towels on the edge of the pier and quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Well," I said, "let's see the goods." I gestured with my hands. "It's ladies night, Master Artist. Show me if I've got Mister Universe on the hook or Pee Wee Herman."

With a grin, he started doing a strip tease to music only he could hear. When his shirt came off, my breath caught in my throat. The long, dark hair framed a real washboard stomach and chest muscles that my fingers were already itching to trace. Then, he slowly unzipped his pants, flashing me a glance at his dark silk boxers. By the time he had kicked off his shoes and stripped off the pants, I was panting. He stood there clad only in his boxers and bent away from me, torturing me with the outline of what promised to be a killer ass, tight and firm. Oh, my. I licked my lips and blushed when he caught me.

"Take it all off," I called out, putting my hands on my hips. "I want the 'Full Monty!'" Then I let loose a shrill wolf whistle.

Keven laughed and pulled off his boxers and waved them around his head. I know he was watching my eyes and I didn't disappoint him, overtly eyeing his package.

Oh, Sandy was a lucky, lucky girl. And his ass was as spectacular as I'd thought it would be. I sighed lustfully. Then I pointed out at the pier. "Let's see you strut down the runway, Big Boy!"

With a grin, he turned and walked down the pier like a supermodel, wriggling his ass at me. I thought he must wax because he was dark and smooth all over.

Kicking off my shoes, I ran silently behind him, slipping to within a few feet of him as he reached the end of the pier. He must have heard me at the last second, because he whirled, but it was already too late. With a "whoop" I shoved him off the end of the pier and he hit the mirror-like water, his arms flailing wildly, with a monstrous splash.



I laughed hysterically as he surfaced and squealed when he splashed me. That water was *cold*! I stood there and took my medicine, quickly stripping off my clothes and piling them a few feet back on the pier before diving in and surfacing near him. The water was icy! My nipples instantly shrank down to rock-hard, eraser-sized nubs. I'd swear the water sizzled against my heated sex.

"That wasn't nice," he growled at me. I laughed and screamed as he came for me, splashing water on him the entire way. Not that it saved me, of course. I was promptly dunked several times. He was good about it, though, always letting me catch my breath.

When he had had his revenge, I treaded water as he watched me. I could tell he was looking at my breasts floating in front of me, and I smiled. "Like the view, Sailor?"

His eyes darted up to mine and then he relaxed at my smile. "I love the view. I hope to try out the Braille version later."

"Like this?" I asked innocently, reaching one hand under the water to touch his stomach.

He pulled me to him and kept us afloat with strong kicks while he kissed my neck.

Those lips sent tingles all over my body, but I was not willing to give up control. I swatted his nose like a bad puppy. "Bad boy!" He started laughing but I don't know how long he kept it up, since I submerged myself and rapidly kissed my way down his body, eyeing him in the clear water. He was ready and so was I.

I almost lost all my air laughing when I opened my mouth wide and sucked the head of his cock into my mouth because his kicking lost any hint of coordination he might have had and we sank like a stone into the dark waters. The soft mud had to have been only a few feet lower, but the temperature was drastically colder than just a few feet above. Some kind of thermal layer, I supposed. I only had so much air, so I just ignored it and went with the flow.

Using one hand to grip that firm ass of his, I plunged him into my mouth, relishing the texture and taste of him on my tongue. Bobbing slowly, I brought him to complete arousal and then let him go to arrow to the surface. The manly taste of him still filled my senses when I sucked air, treading water.

Keven surfaced just a moment later near me, shaking water out of his eyes. Those beautiful eyes. "That was a good start, but I have a better idea."

I quirked an eyebrow at him and just smiled.

His hands gripped my waist and then he pulled himself down my body and under the water. I laughed and tried to keep myself floating as his mouth briefly sucked on my nipples. I managed to stay afloat right until he went lower and I felt a red-hot flash as his tongue split me wide open. With a gasp, I lost all coordination and barely was able to hold my breath as I sank.

The trip back down into the dark was totally different this time, with his hands holding my waist and that wicked, wicked tongue lighting on fire. I figure the water had to be boiling around my pussy. When he wrapped his lips around my clit, all the air rushed out of me and I started struggling.

He immediately kicked strongly and brought me to the surface. I coughed and got the little water I swallowed back up while he held me and pulled me toward the ladder on the pier.

In a minute, I was able to speak while he looked on, concerned. "It's okay. I just lost it there for a second. I'm okay. Climb up and sit down on the pier above the ladder."

He scrambled up so fast that I laughed at his eagerness. When he sat down, his cock was at the perfect height for more fun while I stood on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Positioning myself, I held onto the ladder and smiled at him before taking half his length into my mouth. He tasted even better without all the water in my mouth and his cock was so hot I thought my lips would char. And I could hear him now. My eyes sought him out and kept him trapped in my gaze as I took him.

Keven groaned and tangled his fingers in my red hair. I cooperated and increased the speed of my sucking mouth sliding down his cock. I wanted a nice ride, and right now he was like a teen-aged boy on his first trip to the backseat. If he lasted two minutes, I'd be astonished. I hadn't wanted sex before, but now that I had decided I was ready, I found myself ravenous. I wanted Keven and I wanted him right now.

The salty taste of his pre-come made me shiver and increase my pace. I didn't try to take him into my throat. It had been so long that I'd probably choke myself. When his breathing became ragged and his body started twitching, I knew he was close.

"I'm going to come," he moaned.

Pulling back, I used my hand to caress his cock while I sucked on just the head. I felt his cock expand and then felt it pulse in my grip while the flavor of his seed exploded across my tongue. I watched his eyes roll back up in his head and resisted his involuntary effort to impale himself into the back of my throat. I milked him with soft cries and swallowed his come in two swallows. It had been a long time since I'd tasted a man and while I usually felt no great craving for the taste, the fact that it was Keven lit me on fire.

Pushing him onto his back, I climbed the ladder, the water streaming off me. I'm sure I should have been freezing but I was blazing. Before he knew what I was doing, I squatted and impaled myself on the first inch of his still erect cock. Then I let my weight settle and in a couple of thrusts I had the full length of him inside me.

I settled on my knees and let all of him impale me. I groaned, throwing my head back. I clenched my internal muscles and felt every bit of his cock like I was reading him. In Braille.

When I could breathe again, I leaned over him and gazed hungrily into his eyes. His passion for me blazed back like a beacon. Clamping my lips to his, I began undulating my hips, fucking him. Every time I took him deep, I thought I would pass out from the intense sensation. And that doubled when he began gently chewing on my nipples. I groaned with each combined thrust of our bodies, and I squeezed him tightly every time I bottomed out.

My rise came like a thunderbolt from the heavens, electrifying my senses and making me convulse wildly. I felt Keven flip me over onto my back and wrapped my legs around him as he kept fucking me. Now was his turn. I let him take me.

Keven powered into me with long, fast thrusts and made me feel like I was Jell-O. When I regained my coordination, I started pulling him deeper into me, urging him on with my eyes blazing lust.

"Do it. Fuck me, Keven. Take me," I panted.

"I... have to... pull out..." he groaned.

"I'm on the pill. Just do it," I egged him on. "Fill me full of your hot, tasty come."

That did it. His eyes rolled up into his head again as he arched convulsively. I felt him

shooting inside me and moaned for him, bringing a hand between us to frig my clit wildly until I exploded. Exhausted, he collapsed on top of me.

When we finally could breath normally again, I smiled at his face above me, kissing his chest softly. "Now, I'm hungry."

"That's supposed to be my line," he snorted.

Our laughter must have rung off the mountainsides.

## Chapter Seven: Tiger burning bright

We dried off and gathered our clothes in a euphoric cloud. I kept sneaking peeks at Keven and I caught him eyeing me with a goofy grin on more than one occasion.

Brazenly, I walked back to the house with my clothes in hand and a towel across my shoulders. Keven was a gentleman and walked beside me, rather than behind me. For the first time in my life, I was actually disappointed that I wasn't being ogled. The conversation between us was almost non-existent on a verbal level, but the body language was speaking up loud and clear. We hadn't just crossed a barrier, we'd pole-vaulted over it.

When we got to the house, I saved Keven from wondering where things stood by selecting the guest room next to the master. "I'll take this bedroom," I said, and I smiled at him and the slightly disappointed expression my comment elicited. "Though I don't know how many nights I'll sleep in it." That perked him up.

Keven pulled me into a gentle embrace and whispered in my ear. "I'm happy we've moved to this level in our relationship, but..." He seemed to be choosing his words with care. "I don't want you to feel like you have to sleep in my bed. In fact, I don't want you there unless you *want* to be there. I do hope, though that you do."

I looked into those dark eyes of his. I couldn't tell him how much those words meant to me, so I opted to lessen the emotional level before I was bawling my eyes out – or maybe me balling him till his eyes fell out. "It's good you're not taking me for granted already," I said with a mischievous smile. I touched his cheek briefly. "We'll talk after

we shower and change. You owe me dinner."

Closing the door behind me, I set my dirty clothes in a chair and kicked off my shoes. Then I slipped into the large shower stall, cranked the heated water up till steam was everywhere and groaned as my body thanked me.

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Half an hour later I was down in the kitchen, dressed in new jeans and a teal blouse. With bare feet, I padded up behind Keven and gave him a drive-by kiss before he knew I was even there.

"I'm thirsty," I announced. "What's to drink around this place?"

"Water, tea, beer and wine," he replied. "What do you want?"

"Tea, for now. Maybe a glass of wine with dinner." I opened the refrigerator and found the tea on a lower shelf. "What's for dinner, oh mighty hunter?"

"Chicken Alfredo," he said while taking in my posterior. I grinned at him and poured us each a glass of tea. "What sparked that," he asked when I handed it to him.

"You looked thirsty."

Keven laughed. "That's not what I meant. I was talking about the pier. I thought you wanted to take things slow."

"Well, that's not exactly right," I said, taking a seat at the table. "I was feeling like things were rushing along, beyond my control. So, I decided to give in to temptation, take something I wanted anyway, and take control at the same time. Are you complaining?"

He held out a hand in denial. "No complaints here. I was surprised, but I guess that's what you wanted. Making love to you was a life-altering experience."

"We were both hungry for each other and that took the edge off our lust. Now that we aren't spending so much time wondering how good it will be, we can take our time to do this right. For example," I said putting some heat into my smile, "I hope tonight is slow and romantic. Not that I mind fast and furious, but it's been a long time for me and I want it all."

"I think we can manage that." He started draining the noodles. "Was it the same for you - the hunger?"

I nodded. "I don't know what it is, but I feel like I've known you all my life, and it's like an empty place is filled when you're around." I laughed at his grin. "Not that empty place, Stud. Not everything is sex, sex, sex. I mean emotionally."

That didn't dim his grin at all. He poured the sauce over the chicken and noodles and set my plate in front of me. "I know, but all men are pigs; even emotionally everything is sex, sex, sex." He exchanged the grin for a gentle smile. "Honestly, I feel the same way. From the moment I saw you, I not only wanted your body but I wanted your heart."

Again I felt the emotion for this man well up inside of me. Again, I couldn't meet it head on. "You know the path to a woman's heart," I said instead, taking a scrumptious bite of the tender chicken. "Right through her stomach. This is wonderful!" One of my pesky inner voices chided me for my cowardice, pointing out I would have to face the emotions at some point.

Keven laughed and shook his head. "I thought that was a man's line. And as a doctor, you know the shortest path to a woman's heart is through her rib cage."

"True," I admitted, "except that I mean the emotional heart, not the physical one. And I'm being facetious anyway. The food is wonderful, but the emotional connection is much, much better." Maybe it was time to face it now, I thought. I looked out the window to gather my thoughts and froze with my fork partway to my mouth. The sun was just setting behind the curve of the central mountain peak and the ice was lit up with red. At that moment, I knew I was in love. Admittedly, I was in love with his house and not Keven, not yet, but it was a start.

"It's unbeatable," he said after the sun had set, plunging the valley into a kind of twilight; hours before dark back home. "I sometimes live out here almost full-time. Though I can't anymore."

Forcing my eyes away from the spectacle outside, I looked at him questioningly. "Why not?"

"Because my girlfriend, my emotional touchstone, is a very successful doctor who can't live this far away from her patients, and besides, she makes the beauty of this place pale in comparison anyway."

That unexpected comment slid through any of my remaining reservations like a scalpel. With a happy cry, I jumped up and kissed him soundly. He, of course, was caught completely off-guard. Men. They never see it coming, although Keven saw my few tears. His expression went from bewildered to thoughtful, but he had the presence of mind, at least, to hug and kiss me back.

When I sat back down and dug back into my food, I kept sending him glances that would tell a perceptive man that he had cleared the last hurdle. Maybe Keven would interpret them correctly, maybe not, but he had become my boyfriend in my heart as well as in my brain with that one sentence.

I still didn't have time in my career for a relationship, but tough shit. I was having one anyway, and the doctor would just have to make room. I was so happy that even all the other troubles were sliding out of my mind. I couldn't do anything about them anyway.

We finished our dinner, chatting about inconsequential things. I insisted on doing the dishes and he didn't argue. When the kitchen was ship-shape, I tracked him down in the living room. "What would you like to do now?"

Keven smiled lazily. "I should think that would be perfectly obvious." He pulled me into his arms and kissed me. "After an afternoon of wild, unexpected sex there can only be one suitable follow-up."

I smiled knowingly and he nodded. "That's right; I want to start painting you."

I swatted him in mock outrage. "Painting?!? You don't want to throw me over your shoulder and carry me off like a caveman would take his woman?"

He grinned undeterred. "I can't do both?"

"Funny man," I laughed. "Okay, what do you want to paint that you can actually display somewhere?"

Stepping back, he took his chin in his hand and considered me thoughtfully. "I think a nude of you rising out of the water, climbing the ladder on the pier with the water running off your body."

I shivered at the memory of that ladder and immediately felt myself moistening. "Okay. How do we do this? It's a bit dark to go down to the lake."

"Here's a little painting secret. I can start with the centerpiece, you, and then add in the background at a later time." He gestured to the stairs. "Let's go up and paint a red-haired goddess. Then we'll see what happens next. Actually, you head on up and I'll be right there after I change into my painting togs."

"You have special painting clothes?" I asked. "Are they as weird as some golfing outfits? Do they come with a goofy hat?"

Keven laughed and shooed me up the stairs. "You'll find out in good time. Why don't you get yourself comfortable, and I'll just be a minute?"

Right then, my cell phone rang in my purse on the table. I fished it out and looked at the number. It wasn't one I recognized.

"Hello?"

"Miss Craig? This is Detective Williams. I have some good news for you," he said. My heart started thudding in my chest. "We picked up the man that was harassing the two of you."

"You've got him already? That's wonderful!" I gushed. "Thank God! So, it's safe to come back?"

"He isn't talking, and he seems to be working alone so I think it is safe enough for you to come back," he confirmed.

I looked over at Keven and he was frowning and shaking his head. "Hang on, Detective. What, Keven?"

He adroitly snatched my phone from my hand and held it up to his face. "Detective?" he asked smoothly. "Keven Braddock here. Just to be safe, I think we should stay here a few more days, possibly a week longer. Don't you think that would be prudent?" He waggled his eyebrows at me and I rolled my eyes. "I'm glad you agree. If there's any other breaking news, please give us a call. Thank you."

He hung up the phone and tossed it back to me with a grin. "Safety first. Oh, crap," he said, snapping his fingers. "I forgot."

He pulled me into the living room and pointed above the fireplace. There was a display



of horns and a shotgun. "That's loaded and ready to fire. If something were to need shooting, just pull it down, press the button beside the trigger in and then it becomes a 'point and click interface.' Point it at whatever needs shooting and interface." He grinned at me.

"I don't like guns," I said with a theatrical shudder. "If something needs shooting, you can take care of it. Wait, you mean like snakes? Are there snakes out here?"

He nodded. "Yes, but they won't trouble us. I was more concerned with the human kind of snake."

"Thank God we don't have to worry about that," I said with relief. "And about staying out here, I don't know about a week. Maybe a couple of days."

"We'll talk about that tomorrow. Just be happy that it's over. Now let's go do some painting," he said with a note of assurance in his voice. It would be interesting to see who got their way on how long we stayed out here.

I showed him my dimples and headed up the stairs and into the studio. The massive windows showed the land outside in a deepening twilight that was turning into night. The quarter moon lit the ground in an ethereal, silver light. The lake shimmered like something from a fairy tale. It was so romantic.

Undressing slowly, I folded my clothes and set them on a handy chair. The warm air of the studio relaxed me, but I still felt vulnerable with all my clothes off.

Keven came in carrying a covered canvas that he put on a stand by the door. He looked like he hadn't changed yet.

"I thought you were going to get into your painting gear." I fought the urge to drape my arms across my breasts. I shouldn't feel so self-conscious after we'd made love, but it felt really odd to be totally naked while he was fully dressed.

"I fibbed," he said with a grin. "I actually went down to your car to get something."

"What?" I asked, stepping next to him.

"A present for you." He pulled the cover off with a flourish.

My breath froze in my throat and my hands flew to my mouth. The racing children! He

had saved it! Then it hit me. He said it was a present for me.

With a squeal, I crushed him in my arms, jumping up and down like a mad-woman. "You planned this all along? Ohmigod! I love you! Thank you! Thank you!" Then I froze. "Waitaminute! It's worth thousands of dollars! I can't accept a gift like that!"

He kissed my forehead softly. "Of course you can. From the moment you said you wanted it, it was yours. I can't deny you anything." Then he looked deeply into my eyes. "Do you?"

"Do I what?" I asked, comfortable in his arms.

"Love me. I realized that I loved you that first night, you know."

Had I said that? I ran my mind back over the last few moments and realized I had said it, in a moment of unguarded enthusiasm. Did I mean it like that?

"I suppose that I do mean it, though I don't know how deeply it's going to go yet." I looked deep into his eyes and kissed him. "And I don't know that I won't fall so head over heels for you that my life will never be the same, either. I guess we'll figure that out as we go."

"I like that idea. Maybe we should put off painting for tonight," he whispered, sending a thrill up my spine.

I was about to nod my agreement when a flash of light outside diverted my attention. There was something moving out there with a white light.

Keven turned with me toward the lake. "What in the..."

It looked like a car driving down to the lake, but that wasn't possible. We were all alone out here. No, it was a car. "Someone's out here," I said quietly. "Who could it be? And I didn't think the path was wide enough for a car."

"It's not," Keven said, the tension in his voice as sudden as the arrival of the car. "See how it's coming in from the left? There aren't any trees over there, so it's a straight shot to the lake. That's how the workers that put in the pier went down."

As we spoke the car careened down the hill. It was obvious that it was accelerating way too fast to be safe. It was hard to see clearly, but it looked almost uncontrolled.

Squinting, I tried to see what the shape of the car was, because it looked familiar. Right as it hit the pier and splashed into the water I realized what was so familiar about it.

"That's my car!" I screamed. I started for the door, trying to figure out what was going on, but Keven grabbed me by the arm.

"No, stay here." His eyes, so warm and loving were cold and hard now. "Someone did that, and they may be in the house. I'm going to get the shotgun. Stay here."

My heart was in my throat and I felt frozen where I stood. I had to do something. I couldn't just stand here and let Keven go get himself killed. Forcing my feet, I started out the door and into the upstairs hall. It was so open, how could anyone expect to sneak up on us? As if on cue, the lights went out, plunging the house into darkness. Great. Shut up, Sandy. Stop giving the bad guys ideas.

With one hand on the wall, I found the stairs without falling to my death. I was about to start downstairs when I heard a crash that sounded like someone had dropped a silverware drawer and lots of metal bouncing around.

I froze, waiting to hear something else. Anything else. Silence. Like a tomb. Jesus, Sandy! Shut up!

Taking a deep breath, I descended to the bottom of the steps and turned toward the kitchen. The light of the moon filled the room with shadow and dim light. Small glittering things were scattered all over the floor and the shotgun lay beside the glass door leading out to the patio. Just outside the door on the patio itself was a sprawled figure.

"Keven!" I screamed, running to his side, almost falling on scattered silverware. A fork jabbed me painfully in the foot but I ignored it. I grabbed his head and turned him over onto his back. His hair was matted in hot blood.

I was ready to freak out completely when I forced myself to take a deep breath. Panic wasn't the answer. Time to be like Danny; just put it aside and deal with the crisis. I could panic later if I wanted to. Bending over, I put my ear to his lips and heard him breathing. He was alive, thank God!

"Isn't that just so fucking sweet?" a cold, female voice asked from outside. I felt like I was back at the lake with cold water suddenly splattering my naked torso. Then the smell hit me. Gasoline.

I grabbed the shotgun and brought it to my shoulder, backing up till the railing touched my ass. Karen stepped out of dark shadow and hefted what looked like a half-full whiskey bottle.

With a nasty laugh, she upended it and poured some of it on Keven. "You should never have taken what was mine, bitch," she continued in that cold, totally insane voice. "You'll both burn in hell tonight." She stepped back from Keven and pulled a cloth from her pocket, stuffing it into the half-full bottle.

"Don't move," I told her, trying to hold the gun pointed at her even though my trembling arms made it swing almost in a figure eight.

Karen laughed again. "Even if you knew how to use that thing, which you obviously don't, you won't shoot me. What is it that doctors swear? Do no harm?" Digging into her pocket again, she pulled out a lighter. "Time for you and Kevy-Boy to die."

I closed my eyes and jerked the trigger. Nothing happened. My eyes popped open and I stared at the damned thing. It was broke! I held it out and stared at it.

With a flick of her thumb, Karen lit the cloth on fire.

The safety! I'd forgotten the safety! Searching with my finger, I found a button in front of the trigger and pushed it in with a sharp "click." I forced the heavy gun back up to my shoulder and pointed it at Karen. "Drop it! I'll shoot!"

With a sneer, she drew the bottle over her head to throw it at Keven and I felt the calm inevitability of certainty. I jerked the trigger and the shotgun went off.

Everything happened so fast. It was just a jumble of images and pain. The gun kicked me in my shoulder like a sledgehammer wielded by John Henry. Incredible pain exploded where it hit me and I stumbled back.

I had a momentary vision of a burning, screaming torch where Karen had been standing, and that calm voice in the back of my mind told me I must've hit the bottle. The next half moment, my ass hit the rail and I flipped backwards off the patio.

In barely a moment I screamed and then I hit the ground. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say the ground hit me. Hard. Even harder than the shotgun. I heard a sickening snap as I landed on my left arm. Then I really started screaming.

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to pass out. I wanted to do anything but get up, but I didn't have a choice. I staggered to my feet, sparing my left arm a look as cold adrenaline pumped into my bloodstream. Broken forearm, that calm voice told me. It needed to be splinted, I was advised.

Swallowing hard, I stumbled around the patio until I came to the stairs. The screaming had stopped and now the horrible stench of burnt meat filled my nostrils. Burnt pork, I thought almost laughing wildly. "Bitch, the other white meat!" the voice in my head shouted. I was going into shock and I didn't have time for this.

When I was able to pull myself up the stairs with my right hand, I found things pretty much as I'd left them. Keven was still on the patio by the door and bitch was spread out like a burning starfish on the patio. I staggered well clear of her and idly wondered if those cheap implants of hers would burn.

I stepped over Keven and fell down hard when a piece of silverware slid under my foot. The pain almost made me pass out and I confess I screamed like a little girl, cradling my left arm. I didn't want to get up. The gasoline was making my skin burn, something had scratched the hell out of my back when I fell off the patio and my arm hurt like a stone-cold bitch. Too bad I didn't have the luxury of just giving up.

Forcing myself to my feet, I slid my bare feet on the floor, kicking silverware all over the place with every step. I made my way to the counter and found the fire extinguisher by the sink. Stumbling back outside, I stepped over the now twitching and groaning Keven and tried to figure out how to pull the stupid pin with one hand.

Grabbing the pin in my teeth, I pulled it out and spat. Then I squeezed the handle and put the smoldering bitch out. There was nothing left but a charred corpse. Without warning, my stomach revolted and I barely made it to the rail before I vomited. The extinguisher fell to the patio with a metal "thunk."

"Sandy?" Keven said weakly, struggling to his hands and knees. "Sandy!"

I staggered over and knelt beside him. "I was thinking this was the best getaway ever, but I take it all back. You're going to have to do much better than this if you want to keep getting lucky." The energy was deserting me and it was so hard to move.

He pulled himself up and then pulled me up with him, taking in the scene on the patio quietly. "I can't wait to find out what I missed."

I hissed when he touched my broken arm and he yanked his hand back. "It's broken, and your ex is dead. Help me to the sink and call for help."

Becoming ever more steady on his feet, Keven helped me inside, grabbed my cell phone out of my purse and called 911. When he was done, he helped me wash the gasoline off and sat me down in a kitchen chair. I sat in the dark until he got the lights back on and came back. He had a robe that I could cover myself with and I managed to get it on and sit back down without falling over.

Keven's head was bloody and he looked like someone had hit him with a silverware drawer. I'm sure we made quite the pair. He pulled out a chair and sat heavily beside me. "I don't suppose I can have a do-over?" he asked.

"Nope," I said with a scratchy laugh. "We don't do those. But I will let you take me on a cruise when my arm heals."

"I suppose that's the least I can do for getting you into this mess," he agreed with a smile. He kissed my good hand softly. "I love you, Sandy."

"Damned right. I love you." I said.

We'd be just fine after all.

The End