



LOST AND FOUND
BOOK 6

IN LOVE

WITH THE

Rebel

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

In Love with the Rebel

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Prologue

“You are one *sick* bastard!” Marni Kline hissed, backing away from the naked man before her.

“On your knees!” the man roared, pointing a pale, skinny finger towards the floor. His voice dropped as his fury mounted. “And get those clothes off!”

Marni’s stomach roiled in disgust. Lifting her chin, she glared right back at him and shook her head slowly. “Not a chance. I’m not playing your weird games. This isn’t my thing.” She let her eyes flit over his too-thin, yet quite saggy, body contemptuously. “You’re just a kinky old man who likes to play sex games, huh?” She saw his face turn red as his anger mounted. “You think that, just because you’re in a position of power, that you can manipulate women!” She shook her head with revulsion. “I won’t play!”

The man moved closer, his fury so intense, spittle sprayed halfway across the room as he warned, “You know the consequences if you don’t comply, little girl!”

Marni tried not to react outwardly even as her knees trembled with the primal terror inside of her. “It was only a speeding ticket! You can’t send me to jail for a speeding ticket! This is absurd!”

“On. Your. Knees!” he hissed, his bald head shining in the overhead light. It was actually broad daylight, but the windows in this house were painted black, so no exterior light illuminated the room.

Marni backed away, terrified that he might hit her. Unfortunately, the jerk wasn’t saying what she needed to hear, so she couldn’t leave just yet. “Not going to happen. You’ll just have to send me to jail because I’m not playing your disgusting little games.”

Technically, the man hadn’t incriminated himself yet. She knew what she needed him to say, but the creepy bastard knew the law too well. He was careful.

Suddenly, his demeanor changed. He visibly banked his anger, although it still simmered in his eyes. But he appeared outwardly calm and in control. The man shifted and leaned back against the wall, crossing his skinny arms over his equally skinny chest, tilting his head as he contemplated her from head to toe. Then he said, “Little girl, you don’t understand the power I have in this game. It will be my way. You agreed to this.”

Marni shook her head emphatically, her hand cutting through the air. “I didn’t agree to anything other than a conversation with you about a speeding ticket. That’s it! Then all of a sudden, I’m covered in a black hood and brought here to your kinky little sex den. You kidnapped me!” She looked around, trying to gain her bearings. “Where are we, anyway? This is ridiculous. How many other women have you done this to? How many women have you forced to play your kinky games?”

The man shook his bald head. “Every woman who has joined me here has done so of their own free will. They all...*appreciate*...the games I play.” Marni noticed he didn’t say that the women “enjoyed” his games. Barely-there eyebrows lifted as he chuckled. “They all beg and walk away with what they want.” He lowered his voice. “What they *need!*”

Marni shook her head, wondering if the women begged for mercy, the way she had. “You manipulate vulnerable women. This is *not* consensual! You are forcing women to...” she looked around, unable to control her sneer. “What? What do you make them do?”

The man held his arms outward, obviously unconcerned with his nudity. “We play games. It is a consensual power exchange. There is nothing wrong with playing games, little girl.” His eyes hardened. “I am a very generous man when I get what I want. But my playmates have consequences when they don’t follow the rules.”

Marni shook her head. “I am *not* a willing participant in this. This was supposed to be a simple conversation about a speeding ticket, you...*freak!*”

He shrugged nonchalantly and recrossed his arms.
“You may leave at any time.”

Marni considered her options. Looking around, she could see only one exit and it was behind her. If there was another door, she couldn't see it. She suspected that it would be safer and smarter to just get out of here rather than try to get the man to say the words that she could then take to the police. “I'm leaving. Don't try to stop me!”

The man shrugged and turned away, giving Marni a view of his saggy, pale butt. It was...horrifying!

Not waiting any longer, she turned and rushed for the door. It was locked, but she was able to flip the dead bolt and get outside.

Sunshine! Oh sweet heaven, sunshine! She breathed in the clean, fresh air, pulling the door closed behind her. The car that had brought her here was still in the driveway. A guy jumped out, looking surprised.

“That was fast. Normally, his sessions last longer,” the man commented cheerfully, coming around to open the back door for her. “I'll take you home.”

Marni shook her head. “I'm not getting back in that car!” she whispered through numb lips. She swallowed hard, trying to rein in her terror. She'd been terrified ever since the guy had put a black hood over her head in the parking lot, back in the city.

The guy looked startled. “But...?” He pointed weakly at the house, about to say something else.

Marni didn't wait to hear what he had to say. Instead, she took off running as if her life depended on it. She didn't recognize the neighborhood, but she didn't stop running even after a stitch formed in her side. Ignoring the pain, she ran until her knees were threatening to give out. Even then, she hurried over to the side of a house, out of view from the street, leaning against the wall as she worked to get her breath back.

“That bastard!” she whispered.

When the pain in her lungs and side finally eased, she straightened and looked around. In the distance, she caught sight of the city. Highway seventeen was pretty close. She also noticed a series of apartment complexes several blocks away. She wasn't in the best neighborhood, but definitely not the worst either, she thought.

She breathed a small sigh of relief. "Hey, a silver lining to this miserable debacle," she muttered to herself. Then she remembered the video and checked to make sure the hidden button camera and microphone were still attached to her shirt. "Thank goodness!"

Marni reached behind her and pulled her cell phone out of the special pocket she'd sewn into her jeans specifically for today. The guy who had taken her to the house had grabbed her purse and taken her cell phone out. But Marni had anticipated that and had bought a cheap, burner phone, putting it into her purse so that the guy wouldn't find her personal phone. Dialing, she called for a taxi, then found a bench and waited, still glancing around to make sure she hadn't been followed.

Several hours later, Marni walked into the restaurant just in time to start her evening shift.

"You're late!" her boss called out.

Marni waved and shook her head. "I'm right on time!" she yelled back, grabbing an apron and stepping behind the bar. Normally, she would have walked over to her boss and teased him, maybe rolled her eyes. But she still hadn't recovered from her morning kidnapping. Reviewing what she'd gone through, her mind kept playing through the possible scenarios. She was lucky that she'd gotten out of that situation with only a nice bit of fuel for future nightmares. It could have been so much worse! "What's going on?" she asked John, the other bartender that was working the night shift with her.

John put down a freshly cleaned wine glass. "Slow start, but it's Friday night, so it'll pick up before long." He

poured a beer for one of the wait staff, setting it on the brown tray.

John was right. An hour later, the pace picked up and it was a challenge to keep up with the orders. The bar area was packed and patrons were impatiently calling out orders, trying to be heard above the music. Marni loved the fast pace. Working hard, pouring drinks, and mixing cocktails for the high-end restaurant was a good job. It earned her an impressive amount of money, which she used to pay off her law school tuition. She'd finished her second semester a week ago, but she didn't have quite enough money for the next semester.

"Marni!" Jimmy Manugo called out, sliding onto a recently vacated bar stool.

"Hey Jimmy," she called out, dunking several glasses into the soapy water, then rinsing them and putting them on the rack to dry. She moved down the bar to Jimmy. "Everything okay?" she asked.

Jimmy was her house mate and a good guy, if a bit flaky sometimes. She suspected that some of that flakiness was chemically induced, but Marni didn't look too hard. She was adamantly opposed to drug use, but Jimmy's rent was cheap and his house was located in a quiet neighborhood, which meant she had a place to sleep and study in peace. Those were her main requirements right now.

"It's all good," he replied. "Can you get me a beer?"

She nodded, but didn't head over to the beer taps. "Absolutely. But I need cash first," she warned him. "The last time, I started a tab for you and you left without paying." She glared at him and he had the grace to blush, embarrassed. "I had to pay your bar tab. That's coming out of my rent, by the way."

Jimmy chuckled as if it was all a great joke. "You're a cold hearted woman, Marni," he said. "And someday, my charm is going to break down those walls. You'll fall madly in love with me and we'll live happily ever after."

Marni chuckled, shaking her head. “Didn’t I hear moans coming from your bedroom last night?”

“That was...” he paused, trying to remember the woman he’d brought home the previous night. The woman’s name eluded him and he waved a hand dismissively. “She meant nothing to me,” Jimmy assured her, but he also reached behind his back and pulled out his wallet. “Once you’re mine, I’ll be completely faithful. I promise.”

“Jimmy, I couldn’t take you away from all the ladies,” she teased, grabbing a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet even as he tried to hand her a ten. “That wouldn’t be fair to them.”

Johnny snickered, shaking his head. “I dare you to go home alone tonight, Jimmy,” she challenged, quickly mixed two fancy cocktails and handing them to the waiting patron without missing a beat.

Jimmy snorted. “Right! Not gonna happen.” He turned hopeful eyes towards Marni. “Unless you’ll be waiting for me?”

Marni shuddered. “Not a chance, Jimmy. I’m not your type.” Another couple called out an order and Marni swiftly began filling the order.

“What’s my type?” he asked, sipping the beer that she slid over to him.

“Stupid,” she replied without hesitation.

Jimmy tilted his head, pursing his lips as he contemplated that accusation. Then he nodded. “Yeah. That’s true. I like to take care of my ladies.” He lifted his beer in a salute. “And you, my dear, don’t need help from anyone!”

Marni smiled, but inwardly, her heart ached. Yes, she could take care of herself, but the thought of what she’d gone through today...she definitely could have used some help. She continued mixing and pouring, smiling and joking with the patrons and the bar staff, as she normally did. But in her head, she was working on a plan. She had to figure out how to get the video to the police so that awful judge pervert would

back off. A speeding ticket wasn't important. A speeding ticket wouldn't destroy her plans for after law school. A jail sentence, though? That would seriously hurt her career in law. That ass was interfering with her life's goal. He had to be stopped!

She was just glancing around, looking for the next customer. That's when she saw the transaction happen. "Damn it, Jimmy!" she hissed under her breath. Jimmy handed a small packet to someone, then palmed the offered money in exchange.

Jimmy was a drug dealer.

Mentally, Marni sighed with exasperation. And yet, she'd suspected that he was into some sketchy stuff. The guy didn't have a visible source of income, so Marni should have realized that he was selling drugs. She'd just hoped that he had some sort of inheritance or maybe his mother supported him somehow.

Unfortunately, the extra money Jimmy always had made sense now. He owned the house outright and didn't work. It wasn't a huge house, just a two bedroom with one bathroom. But still, Jimmy didn't work and yet, always had money.

Berating herself for not putting it together before now, she considered her options. Phoenix wasn't necessarily where she wanted to live for the rest of her life. It was great during the winters, but the summers...they were truly painful. Triple digit heat meant that one had to run errands during the mornings or evenings when the sun wasn't at its hottest.

"So, what ya gonna do?" she sang under her breath.

"Huh?" Johnny asked as he reached for a bottle of scotch behind her.

Marni sighed. "Nothing. Just trying to figure out my life."

Johnny didn't seem overly interested, but she knew he was a good guy and, even better, easy to work with.

She looked around, but everyone seemed to have drinks for the moment. The night was finally slowing down and they were cleaning up and restocking. There were still a handful of patrons, but the restaurant was closing soon, so it was time to prep the bar for the next shift.

Unfortunately, by the time the overhead lights went on and the bar locked up, Marni still didn't have any idea on what she was going to do with her life. Yesterday, she'd thought she had everything planned out. She'd finish law school, get a good job, and go back to her older sister, Maxine, to apologize for being such a bratty little sister so many years ago.

Now...? She felt like a failure. She couldn't even pay for a simple speeding ticket, her housemate was a drug dealer, and she had pissed off a very powerful man.

She had to leave Phoenix, she thought. She had excellent grades, so Marni had confidence that she could get into a new law school. Maybe on the east coast? She wasn't sure exactly where, but she decided that it was past time to explore a different climate.

It was also time to get away from corrupt creeps! Maybe she could send the video to the man's email, and hope it would make him back off. But that didn't mean that the guy wasn't still a concern. Having a legal career here in Arizona meant that she absolutely would run into him, sooner or later.

Yes, the east coast sounded like a better plan. Getting far away from the creep made more sense.

As soon as she got home that night, she packed her meager belongings into her duffle bag and dumped everything into the trunk of her Volkswagen Beetle that had definitely seen better days.

She'd just tossed a pillow into the back seat when Jimmy pulled into the driveway. "What the hell?" Jimmy yelled as he slammed his car door closed. "You can't leave!"

Marni turned to face him, leaning a hip against the door. For a long moment, she contemplated Jimmy's long hair and scruffy beard. She suspected he thought it made him look

hip and edgy. In reality, he just looked...sloppy and scruffy. Folding her arms over her stomach, she smiled easily at Jimmy as he stood on the grass in front of their house. "You're a drug dealer, aren't you Jimmy?" she asked softly, aware of the sleeping neighbors who surrounded them.

Jimmy's head whipped around, checking that no one was listening. "Shut up!" he yelled, then clapped his hands over his mouth. He took a deep breath and continued more quietly, "Don't say things like that! What if the neighbors are awake?"

She rolled her eyes. "Jimmy, Henrietta is nearly blind," Marni pointed out, indicating to the house to the right. "And Barney sleeps about twenty hours a day and drinks the other four. If he's awake, he's watching TV at top volume. No one can hear us." She shuffled her feet slightly. "Is it true? Do you sell drugs?"

"No!" he snapped.

She lifted a reddish-blond eyebrow high in disbelief. "Then how do you earn money? How did you pay for the new TV you bought last week and the gaming system you bought yesterday?"

It was Jimmy's turn to shuffle his feet. "I got some money from an aunt who died."

Shaking her head, Marni sighed. "You told me that you didn't have any relatives other than your mother."

Jimmy wasn't the sharpest crayon in the box, but he was sweet and funny. Unfortunately, he couldn't think up a lie fast enough.

"Fine! I might, *maybe*, sell a few chemical options to friends and acquaintances, just to make a little spending money." He shuffled his feet again, looking down at the darkened sidewalk. "But that doesn't impact you in any way."

Marni chuckled. "Jimmy, you know I'm going to law school."

He lifted his eyes in confusion. "What does that have to do with anything?"

She leaned forward. “Law school, Jimmy! I’m studying the law! I can’t study the law, then allow someone to break it. I’ll jeopardize my ability to eventually become a lawyer! The bar association frowns upon wanna-be lawyers who ignore the law!”

Jimmy snorted. “As if those old farts don’t break laws all the time!”

Silently, she had to agree with him. This morning was an excellent example!

“A good lawyer uses the law to help their clients.” She said it gently, not wanting to hurt Jimmy’s feelings, but needing him to understand her point of view.

Jimmy didn’t agree, but his eyes softened. “But...I love you, Marni,” he whispered. “The other women, they’re just...they don’t mean anything.”

Marni was surprised, unaware that Jimmy felt that way about her. Carefully, she reached for him. Lightly, she hugged the big lug. “Jimmy, you don’t love me. I’m just one of the few women who didn’t fall for your wonderful charm.” She pulled back, resting her hands on his shoulders. “Take care of yourself, okay? And promise me something?”

“Anything,” he replied, his voice muffled by her shoulder.

“Stop selling drugs,” she ordered, locking eyes with him. “Get a *real* job. You’re not stupid, Jimmy. You’re smart and capable. Get a job and stay alive! Selling drugs is a lazy way to live your life and you know it!”

Jimmy sniffled, but he nodded. “If I get a real job and stop selling drugs, will you come back and be with me?”

Marni smiled gently as she shook her head. “No. You and I won’t work, Jimmy, and I think you know that. But if you get a real job and stop selling drugs, then I’ll come back next year for your birthday and take you out to Mulligan’s for a burger and beer. Deal?”

Jimmy’s smile was slow in coming, but he nodded. “Yeah. It’s a deal.”

She leaned in and gave him another hug, then pulled away, cupping his cheek sweetly. “You’ve promised me, Jimmy. Now, go follow through. You have my email. I want to hear all about the crappy job you get and how you’re going to turn it into something wonderful.”

He laughed and stepped back. “You don’t have to leave tonight, you know. You could get some sleep and leave first thing in the morning.”

She shrugged as she settled into the beat up old car. “I prefer driving at night. Plus, I’m still a bit wired from bartending. It always takes me a while to calm down, so I might as well get a head start on wherever I’m heading.”

Jimmy sighed, shoved his hands into the frayed pockets of his jeans, and stepped back. Marni waved, then drove off, but she kept glancing at Jimmy in her rear view mirror until she turned right at the end of the street.

Marni stopped at the gas station, filled up her tank, and bought a cup of coffee and several apples. Minutes later, she was on Highway Eighty-Seven heading east. She didn’t have a specific destination in mind, just a general idea of “going east”. Tennessee sounded nice. Or maybe Maine? Nah, too cold in the winter, she thought. New York? There were good law schools in New York.

As she crossed over the border into New Mexico, Marni considered stopping in to see her sister. Maxine was one of the most incredible people Marni knew. She was so darn strong and capable! Everything Maxine did, she did perfectly. Max worked at the Los Alamos National Laboratory doing something incredible and amazing.

Marni loved her sister, but...well, after their parents had died, Max had stepped up in their place and...Marni had to admit, if only to herself, that she’d been a real pain in the neck back then. But Marni was going to fix that. Max always had her life together, everything under control. But Max had also given up so much to raise Marni during her last few years of high school. So Marni was going to do something great with her life. She was going to be the best, most amazing

lawyer this country has ever seen. Marni would make her big sister proud!

Chapter 1

“Can you type?” the man asked.

Marni squirmed on the uncomfortable, wooden chair. “I can type,” she replied, looking pointedly around at the antiques. “On a computer. I don’t know how to use a typewriter.”

The man smiled and, darn it, that smile did funny things to her stomach. She’d meant to insult the man, not amuse him! The guy was like a giant frat boy – too good looking and too freakishly tall. He was everything she hated in a man.

Except...there was just something about him that... Marni didn’t understand her reaction. He wasn’t her type, so why was she struggling to keep her eyes off his broad shoulders and clean-shaven jawline? A nice, hard, square jawline. Firm lips. Incredibly broad...!

“And you’re attending law school?”

Marni snapped back to the present, pushing her red hair behind her ears and reminding herself to pay attention. This was a job interview, not a...what did one call an event where the woman lusted after the guy?

She looked at the man’s blue eyes, startled to realize that he was waiting on an answer. What was the question? Oh, right! Law school!

She nodded jerkily, folding her hands on her lap. “Next fall, yes. I’m enrolled at Penn State, but I got here too late to enroll for the spring semester.” “Spring” was such a misnomer since it was still freaking cold here in Pennsylvania. A recent snowfall had dropped about eight inches of snow, making everything look magical and pristine – for a few hours.

He paused to write something on her resume and Marni clenched her teeth, trying to stop herself from speaking. If there were any other jobs around, she would tell

this too-good-looking jerk to go to hell. But since there weren't, she was stuck.

He was sitting behind a big, wooden desk, so Marni couldn't be sure how tall he was. He had broad shoulders and a lean waist, dark, almost black hair, and that firm jawline.

Some people might call him handsome. Marni might have even assigned that adjective to him when she'd first met him. But after having been in his office for...she glanced at her watch...twenty-two minutes now, answering the stupidest questions she'd ever heard, she no longer appreciated his charms. He was just a big, annoying jerk.

Unfortunately, he was a jerk that paid well. She'd done her research and the guy was a good lawyer. Why he was stuck here in dinky, little Punxsutawney, instead of in a big city, like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, or even Harrisburg, the state capital, Marni didn't know. Nor did she care. The guy was a decent paycheck until she could start classes again. Nothing more.

“What kind of law do you hope to specialize in?”

Ah, finally something she could answer easily. She sat up straighter in the torturous chair. “Right now, I'm leaning towards family law. But that could change as I learn more.”

He glanced at her over the paper. “That's a nice answer, since this is a family law firm.”

Excellent point, she thought. Had her reply sounded like she was sucking up? She brightened her smile, reminding herself of the hourly salary. “Serendipitous, isn't it?” she replied, adding a cheerful shrug just to annoy him.

It worked and she had to stop herself from laughing. Not a good idea to laugh at one's hopeful employer.

The guy sighed, scratching the side of his head with the hand still holding the red pen. “What kinds of hours can you work?”

Ooh! Another easy question! “Right now, I can work full time through the summer months.”

Those blue eyes peered at her again. “You’re not going to participate in the festival?”

Participate in the festival? She could participate? Leaning forward slightly, she asked, “Is that a possibility?”

Josh refrained from rolling his eyes. Barely.

He made a checkmark on the resume. “If you’re working here, then no. It’s not possible. I need a full time assistant. I need someone who can answer the phones, work on legal briefs, and greet clients.”

He asked questions for another half hour, then sighed. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he accepted that he didn’t have a choice. He had to hire her. He hadn’t been able to find a single issue that would allow him to disqualify Marni Kline from the job.

Other than her stunning red hair and soft, full lips. Those emerald eyes were distracting, but he knew that any mediocre labor law lawyer could successfully sue him if he disqualified her due to the color of her eyes.

Damn it!

It didn’t help that there were no other candidates and he truly needed the help. His previous assistant had left suddenly, so Josh was quite desperate now.

Tossing the resume onto his desk, he laced his fingers together, glaring at the too-beautiful woman with irrational resentment. “When can you start?”

The beauty sat up straighter in her chair and he swallowed a groan. The movement pressed her full breasts against the material of her cheap suit, drawing his eyes towards those tempting mounds.

“I got the job?” she asked, eyes shining with joyous relief.

He stared at her mouth. Full lips. He wondered what they would feel like when he kissed her.

“When” he kissed her? What the hell? There would be no kissing! Law office, Josh reminded himself firmly. No

kissing! Not a chance!

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. She really was quite enticing. She'd be a distraction. Marni Kline was far too tempting!

Still, he glanced at the pile of cases that needed to be filed, the transcription that needed to be typed up, and the mail he hadn't bothered to sort in two weeks. He was exhausted, having just finished an eighty hour week, and he was ready for someone else to step in and take over the administrative tasks that he simply didn't have the time to accomplish. His last assistant had barely survived a heart attack last month. She'd immediately retired. Not because of him. Josh acknowledged that he was a difficult taskmaster, but Betty ate sausage and eggs with butter-browned hashbrowns every morning for breakfast and some sort of meat for dinner. Again, with butter for browning. She preferred whipping cream in her coffee, with about ten scoops of sugar. Due to her diet, Betty was about a hundred pounds overweight. So her heart condition had more to do with her lifestyle than the pressure from this job.

He looked at the woman in front of him. She was beautiful, smart, and looked to be a good worker. She had excellent references and...there was absolutely no reason not to hire her other than the fact that he wanted to bed her rather than have her file contracts.

Another forehead rub, then he nodded. "Yes. You have the job, depending on when you can start working."

"Tomorrow?"

He glanced at the large stack of files again, files that he sifted through every time he needed to review something for a client, then lifted an eyebrow in her direction. "What are you doing right now?"

Those damned green eyes lit up with excitement and she wiggled...yes, she actually wiggled in her chair!

"I need to find a place to live. I've been sleeping at the youth hostel in State College for the past few nights while

I looked for a job. But I'm sharing a room with three other women, one of which snores loud enough to scare a bear." She lifted a hand to her cheek and his eyes automatically checked for a ring. No ring. "I'm not even exaggerating. She's so loud! So, I need to find an apartment."

Josh reached into the middle drawer of his desk and pulled out a set of keys. "Done. So, you can start today? Right now?" He stood up, reaching to adjust his tie, but remembered that he'd loosened the tie and released a few of the buttons. "I have to fly to Los Angeles tonight. I need this office fixed up and organized by the time I get back in three days. Think you can do that?" He tossed the keys across the desk to her.

She caught them easily. "Is this the key to a closet somewhere?"

He didn't bother to roll his eyes. He simply reached for the jacket that he'd draped over the back of his chair and flung it over his shoulder. "There's an empty apartment above these offices. It's yours as long as you're employed here." He walked towards the doorway. "Don't mess it up." Then he walked out of the office and took in a deep breath of the clean, cold air. Cold was good. Cold tamped down on his body's reaction. She was a truly stunning woman, but he sensed she was bad news. Dangerous. A menace to his peace of mind.

Josh didn't want the added complications of a woman in his life. He'd just eliminated a massive complication by resigning from his old law firm and coming here to a small town to set up his own practice. This tiny town didn't have much need of his legal services, but most of his clients from the old firm followed him, so he had the clients without the political headaches. He'd hired a private investigations firm to do the research and background checks, so he didn't need to bring on a full-time investigator. The company he'd hired is one of the best, based out of Las Vegas, Nevada, and Josh had complete confidence that the firm could handle anything he tossed their way.

Right now, he needed to fly to LA to help one of his clients out of a mess. The daughter had done something to a

government building and...well, she'd been in this kind of a situation before and she probably would again. The family kept bailing her out and he kept billing the father his exorbitant hourly rate to fix the legal problems.

Marni stood up, looking around and absorbing the silence. Not complete silence. There was an antique clock ticking somewhere in the office. Toying with the keys, she wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

"Okay, there's an apartment around here somewhere." She looked around again, taking in the gorgeous antiques, beveled glass windows, and glossy wood floors. Original hardwood floors, she noted. But they'd been refinished at some point. Still, the hardwood floors didn't offer a clue as to where the apartment might be.

Standing up, she walked around, examining the gorgeous antiques. "Where would someone hide an apartment?" She started opening doors. The first was a closet. The next revealed a kitchen. A nice, well-stocked kitchen, actually, she thought, admiring the expensive appliances for a moment before she backed out again.

The front door opened and Marni spun around, immediately feeling guilty for prying.

"What are you doing?" Josh-the-Jerk demanded.

Marni paused, clenching her jaw tightly so that she wouldn't snap at her new boss. It was an excellent job and the money she earned in the next couple of months would pay for an entire semester of law school!

"I'm looking for the apartment you mentioned," she explained, breathing slowly to calm her fury. The accusation in his eyes was there and she didn't like it.

"Oh," was all he said. He jerked his chin towards the opposite wall. "This way."

He walked over to the door near a large, shining armoire which revealed a long, narrow hallway. He went up the stairs without another word. Marni followed with a quiet sigh.

There were two doors on this floor. One with the letter A on it, and B on the other one. Made sense, she thought.

“Which one is the empty apartment?”

“B. It’s fully furnished, and there’s a garage in the back if you need to store anything.” He plucked the keys out of her hands and shoved the key into the lock. He pushed the door open and stepped back so that she could enter. “I just need to grab something. I’ll see you in a few days.”

Then he vanished back down the stairs. Marni heard the front door open and close, then silence... except for that damn clock ticking. She realized she only heard it when she was alone. Strange.

Taking a deep breath and telling herself to stop being so fanciful, she stepped into the apartment and...!

“Oh, this is beautiful!” she sighed blissfully, turning around to take it all in. The apartment was purple! A genuine purple room! It was so damn lovely, she wanted to cry! If she ever had the chance to paint a room a color other than something neutral, she’d paint it this color! The sofa was obviously well used, but looked to be comfortable and solid. There were two chairs that didn’t match the style of the sofa, but they still “worked”.

The apartment included a small but definitely workable kitchen that included a stove and oven and even a microwave. There were cheap, mismatched dishes and glasses, a few pots in the lower cabinets. It seemed as if someone had gone to a thrift store and chosen whatever was there. But it was perfect! She loved it. Every piece of the apartment was amazing! When she pushed through the only other door, she sighed with happiness. A large bed with a chenille comforter, and lots of pillows! Oh, she loved pillows! Marni remembered her childhood bedroom. Her mother hadn’t been a good seamstress, so she’d honed her skills by making pillows. Marni had formed a nest around her with those pillows and she’d loved them all!

The bathroom wasn't anything to write home about. It was just a sink, a tiny shower stall, and a toilet. The bathroom needed a clawfoot tub, she thought. There were a few rough towels hanging on the rack, but Marni could get something softer.

"This is perfect!" she whispered, then did a small dance of happiness as she did another walk through of the apartment. "Coming here was the perfect choice!" She was going to live in heaven!

Chapter 2

The man was going to be the death of her. Marni eyed the stack of files that he'd just dumped on her desk. "Can you get those transcribed and logged into the system by this afternoon?" he asked, as he walked into his office and closed the door, not bothering to wait for an answer.

"Ever heard of text to speech?" she grumbled, collecting the stack of files. She placed them on her lap, then sifted through the cases. He'd returned from LA this morning, making the air hum like it did before a thunderstorm. He'd dumped a pile of stuff onto her desk and then hidden in his office.

"Sure! I can do all of this!" she whispered grumpily. "Don't mention all of the work I did while you were gone! Happy to be of service. More than happy to get it all done for you, since you didn't bother to hire anyone over the past several weeks, leaving the work to pile up for some stupid, unsuspecting idiot who needed a job so badly that she didn't bother to find out that you're a complete ass!"

"Thank you for your help."

Marni startled so hard the files tumbled from her lap and she even let out a yelp. Turning, she looked up at the man who was leaning in the doorway, blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

Jerk!

"Yes, I noticed that you cleaned up and organized everything while I was gone. I noticed that you did the work of a month in a little over seventy-two hours. I'm not an idiot. I'm just..." he paused and ran a hand over his face. "Exhausted."

Instantly, Marni felt awful. He really did look tired. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He lifted an eyebrow at her question. Marni hmped impatiently, lifting her hand to stop his sarcastic question. "I'm not dispensing with fifty years of feminist efforts here. I

need coffee myself and I'm offering to get you a cup as well. But if you don't--"

"I do," he interrupted, his lips curling slightly at the corners. "Thank you."

She huffed again, irritated by his amusement. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black, no sugar."

Marni nodded. "Easy enough. I made a fresh pot earlier this morning."

"Thank you."

She eyed him for a moment, wondering if he was making fun of her. But she saw only sincerity in his eyes. And fatigue.

"I'll be right back."

She went into the white kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. In one, she added some milk and sugar, the other she left black. Marni never understood how people could drink coffee without anything in it. It was bitter and horrible without a bit of sweetness to it. But to each their own, she thought as she carried both cups back out to the main room. Her desk was in the lobby so she set her delicious cup of happiness down on the corner of the desk, then walked into Josh's office and set his down on his desk, walking out since he was on the phone talking about punitive damages and liability. She'd read up on that tonight, she vowed, then returned to the lobby and took a long sip of her coffee. Delicious, she thought with satisfaction.

Josh rubbed the back of his neck, pacing along the expanse of his office while he tried to diplomatically convince his client that he would be laughed out of court if he attempted to bring another suit against his ex-wife. The divorce documents had been signed, sealed, and filed with the courts two years ago. He couldn't ask for alimony now.

Taking the cup of still-steaming coffee, he took a long sip and...spat it out. Dear heaven, what the hell was in the cup? He stared down at the black sludge, then out through the

doors of his office. With fascination, and more than a bit of stomach churning, he watched as Marni took a long sip of her coffee. Was it from the same pot? Had she spit in his?

Whatever she'd done, the "coffee" wasn't drinkable. He poured the coffee into the potted plant in the corner of his office. He'd grabbed something from Luella's diner later because that gut-rot was poison!

The rest of the afternoon went by smoothly. He had international clients that called about various issues, but he also helped out some of the locals with their legal matters. Even after a few days, Josh had to admit that Marni was excellent with the clients, both on the phone and in person. She was sweet and funny, helping them relax as soon as they entered the office. And, with every passing day, he wanted to toss the gorgeous redhead over his shoulder and haul her to bed so he could discover all of her secrets! Every time she walked into or out of his office, his eyes were transfixed on her figure. Every time she leaned over to pull something out of the lower drawer of her desk, he couldn't help but peer through the open doors, hoping for just a glimpse of the shadow between her breasts.

Never in his life had he been so obsessed, hoping for just a hint of cleavage. And yet, he couldn't seem to stop himself. Was she taunting him, he wondered? Was she doing all of that walking and filing and... stuff...just to drive him wild with lust?

And why the hell did she have to wear those flirty, short skirts and tight tops? Yeah, she wore thick tights to keep her legs warm. It was still February, after all. But the skirts barely came to her mid-thigh. Her cute, almost-mismatching tops hugged her high, firm breasts like...like he wanted to hold them, he mentally growled.

Turning away from the sight of her bending to file something in the cabinet behind her desk, Josh forced his mind to focus on...what the hell was he doing? Yes, the woman was driving him crazy! Tomorrow, he would submit a request to the employment agency, asking them to send over a new

batch of resumes for potential candidates. His body couldn't handle this kind of pressure every day.

Chapter 3

Maybe he wasn't so bad. Marni skipped down the narrow stairs from her darling apartment and into the lobby. The air was a bit chilly most mornings because the programmable thermostat didn't ramp up the furnace until eight o'clock. Marni came downstairs around six, so she could read a few chapters in the textbooks she'd be studying when she was next able to register for classes.

She'd always thought of herself as a night owl. But she was now coming to the conclusion that she was wrong and her previous nighttime alertness was probably caused by the fact that she'd always worked night shifts.

Now, working in an office, she'd discovered that her internal clock gave her more energy in the morning. Hence, she'd started studying earlier so she could absorb more of the material.

So, it was a shock to step into Josh's office at a few minutes past six o'clock, only to find him sound asleep, his long legs hanging off the end of the elegant and uncomfortable-looking sofa with a thick case file spread out over his chest. The man must have been working late into the night, reading that file and had fallen asleep.

Marni stopped cold, stunned by the perfection of the moment as she stared down at the man. During the work day, Josh was always moving, always active. Even when he sat behind his huge desk, the man worked on five or six cases at a time. Phone conversations required him to be pacing. It was almost as if the man needed to move to keep his brain working.

Marni admitted to herself that he fascinated her. He might be a jerk, but he was a hard-working jerk. And he *was* freaking brilliant. The times when he left those double doors open so she could listen in on his side of the phone conversations amazed her. He had impressive and creative legal solutions to every problem he faced. His clients were

demanding, but Josh knew how to calm them so he could explain how the law could help them.

Now that those blue eyes weren't glaring at her, Marni took her time examining his features. While Josh was awake, there was an almost chaotic energy about him that was a bit exhausting. But with his eyes closed, he looked...boyish! His ridiculously long, dark lashes graced his tanned cheek. There was a bit of scruff along his jawline that she'd never noticed before. He was always clean shaven when he came in each morning, his tie perfectly aligned and a freshly ironed suit on. The man never looked messy.

Now, even his hair was mussed, almost as if he'd been running his hands through it. Fascinating! Her fingers itched to straighten his hair, smooth the shining locks so that they weren't so mussed. There'd been a time when Marni would have loved to mess up his hair. But after working for him for a week, she found that she wasn't sure she liked him looking like this. The appealingly boyish quality was...disconcerting.

His chest rose and fell and she could see that he was deeply asleep. So if she just...smoothed his hair, he'd never know. Then she could head to her desk and study until he woke up. It would be like any other morning, she told herself.

Telling herself to leave him be, that fixing his hair might wake him up, Marni started to turn away, thinking to let him sleep. But the file balanced precariously on his chest shifted...it was about to fall. Even as she stood there, it slipped another inch. The papers weren't secured so whatever he'd stuffed into that file was going to scatter across the floor.

She reached out, but froze before she touched the folder. Pressing her lips together, she started to pull back. Bad idea! Very bad!

Her fingers curled into impotent fists and she stepped away. "Leave it," she whispered. "Just walk away!"

Marni turned, but a niggling whisper in her head called her back.

She stared at Josh for another long, frustrating moment. “Darn it!” He looked so vulnerable and...tired. The man was such a powerhouse when he was awake, but right now, his body slanted in such a painfully awkward angle on the too-short sofa, Marni’s heart ached for him.

The folder shifted again. She blinked, eyed the papers, chewing on her lip with indecision. Another shift and Marni leapt forward, determined to save the file. Or maybe she could just nudge it further back? Yes, that seemed like a better plan.

With that intention in mind, she inched closer. Then a bit closer, her fingers itching as they hovered in the air just above his chest and the shifting case file.

In that same moment, Josh moved. The folder moved! Sliding inch by precipitous inch, it started to tumble. Marni reached out and caught the folder before it slid off his chest. His eyes opened. Blurry at first, but with impressive speed, he reached out and caught her, pulling her forward. Already off balance, Marni yelped as she fell.

Right onto his chest, her wrists manacled by his hands. How in the world had he done that? Only one hand had been reaching out, but now both of hers were...!

For a shocking moment, they stared at each other, their bodies pressed together. She felt the hard planes of his chest and his flat stomach against hers, felt her breasts press against his arm and chest. Her body reacted and...she felt his body react as well! Her breath caught, her eyes widened, and she had no idea what to do.

She was fairly certain that she wasn’t supposed to notice how incredibly good he felt! And Marni was positive that she wasn’t supposed to wiggle closer. Keeping as still as possible, she tried to suck some air into her lungs, but it was difficult to remember how to breathe. Nearly impossible! The man felt...wow! She wanted to snuggle into those muscles. She wanted to inhale the male scent of him and revel in the heat emanating from his delicious body! She wanted...!

“What are you doing?” he rasped, his hands tightening around her wrists.

What *was* she doing? Marni wanted to groan as she frantically tried to remember what she’d been doing. Because there was absolutely no way she could tell him she was savoring the sensations of his amazing body pressed against hers!

“The file folder,” she stammered. “It was about to fall. You fell asleep and the papers...” she couldn’t finish the explanation because...he moved and the friction of his body against hers was...wow!

Those blue eyes moved over her face and Marni was fairly certain that her cheeks were flaming with ugly color. Redheads never blushed prettily.

“I wasn’t asleep.”

She might have snorted at that fib if she wasn’t so overwhelmed by the painful awareness of his body. He was so tall, but for some ridiculous reason, she fit against him perfectly.

Impossible, she told herself. Fanciful!

“I should get up,” she whispered.

“You should,” he agreed. But he didn’t relinquish her wrists. They continued to stare at each other and she felt his heartbeat pounding against her chest, adding another layer of intensity to this already charged moment.

The damned clock chimed, shattering the spell that had come over them.

With a squeak, Marni scrambled to her feet, gritting her teeth against the heady sensations as their bodies slid, the friction heating her already aroused body. She clutched the messy file folder, nearly dropping it when he stood up next to her.

Rubbing a hand over his scruffy jaw, he looked around. “I guess I *did* fall asleep.”

Marni stepped back, placing the offending file folder on his desk, shocked to find that her hands were shaking. Hiding her hands behind her, she looked at him, flustered and not sure what to do next.

Finally, her eyes caught sight of an empty coffee cup on his desk and she grasped onto that solution as if it were a lifeline.

“I’ll umm...go make some coffee.” And with that in mind, she turned and rushed into the kitchen. Hidden from his too-knowing blue gaze, Marni took a moment to pull herself together. Standing at the counter, she took several slow, deep breaths, trying to steady her nerves. When she felt slightly more balanced, she looked back over her shoulder at the now-closed door. “What just happened?” She shook her head, because her intense reaction didn’t make sense. None at all! She was here in town only until she could get back into law school! He was definitely not her type. She didn’t like the corporate type. She preferred more laid back guys. Men who knew how to have fun. Men who were kind and considerate. She didn’t like men who snapped orders and scowled throughout the day.

“Coffee!” she mumbled, picking up the container of coffee grounds. She spooned the grounds into the reusable filter, then filled the pot with water and dumped it into the water reservoir. She pressed the start button, then leaned back to wait. A moment later, the soothing purr of the coffee maker filled the kitchen. Marni took two cups down from the shelf and waited, not ready to go out to the lobby just yet. She needed a few more minutes to calm her racing nerves and to figure out why she’d reacted so strongly. She didn’t like Josh. She definitely wasn’t attracted to him. She couldn’t be. So, why had her body gone all hot and bothered on her like that?

The coffee maker finished and she poured steaming coffee into the cups, then added cream and sugar to her own. Carrying them into the office, she noticed that Josh wasn’t there. She set the cup of boring, black coffee in the center of his desk, then headed to her own. She pulled out a textbook and stared blankly at the page. She couldn’t concentrate.

Where was he? She heard noises, but...she didn't know where he'd gone. It was a bit disconcerting to hear him puttering somewhere in the "house" and not know where he was.

By the time he reappeared, freshly showered and in another of his expensive tailored suits with a red, silk tie loosely draped around the collar of his immaculate, white dress shirt. He held an electric razor that he smoothed along his hard jawline as he strode into the room. Marni swallowed hard and reminded herself to keep control of her rampaging libido. She'd turned on her computer and was working through the bookkeeping, logging costs into the spreadsheet she'd developed. She'd send out the invoices for Josh's hours this afternoon, once she'd linked up the spreadsheet to his accounting system.

And she would ignore Josh as much as possible! Because, truth be told, Marni was pretty freaked out right now!

Josh walked into his office, tossing the razor onto the desk. Marni was hard at work, logging something into a spreadsheet. So far, her work had been exemplary. She'd caught up on months of bills and filing in just a few days, filed the chaotic mess that he'd created over the previous weeks, and her transcriptions were finished and uploaded to the appropriate case files on his private server. She was good. Better than good!

He took a slug of the coffee she'd left him, desperately needing the caffeine. He'd gotten only about three hours of sleep and...Josh choked on the brown swill. "What the hell?"

He eyed the brown sludge, then turned to frown at Marni. Sure enough, she lifted her own coffee mug to her lips and took a sip. She didn't seem to notice the coffee was horrible! The woman seriously needed to learn how to make good coffee!

Or maybe she just did something to his coffee? He'd wondered about that the other day, but had assumed it was a one-time thing. Taking the mug into the kitchen, he pretended as if he was just going in there to grab something for

breakfast. But as soon as he got there, he dumped the coffee into the sink and poured another cup from the pot. Sniffing the brew first, he didn't detect anything wrong with it. It certainly smelled like coffee. Taking a tentative sip, he cringed and spit the sip out in the sink. It was awful!

"Hell!" he muttered, staring at the closed door. How the hell did someone mess up coffee? With a sigh, he rubbed his forehead, glared at the offending coffee pot, then slipped out the back door. He forgot to grab a coat, but he was so desperate for a good cup of coffee, he didn't go back for one. Plus, he was hungry. He walked down the block to Luella's.

"Hey there Josh!" Patsy, one of the morning waitresses, called out to him as she poured a cup of coffee for a local. "You need some breakfast?"

"Yeah," he replied, nodding at the pot of coffee in her hands. "Can I get a cup of that while I wait?"

She laughed, but flipped over a paper cup and poured him a fresh cup of coffee. Josh lifted the cup to his mouth and, because of the vile stuff he'd had earlier, took a careful sip. But this...this was good! Closing his eyes, he took a seat on one of the stools as he put in his order and waited for it to be cooked. "Make that two," he decided.

She blinked at him, startled, but Patsy just shrugged and doubled his order. It took less than five minutes for the eggs and toast to be finished and packed into a pair of takeout containers. He left a big tip, then whistled as he walked back to the office. Once in the kitchen, he paused to pour the coffee into his mug, not wanting Marni to know that he'd gotten coffee from a different source. Why he cared, Josh wasn't sure. But for some reason, he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Walking back into his office, he paused to deliver the second container of breakfast to her desk before proceeding into his office. Since Marni was on the phone with what sounded like a potential client, he didn't expect a response.

Ten hours later, Marni turned off the computer and trudged up the stairs to her apartment. She was exhausted to the point that she wasn't sure she could even think. Josh had

been in the office this morning, but had left around noon for a client lunch. Then he'd texted her that he had to drive into Pittsburg for another meeting. Marni had been taken aback by her disappointment when he'd left. The office had felt too quiet after his energy this morning. But then...the texts started! He was insane! There could be no other explanation. Even when he was out of the office, he constantly texted her instructions.

By the time six o'clock rolled around, an hour after she should have clocked out, he was still sending her messages with tasks to finish.

Lying down on the sofa, she closed her eyes for a long moment, wondering if she'd been insane to take the job. "No! I can do this!" Abruptly, Marni sat up and looked around, determined to not give up. "But I need food first."

Stuffing her textbooks into her bag, she trudged along the sidewalk. She stopped in the deli and got a sandwich, then discovered the most magical place in town.

"Ooh!" she yelped happily, opening the door to the candy shop. "Fudge!" she whispered. "I haven't had fudge in too long!"

Marni had fond memories of going to festivals and carnivals with her parents and Maxine. Her mother would always convince their dad to stop somewhere to get fudge. There were always wonderful flavors like chocolate and mint or peanut butter and chocolate, white chocolate and raspberry...the list had seemed endless for a small kid. So, whenever she spotted a candy store, she always stopped in, bought some fudge and let the happy memories flow.

"Good evening!" a giant teddy bear of a man called out from the back of the store.

"Hi there!" she replied, happily roaming through the aisles of candy. She didn't see fudge anywhere though. "Do you sell fudge?"

The man shook his head, but before Marni could thank him and turn away, he took something out of a large, metal

bowl, handing it to her. “I don’t have fudge, but try these.”

Marni looked at the small paper cup he’d handed her. At the bottom were three small...lumps. She looked up at him. “What *are* they?”

He chuckled. “Not the adventurous type, Red?”

She refrained from rolling her eyes at the typical nickname. With red hair, she’d grown up with people calling her “Red” all the time. “Not really,” she replied.

“Those are freeze dried skittles. And I guarantee that they are the best things you ever tasted!”

Marni contemplated the bearded man for a moment, then she looked down at the lumps again. Taking one, she popped it into her mouth. The burst of flavor was shocking. “Wow!” she gasped, as she crunched that one, then popped another into her mouth. “Oh, these are miraculous!”

The man chuckled. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

Marni smiled at the man, tossed the paper cup into the small trash bin, then looked around. “Okay, I’m sold. Where are they?”

The man pointed to the left where a whole display of freeze-dried skittles waited to be bought.

“I’ll take three,” she decided, gathering the packages into her arms, cradling them as if they were infants. “Thank you!” She paid for the skittles, stuffing the packages into her backpack, then waved to the man as she left. “I’ll be back!”

With a new bounce to her step, Marni continued down the street to the library. It seemed like a good place to study, and she could probably pop a few skittles to make the study process more interesting!

It was only seven o’clock and she’d just opened her textbook when a boy and his mother settled at the table nearby. “It’s nice and warm here, isn’t it?” the mother said, obviously trying to sound positive and upbeat.

The little boy grumbled as he took his homework out of a well-used backpack. “I don’t understand why we can’t

stay at our apartment, Momma.”

The mother smiled faintly, but it didn't reach her eyes. In fact, she looked tired and worn out. She pulled a notebook out of her bag and plopped it onto the table. “It's too cold there, my love. It's warmer here.”

“Why isn't it warm enough at home?”

The mother obviously struggled to come up with an answer that her son would understand. “It will be, honey. As soon as I get paid, I'll be able to hire someone to fix the heater. Until then, we'll just hang out here.” She forced a smile, trying to play off the night as if studying in the library was a game. “It will be fun! We'll pretend that we're sort of camping, okay?”

The boy didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. They were silent for a moment, both of them looking at their work. Then the boy looked up and asked, “Shouldn't the landlord pay to fix the heater?”

The mother sighed and nodded wearily. “Yes. But you know how he is, honey. We don't want to cause a fuss. He's not a nice man.”

Marni's temper flared as she realized what the woman meant. The woman was paying rent on an apartment that didn't have heat? Oh, no! That wasn't fair!

Standing up, she stuffed her books into her book bag and walked purposefully over to the other table. “I'm so sorry to disturb you.” She looked at the mother. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

The woman was startled at the interruption. She glanced at her son, who merely shrugged his shoulders, pencil in hand, working on a paper filled with math problems. The woman stood up slowly and they walked a few feet away.

“I sincerely apologize, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but I overheard your conversation about your landlord. Did you know that you can contact someone in Housing and Urban Development about landlord issues? Especially if you are unable to stay in your apartment due to lack of heat.”

The woman began shaking her head before Marni could finish her sentence. “No! We can’t do that! The last time we complained, he kept barging into our apartment at all hours. He wouldn’t even knock! He’d just unlock the door and start yelling at us. It was terrifying!”

Marni bristled with horrified anger. “That is a major violation of your rights as a tenant.” She glanced over at the boy. “Do you come here every evening?”

“Yes. It’s too cold in our apartment. We sleep and cook our meals there, but we have blankets and can heat up the kitchen with the stove. But it’s too expensive to do that all the time.”

She nodded her head. “I agree. Nor should you have to,” Marni asserted firmly. She pulled out a piece of paper, writing down her contact information. “I’m going to get a bit more information. Call me if your landlord does *anything* else to harass you. And if you wouldn’t mind, could you write down the date that you asked for heating repairs? That’s important. I think that landlords have fourteen days to fix an issue after it’s reported.”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t remember exact dates.”

Marni touched her arm. “Estimates are fine. It’s just to give me a timeline.”

“What are you going to do?”

Marni smiled. “I’m just a law student, so legally, I can’t do anything. I can’t even give you legal advice until I’ve passed the bar exam.” Her smile widened. “However, I *can* ask someone who is a practicing lawyer, a very good one, and at least get you a bit more information. Will that help?”

The woman stared at Marni for a long moment, the piece of paper in her hand. Then she nodded. “Yes,” she replied softly. “Yes, information on options would be very helpful. However,” she glanced over at her son, “please don’t do anything else. I can’t risk another episode of that man

harassing us. Our lease ends in six months. We'll move out then and find a better place to live.”

“That’s probably a good idea, but you shouldn’t have to move simply because your landlord is breaking the law.”

The woman laughed, a painfully brittle sound. “Powerful people break the law all the time. It’s how they increase their power.”

“I agree, but I know there are good people in the world.”

“I’m Mindy, by the way,” the woman added, extending her hand. “Even if nothing comes of this, it’s lovely to have gotten to meet one of the good people in the world.”

Marni flushed at her praise, as Mindy returned to the table where her son had just finished his math paper and was pulling out more homework.

Marni gathered up her textbooks and, after waving at the woman, left the library. The wind had picked up a bit, making the cold almost painful, but Marni pulled her jacket closer, lowered her head, and forced her feet to take her back to her lovely apartment. She had a mission now! And she needed to figure out how to help Mindy. She knew what it was like, having the threat of a powerful man’s retribution hanging over her head. No way was she going to let Mindy’s landlord force her to move!

Chapter 4

Josh stepped through the door and paused. Marni was here, the sunlight streaming in through the beveled glass doors, creating glints of light in her red tresses. She'd pulled that glorious hair back into a braid today, the tail draping over her shoulder to rest over her left breast.

Lucky braid, he mentally grumbled.

Carrying his coffee from Luella's, he stepped into the lobby, bracing himself for the impact of her sparkling, green eyes. Unfortunately, not even bracing himself could stop the jolt of lust as she looked up from whatever she was working on. He almost cursed when she added a warm and welcoming smile.

That smile twisted his gut because he just *knew* she was up to something. She never smiled at him. If she wasn't scowling at him, her face was generally blank. He appreciated that blankness. It helped him get through the day with only a thousand sexual fantasies involving all of that lovely, pale skin revealed for his delectation.

That smile caused his fantasies to go into overdrive. An image of Marni beaming up at him, her lovely red hair spread out over his pillow, or that hair surrounding him as she smiled down at him from above, her long legs straddling his hips.

Josh stopped his racing mind. No, that smile didn't bode well.

"What?" he demanded, frowning at her quizzically.

Her smile widened. If his eyes dropped lower, glancing at the sumptuous breasts pressing against the soft, pink sweater...well, it wasn't his fault. It was hers! No, that was stupid. She hadn't done anything wrong. It was his own lack of discipline.

And the braid! Yes, he'd blame his loss of concentration on that damn braid that was still taunting him, still pointing down at the breast that he'd never be allowed to

touch. Or taste. Or...stop! Just stop, he reprimanded himself firmly.

Marni's soft, seductive tone interrupted his mental remonstrations. "I was hoping I could pick your legal brain for a moment." She picked up a notebook, pressing it against her chest. Hiding her breasts from his hungry gaze.

Sighing with resignation, he turned away from the temptation that was all of her and walked into his office. "What's up?"

There was a slight hesitation in her tone that whispered to him that she was up to something.

"I'm reading about a case where a woman is struggling with her landlord. The guy isn't fixing things in her apartment and it's causing problems. Plus, the landlord keeps barging into her apartment unannounced without knocking, let alone making an appointment, like he should. All because this tenant asked to have something fixed, something necessary, and the landlord doesn't want to fix it."

He sat down behind his desk and leaned back, studying her curiously. "What's this woman's name and where does she live?" He linked his fingers together, waiting for her to explain.

Josh almost laughed when she lifted a hand, trying to act casual as she said, "Oh, this isn't a real case. It's just a hypothetical question." Her eyes dropped and she shuffled her feet.

Right. He didn't believe her. Not for a minute!

He toyed with a pen, trying to hide his amusement. If she hoped to work as a lawyer, she was going to have to work on that poker face.

"If there are repairs that need to be done, the tenant needs to submit those requirements in writing to the landlord. The property owner is required to fix the issue within fourteen days. If that's not done, then the tenant has two options. They can file suit in small claims court or they can put their rent in an escrow account. The tenant would then file a report with

both the county courts as well as Housing and Urban Development that explains the situation, the steps she took to resolve the problem with the landlord, and the desired resolution. The landlord must give the tenant twenty-four hours' notice before entering the dwelling, except in emergency situations." He paused, eyeing her carefully. "Is this hypothetical tenant in need of emergency repairs?"

"Is lack of heat considered an emergency repair?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. "And does it make the situation more urgent if this hypothetical tenant has a child?"

Josh's body tensed and he leaned forward. "That would definitely be considered an emergency repair. The temperatures last night dipped down into the single digits! Who is she? Her apartment is uninhabitable and dangerous."

Marni's smile dimmed and she looked unsure of herself. She slumped down into the chair that was set in front of his desk. The chair was normally for clients, but since Josh's business was international, he rarely had clients come to the building.

She ran a frustrated hand over her hair, tugging at that taunting braid. "I know that. This is why I'm asking for help."

He shook his head and pulled a notepad closer. "Details, Marni. Give me details."

"I don't have a lot of details. I met the woman last night at the library." She looked up at him, her green eyes pleading with him to make things right for her new friend. "She has six more months on her lease. The last time she complained to her landlord about a repair, he became vindictive and entered her apartment at all hours, scaring her and her son."

"That's malicious intent and harassment," he growled, scribbling that information down on his notebook. "You said she has six more months on her lease?"

"Yes."

"And a son?"

“Yes.”

“How old is her son?”

“I’d guess about ten.”

His eyes sharpened as he looked up at her. “You don’t know?”

Marni spread her arms wide, rolling her eyes. “I was at the library last night and I accidentally overheard her talking with her son. I was invading her privacy, Josh! And I couldn’t give her legal advice on my own.”

He growled and wrote down a few more details. But when he looked up at her, his eyes were firm. “When will you see her again?”

“Tonight. I gave her my cell number, and I also told her that we’d see her tonight at the library. She promised to be there.”

He nodded and scribbled more down, then stood up. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

“Where are you going?” she yelled after him, rushing behind him.

“I’m going to talk to the sheriff. If the landlord is entering her apartment without notice, that’s considered breaking and entering. The sheriff’s office needs to be on alert and ready to arrest him if he does it again.” He paused with his hand on the doorknob as he turned back, looking down at her with a hard look to his amber eyes. “Next time, just tell me what’s going on, Marni. I don’t like hypothetical nonsense.” He pulled the door open. “And I *really* don’t like bullies!”

Marni stared at the door, shocked and more than a little turned on. Dazed, she returned to her desk and sat down, a smile forming as she considered how angry Josh, the big, bad, international lawyer, was on behalf of a single mom who was trapped in a bad situation without the money or know how to get herself out of it.

Yeah, the world needed more men like Josh, she thought as she turned to her laptop.

Chapter 5

“Where is she?” Josh demanded, pacing between the library tables.

“I don’t know,” Marni replied, using her finger as a placeholder on the case law book she was reviewing. “I told you before that I only met the woman yesterday.”

Josh walked over to the textbook and jerked it away from her. He flipped it so he could read the title, grunted quietly, and returned the textbook.

“Thank you,” she said, sarcasm dripping from her tone.

He grunted again, then looked towards the library door. When no one entered, he braced his arms wide on the table. “Tell me about McCullen v Chalmers,” he commanded.

Marni blinked, startled and barely able to suck in a breath when he was so close. She looked up into his blue eyes and...and nothing. She couldn’t think. Not when the scent of him surrounded her like this. All she could do was think about his aftershave. The citrus scent was sexy!

“Quickly, Marni. You’re not going to have time to contemplate life when you’re in the middle of a trial.”

She jumped and glanced down at the textbook. “McMullen sued his supervisor for...” she paused, closing her eyes in order to recite the case law. Moments later, she blurted out not just the case and the relevant details, but also the reasons why that case was so important in a broader way. Josh snapped more questions at her, his eyes narrowing when she started to head down the wrong angle on a case. Marni would pause in those instances and think, concentrating on meshing several important cases together, so that she could see the overarching pattern.

This went on for more than forty-five minutes. Thankfully, Josh finally sat down, loosening his tie as he continued to question her. He thoroughly tested her

knowledge of the case law and the interconnections, relevance, and details of each case.

When she looked up, Marni was almost disappointed to see Mindy and her son enter the library.

“That’s her,” Marni said, interrupting his next question. Josh looked around and stood up, causing Mindy and her son to pause. Mindy’s hand on her son’s shoulder tightened perceptibly.

“Sit down!” Marni hissed. “You’re an intimidating person, Josh.” Marni stood up and waved Mindy and her son over, smiling encouragingly. “Just stay put for a second and let me explain to them what’s going on.”

Josh glared at her and she glared right back. But in the end, she won the contest and he sat, waiting while Marni walked over to Mindy and her son, eventually bringing them to the table.

“Please don’t be frightened. This is Josh. He’s my boss, who I mentioned yesterday.”

Mindy peered around Marni’s shoulder at Josh, then shook her head. “He looks expensive.” She looked at Marni. “We don’t have the money for an expensive lawyer.”

“He’s—”

“I’m taking your case pro bono,” Josh interrupted. She jerked her head around, glaring at him, but then his words registered and she smiled.

“Pro bono?” Mindy repeated uncertainly, glancing between Marni and Josh with confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I hate bullies and I’m going to take your case in order to ensure that you and your son have a decent place to live without the malicious intent of your bully of a landlord,” Josh explained.

The woman’s mouth fell open. Her son, just as stunned, pressed against her side. “That’s...so kind of you.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” Josh said, his voice softening. “Why don’t we sit down and talk about what’s happening to you?”

The woman nodded and they all sat down. Josh had the legal pad with his previous notes on the table, but as they talked, he added more information, filling up several pages by the end of the conversation.

“This sounds good. I have enough for now.” He put his pen down and smiled at Mindy and her son, Hector. “Here’s what’s going to happen next. I’ve already spoken with the sheriff.” He put a hand out when she gasped. “I briefly explained what I knew about what you’ve endured so far. The sheriff is just as angry as I am and will send a deputy to the landlord’s residence, explain a few things about the law to him, and warn him that he can’t harass you. I’m also going to install hidden cameras both outside the apartment as well as inside. You’ll be staying somewhere else until the heat is fixed.”

“We can’t afford—”

“It’s okay. I’m going to sue the landlord for the rent for the second residence as well. With the cameras, I’m hoping that we’ll catch him in the act of harassing you. If that happens, then we’re going to sue him for punitive damages. Your rent will be entered into an escrow account and will be held there until he’s fixed the heating issues. If that doesn’t happen, then we’ll sue for breach of contract and for you to be released from the rental contract.” He wrote something else down. “I’ve spoken to a judge and he’s agreed to a restraining order. That was delivered to your landlord about an hour ago. So if he comes over tonight, he’ll be arrested on the spot.”

Josh looked at both of them. “Ideally, we’ll get you out of the rental agreement so that you and Hector can move into an apartment that is habitable. If the judge doesn’t allow that, then we’ll sue the guy’s ass until he stops harassing you. Any issues with the plan so far?”

Both Mindy and Hector were grinning now, their body language much more relaxed. “I can’t thank you enough for

all you're doing for us. Somehow, I'll figure out a way to repay you."

Josh shook his head. "Don't repay me. Pay it forward," he urged her solemnly. "I hate bullies. They are weak, insecure jerks who prey on vulnerable people." He looked at Hector. "Look for others who are being bullied and help the vulnerable. That's how you can repay me."

Mindy and Hector beamed, nodding effusively. They collected their bags and headed for home.

When Josh looked at Marni, he was struck by her beauty all over again, even as she grinned smugly at him.

"What?" he demanded, flipping his notebook closed and tucking his pen into his coat pocket.

She chuckled as they packed up their own belongings. "You think you're such a bad-ass, hotshot lawyer."

Josh grunted, pulling on his coat. "I *am* a bad-ass, hotshot lawyer." He reached out and took her coat, holding it for her.

She pulled the jacket over her shoulders, then reached up to flip that flaming braid out from underneath. "You're a softy," she whispered. "But don't worry. I won't tell anyone!"

Josh rolled his eyes, putting a hand to the small of her back as he nudged her out of the library. "You don't know me very well if you think that, Marni." He wasn't a softy. Hell, there wasn't a single soft part of his anatomy at the moment!

Chapter 6

Humming a song she'd been listening to on the radio, Marni danced a few steps as she walked from the parking lot to the courthouse. Today was a good day. The temperatures were still ridiculously cold, but there was an air of excitement in town. The Groundhog Day festival preparations were ramping up and the town really went all out for that weekend.

Plus, Mindy's landlord had been arrested three days ago for breaking and entering. While in jail, the sheriff offered him the option of fixing the heating situation within the next twenty-four hours or staying in jail. The heat was fixed that day.

Yes, life was good. Josh was back to his normal grumpy self, but he mostly stayed in his office and emailed her instructions. After that first week, she'd gotten into a groove with his expectations, so none of his work requests were too complicated.

Except for those startling moments when he snapped a question about a case law at her, demanding that she explain the details and relevance. He usually hit her with the demand first thing in the morning. If she didn't know the importance of any specific case law, he'd expect her to brief him by the end of the day. Those briefings usually lasted twenty or thirty minutes because it wasn't enough for Marni to know just that specific case. He had to brief her on other cases and she had to explain the interconnections.

He was a difficult taskmaster, but Marni secretly enjoyed those conversations. His mind was sharp as a knife and he forced her to step up her game. His expectations were high so she strove to reach them.

As she reached the building, she noticed an elderly woman sitting on a bench across the street from the courthouse. Marni wasn't sure why the woman caught her eye, but she couldn't look away. The woman was clutching her purse and, even from this distance, she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Marni bit her lip, glanced up at the courthouse, then back at the woman.

Giving in to the need, she hurried across the street and slowly approached the woman. “Ma’am? Are you okay?”

The woman jumped and looked up, clutching her purse more tightly to her chest. When she saw Marni, she relaxed slightly “Oh. Um...Yes. I’m...” she let the last trail away.

Marni sat down, leaning back against the back of the bench. She was quiet for a moment, then she asked, “You’re not fine, are you, ma’am?” Marni tucked the court filings under her arm. “Do you need someone to talk to? I’m a stranger. You could tell me what’s bothering you and then you’ll never see me again.” She paused, but noticed the hopeful look in the elderly woman’s eyes. “Sometimes, it’s nice to just let it all out. It gets the worry out of your brain and then the problem isn’t as heavy.”

The woman’s mouth opened and closed, but she eventually shook her head. “No. Everything is fine.”

Marni knew the woman was far from fine. She sat up and looked around, tugging her scarf tighter around her neck. “Well, I need to go inside that building to file some documents. But after that, I was hoping to get a cup of coffee. Would you care to join me?”

The woman glanced at the papers in Marni’s hands. “Do you know how to file court papers?” she asked timidly, her voice barely a whisper. “I tried to do that myself. But I’m just...it’s a bit confusing, don’t you think?”

Marni smiled and nodded. “Absolutely! The first time I tried to file court papers, I went to three wrong offices.” She nodded towards the courthouse. “How about if we get that cup of coffee right now? You can tell me about your problem and maybe I can help you file your documents?”

The woman’s mouth formed an O, but she considered Marni’s offer, then nodded. “Yes! That would be lovely! Thank you so much!”

She stood up and they crossed the street together. Marni slowed her steps as she conversed with the woman. Her name was Marjorie Bethel and she'd been living on her own for the past five years after her husband's passing.

Marni purchased two cups of coffee in the courthouse cafeteria and sat Marjorie down. "Okay, tell me about the documents you need to file." She took a sip of her coffee and tried not to cringe. It was a horrible brew, but Marjorie was already talking and Marni didn't want to interrupt her.

Ten minutes into the conversation, Marni knew what she had to do.

"Hold up for a moment, Marjorie," Marni cautioned. "I need someone else to hear this." She pulled her cell phone out and, with trembling hands, she dialed Josh's number.

"What's wrong?"

Marni's heart did a little flip at his concern, but she tamped it down and took a slow, deep breath before explaining. "Remember how you told me that I should come to you immediately when I found someone who was being bullied?"

"Where are you?" he demanded. "Are you at the courthouse?"

She could hear him pulling his coat off of the hook and hurrying out of his office.

"Yes. I'm in the courthouse cafeteria. I have a lovely woman here, by the name of Marjorie Bethel, and she..."

"Stop talking. I'm on my way." He didn't bother to give her time to respond. Josh simply ended the call.

Hurrying down the sidewalk, Josh sifted through the potential problems. Why did the woman's name sound familiar? He wasn't sure, but Marni clearly had a sixth sense about people in need. He was just relieved that she'd called him first this time instead of trying to hide the issue as she'd done with Mindy and Hector.

She was too soft hearted, he thought. One day, that softness was going to get her hurt. Josh vowed that he'd be there when that time came, so that he could help her. Because as sure as he was breathing, she was going to get hurt.

“Josh!” Marni called out, standing up as soon as he stepped into the cafeteria. It was close to noon, so the room was filled with courthouse staff grabbing lunch. He nodded to her, then glared at her as he approached their table. Thankfully, the woman also sitting at the table looked harmless enough. No danger here, he thought and let the tension ease out of his shoulders.

“Josh, this is Marjorie.”

Josh took the elderly woman's hand, noticed that there was a slight trembling and tried to ease her concerns. “When Marni calls, I know that something needs fixing,” he teased, ignoring the glare from the woman in question as they all sat down. Josh pushed his winter coat off and unbuttoned his suit jacket. “So, what's the issue?”

Marni glanced over at Marjorie, but the woman pressed her lips together, no longer able to look Josh in the eye.

Marni, being the bulldozer that he knew her to be, pushed forward. “Marjorie's son is stealing her money.”

He'd expected another tenant issue. Landlords were ridiculously hurtful to elderly residents. So her explanation startled him. “Your son? Why do you think that he's stealing money from you?”

Marjorie looked over at Marni, who nodded her reassurance. Only then did Marjorie open her purse. She pulled out several envelopes and bank statements. “At first, I didn't notice the withdrawals.” She pointed to two on the statement from several months ago. Both withdrawals were only twenty dollars here and there. “But then the next month, there were five withdrawals.” She huffed. “I cared about that! Plus, the amounts were larger! But I wasn't sure how to stop them. I called my bank and they canceled the bankcard and issued me a new one. But somehow, the withdrawals started

up again this month! The lazy sloth has pulled more than a thousand dollars out of my bank account this month!”

Josh took the bank statement, examining each highlighted line item. She was right. Initially, the withdrawals were small. Apparently, not enough to gain her attention. But with each passing month, the amounts and frequency increased. Calculating the total in his head, he realized that Ms. Bethel had lost over two thousand dollars.

“Why do you think that your son is the one doing this?”

She hmped. “Because he only comes to visit me when he needs money. I stopped giving him money when I discovered he’d lost his job about six months ago.” She shook her head. “I should have stopped a long time ago, but...” she sighed, shaking her head. “Well, he’s my son and he always had a good story.” She shifted uncomfortably in the plastic chair. “But when I started to notice the withdrawals,” she narrowed her eyes, “I know what you’re thinking, mister. You’re wondering if I pulled the money out and just don’t remember it.” She didn’t wait for an answer. She dug into her purse and pulled out her phone. “This withdrawal,” she said, pointing to one of the highlighted lines, “was on the day when I was on a road trip with my friends. We were camping that weekend.” She spun the phone around and showed Josh pictures. Sure enough, there were four ladies posed in front of a camper on the same day as the withdrawal. “And this one,” she said, pointing to another line on the bank statement, “I was with my daughter and grandchildren.” She flipped through the pictures again, and turned her phone to show her beaming with two adorable little girls. “So, there is no way anyone can tell me that I’m going senile and I pulled money out of my account without remembering.” She harumphed and dropped her phone back into her purse.

“However,” she seemed to deflate now, “I don’t know how to stop him. I’ve already canceled my bank card and that didn’t stop him. I was ready to sue that good-for-nothing but,” she pulled another stack of papers out, smoothing her hands over the wrinkles. “Well, I went to one clerk at the courthouse

and she said that they didn't do civil actions. I went to another clerk and he said I was at the wrong office again, but without any explanation." She shook her head. "I don't know where to file these claims so that I can stop that boy from stealing my money!"

Josh nodded and reached for the documents. "May I?" he asked before taking them.

He laid the papers down after scanning through them. "Ms. Bethel, I hate to tell you this, but I don't think this is a court issue. This is a job for the police. If you want to go forward, they'll arrest your son and put him in jail. He'll be charged with grand larceny and identity theft. Those are hefty charges."

Marjorie sighed. She contemplated that statement for a long moment, then nodded her head firmly. "I think that might be best for him. He's gotten out of control." Her face crumpled as she looked up at Josh. "I think he might be abusing his wife too."

"What makes you think that?" he asked, his muscles tightening. That's when Marni reached out, putting a gentle hand on his forearm. Immediately, Josh's body began to relax. Marni's touch was a balm to his sudden outrage.

Marjorie sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I was at their house recently and I saw a bruise on Janet's shoulder." There was a pause, then her eyes hardened. "Janet isn't an idiot. But my son...he's..." She shook her head, not willing to put it into words.

Josh spoke into the silence. "Why don't I walk you over to the police station? I can introduce you to the sheriff and he can take your statement. From there, they will explain what the next steps are." He pulled a card out of his pocket, handing it to her. "Here is my card. I will stay with you through this visit, but if something comes up in the future and you need help, no matter what time of the day or night, call me, okay?"

Marjorie stared at the card, then lifted her eyes up. They were a bit teary but she blinked the tears back. "Thank

you,” she whispered. “I didn’t think anyone would listen to me. Or believe me. So often, old people like me are brushed aside. Everyone assumes that we’re senile. Most of the time, we just don’t understand technology, but that doesn’t make us stupid.”

Marni clasped the other woman’s hand. “You’re not stupid, Marjorie. Your son is taking advantage of you and we’re going to help you stop him, okay?”

Marjorie nodded and finished the last of her coffee. “Well, I want to thank both of you for your help.” She beamed at Marni. “You’re a wonderful person for seeing my pain and coming to help me. You’re both wonderful! I hope both of you have a long and happy marriage, just like me and my Jim!” With that, she stood and started toward the sheriff’s station, unaware of the shocked glance between the two she’d left behind.

“I’d better...” Josh said, nodding towards the quickly departing Marjorie.

“Yes!” Marni gasped, her cheeks turning a painful shade of red. “She needs your help!”

Josh stood up and grabbed his coat, glanced at Marni then pulled the coat over his impressive shoulders. A moment later, he eyed the full cup of coffee in front of her. “Did you make that coffee?” he asked.

Marni glanced down at her untouched coffee from the cafeteria. “No. It’s awful. I bought it—”

“Good,” he said, interrupting her as he grabbed the coffee and hurried after Marjorie.

Marni opened her mouth to warn him again, but he was already too far away. “He’ll figure it out,” she muttered.

Chapter 7

The storm wasn't predicted. Josh woke up to the rumble of thunder off in the distance. Looking around, he realized that he'd fallen asleep on his sofa again. Damn.

Stretching sore muscles, he looked around, wondering where he'd left off. Oh, right. The contract for his client. He rubbed his neck, trying to ease the knot from sleeping on the less than comfortable couch. He considered the thought of getting a new sofa, one that would be more comfortable when he fell asleep on it. The decorator he'd hired to style this place had raved about the sofa and the quality and blah blah blah. All he knew was that it was a torture trap if one fell asleep.

The thunder rumbled again, closer and louder this time. Was it going to rain? Or snow? Either wasn't good. The temperatures today had gone above freezing, barely, but rain meant that it would freeze on the streets.

Maybe it was a good thing that he'd fallen asleep here at the office. Again.

A cry echoed through the darkness. Josh froze, but the only sound he heard was the ticking of that damn clock. He absolutely hated that clock. Another decorator "find", he remembered. The clock had a marble base and ridiculous looking horses flanking the clock face. He had to remember to wind the blasted thing every morning. What was wrong with technology?

Oh, right! It didn't mesh with the "feel" of the décor.

At the time, he'd agreed with the decorator's suggestion to go with antique décor. It definitely suited the style of the building's architecture. But it wasn't comfortable. He'd put his foot down when she'd suggested a prissy desk for his office. That was the reason Marni sat at the prissy desk.

It fit her though. She had a sort of boho charm to her, even though she tried to hide it with thrift store outfits. Some of her outfits looked amazing and others...well, missed the mark completely. She kept trying, though. And that was the

important thing. No, the important thing was that she was smart and damn good at her job.

Another cry came through the night air and he froze. What the hell was that?

He walked to the back of the house and peered out into the backyard, searching for a cat or maybe a racoon. Nothing. Not even rain. The storm was getting closer though. He could feel it in his bones. Glancing at the second story windows where he knew Marni was sleeping, he wondered if she was the reason he felt so...out of sorts. He thought about Marni all the time. Returning to his office, he wondered what she was wearing. When he left for the night, he knew she went upstairs to study. What did she study in? He pictured her in a cute little nighty with satin straps and a flirty skirt that didn't quite cover her pert butt.

Realistically, she probably wore oversized sweat pants and a massive sweater, but even that was enticing to him lately.

She strutted around in his office in those cute, short skirts and tight tops, looking adorable and absolutely delectable. The woman couldn't make coffee to save her life, she collected wounded souls like baseball cards, and she was driving him crazy! He should be in Luxemburg right now, helping his client personally. Instead, he was sitting in his office, sleeping on that torturous sofa, just because he wanted to be close to her. The thought of leaving her alone made his stomach ache and he couldn't stand the thought of not seeing her every day, even if it meant losing his mind due to unfulfilled lust.

The cry came again and he looked wildly around, but the booming thunder momentarily deafened him. Then he heard it again, this time louder.

"Marni!" he breathed and was halfway up the stairs before he finished saying her name.

Heart thudding, he knocked on her door. "Marni! Open the door! Are you okay?"

He shoved his hand into his pocket, coming up with the keys to her apartment door. "I'm coming inside, Marni! Call out to me if you're okay and you don't want me to come in."

Nothing. He shoved the key into the lock and pushed the door open.

Her apartment was completely dark. She didn't have any nightlights. He didn't either, but he didn't cry out in the night during thunderstorms.

Moving carefully through the apartment, he made straight for the bedroom. But Marni wasn't on the bed. Looking around, squinting to see through the darkness, he spotted her. She'd curled up into a ball in a corner, face hidden against her knees. The space was about as far away from the windows as possible.

Immediately, his chest ached. Rushing over to her, he knelt down, trying to see into her face. "Marni, are you okay?" That was a stupid question since she quite obviously was not okay. She was curled up in a ball, shaking like a leaf, and trying to ward off some unseen evil! "How can I help?"

Her fingers were clenched in those glorious red locks, her fingernails digging into her scalp. "I'll be fine," she whispered, curling herself into a tighter ball. "I'll be fine!"

The thunder rumbled again, louder and accompanied by a flash of lightning, illuminating the room for just a moment. That was all the light he needed to know that Marni was not "fine". Not even close to being fine.

"Hell!" he grumbled softly. He scooped her up and carried her over to the bed. He stretched out beside her, wrapped blankets around her, stuffed a few pillows behind his back, and cradled her against his chest.

"I'm fine," she murmured, but the pale, shaking woman didn't even try to pull away. She leaned into him, flattening her palms against his chest, and snuggling her cheek into the curve of his neck.

He tightened his grip around her, rocking her gently. He whispered assurances as he listened to the increasingly loud thunder. Marni jumped with every clap of thunder, so he stroked her back, desperately trying not to think about the skimpy tee shirt and tiny pair of pink panties she was wearing. Oh, what he wouldn't give for a nice, thick robe right now. Or a coat and mittens so he couldn't feel her small hands against his chest. Even better, he'd love to tear his shirt off so that those fingers were pressing against his bare skin. Then he could kiss and distract her. He could go through each of the fantasies he'd had with her as the starring role. Every damn one of them!

"Tell me about your family," he ordered, stroking her back again. He tightened the blanket, ensuring that she was completely protected. Why the hell was it so cold in here?

"I only have a sister now," she began, her voice low and fragile.

Another flash of lightning lit up the room and Josh tightened his arms around her as she hid her face against his chest. "What's her name and what is she like?"

Marni tensed, doing her best to fight her fear.

"Marni, what's your sister's name?" he repeated in a firmer tone.

"Maxine!" she burst out. "Her name is Maxine and she's amazing! She's a computer programmer that works on projects I will never be able to understand, she owns her own home completely, and she's just...perfect!" The thunder rumbled, louder than ever and Marni cringed, but she had managed to stop shaking.

"Where does she live?"

"In New Mexico," she whispered, then cleared her throat. "She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico and she's smart, so much prettier than me, and she has the perfect life."

"How often do you talk with her?"

There was a long silence, so Josh hugged her more tightly. Marni shook her head. "I don't."

Don't what? Don't talk to her sister? That didn't make any sense. "What do you mean? Is your sister mean to you?"

Marni shook her head. Since her nose was pressed against his neck, he felt the movement all the way down to his toes. "The opposite." There was another long silence. Josh wondered if she was finally going to tell him. After several moments, she took a deep breath and continued. "After our parents died, she saved us. She petitioned the courts to let her become my legal guardian. I was a complete and total brat!"

Josh wanted to ease the pain he could feel vibrating through her slender body. "Why were you a brat?" he prompted.

She sighed and tucked her head under his chin. He could feel her relaxing slightly. "I was so angry and terrified after our parents were killed that I couldn't think about how scared she must have been. I made her life a living hell. That's why I left, so that she didn't have to deal with me anymore."

He thought about that for a moment, not really understanding. "How do you know what your sister is doing if you don't talk to her?"

Another pause, but he waited patiently this time, knowing that Marni would tell him. "We text. And email. I send her postcards whenever I visit a new place." She sighed, snuggling against him more completely. "Plus, I keep tabs on her. She's so brilliant that I can follow her career by reading about her in the news." The thunder boomed outside, but she was distracted enough to not react. "I'm too ashamed of my behavior to talk to her. And too afraid that I'll say something to hurt her. So I text her so I can protect her. And I let her know where I am by sending her the postcards."

"Protect her from what?"

"Me." She sighed when the thunder clapped. "I'm trying to get my life back together, Josh. I finished two semesters of law school back in Arizona. I've registered for classes next semester at Penn State." She sighed and he hoped that she wasn't aware of the impact her wiggling and soft,

sweet sighs were having on him. “I want to be better before I contact her, so that she’ll have something to be proud of.”

“You don’t think your sister would be proud of you right now?”

Marni snorted. “I’ve led the life of a vagabond for the past several years. I’ve never settled down anywhere. I’ve flitted from one city to the next, one festival and fun time to the next.” She wiggled again and he ground his teeth to control his reaction. “I want her to be proud of me.”

“Tell me you’re not becoming a lawyer just to make your sister proud of you,” he said when he was able to speak again.

She laughed and he loved the sound. Too much!

“No. I want to be a lawyer so I can help people.” She sighed. “I won’t be rich like you, but I don’t need much money.” She paused, her nose brushing against his neck again. “I just need a purple apartment, excellent coffee, and good wine.” She started to relax a bit more and Josh realized that she was drifting off. “And chocolate,” she muttered. “I have a horrible sweet tooth.”

He’d noticed. The woman dumped several teaspoons of sugar into her coffee every morning. It was probably the only way she could drink the vile stuff. How could she mess up coffee so badly? He shifted the pillows behind him, the thunder softening as the storm moved on. Coffee could be brewed too strong or too weak. But he didn’t understand how one could brew it so that it wasn’t drinkable.

Josh smiled at the thought. He’d watch her make the coffee next time. He’d figure it out because it really was quite horrible! His eyes closed and he promised himself that he’d hold her for just another moment, just until she was truly asleep, then he’d slip away and head home. Just another moment, he vowed.

Chapter 8

The storm! Dear heaven, the storm had been horrible last night!

Marni's eyes popped open and she looked around. She felt warm. Much warmer than she'd expected. Safe? Yes, she also felt oddly safe.

She'd always hated storms, the thunder reminding her of a gunshot. Her parents had been shot and she'd always hated the sound. Thunder, storms...her love of the intensity of summer storms had been destroyed after her parents' death.

But she was fine. Josh had come to her last night. He'd held her and she'd felt safe for the first time in so long!

As those two realizations subsided, other sensations hit her. There was a big, strong hand cupping her breast. And a heavy log draped over her waist? Nope, arm. Not a log. It was thick enough, muscular enough to be a log. But still an arm.

Josh!

Memories from last night came flooding back and she remembered Josh had come to her rescue last night during the storm! He'd been so sweet, kind, and gentle.

She couldn't hold back a moan when his hand moved! This was very bad. Seriously bad! Josh must have fallen asleep after helping her last night. He probably had no idea who he was holding in his arms. It was going to be so embarrassing when he woke up and realized it was her. Marni knew he didn't like her. He'd been so sweet last night, but she knew she made his life much more complicated than he preferred.

The chest against her back wasn't the only thing that was hard, she suddenly realized. There were...other parts... that were similarly...unyielding. Marni had to fight the urge to press her bottom against that other part of him. She bit her lip to stop herself from reacting when those fingers brushed over her already stiff nipple.

Obviously, he was still asleep. Marni should get up. She should slip out of his arms and jump into the shower before he truly woke up.

Instead, she closed her eyes, unconsciously pressing back ever so slightly against that erection. He felt so good! Another moment wouldn't hurt. He was still asleep, after all. He'd never know how much she'd enjoyed....

Holy...! He pinched her nipple! She couldn't stifle her gasp as intense pleasure washed over her. She grabbed his hand, not sure if she meant for him to stop ...or silently plead for him to do it again.

He did it again, then rubbed the rough pad of his thumb against the overly sensitive tip.

"If you want me to stop, just say so," his deep, husky voice came from behind her. She couldn't stop the moan of pleasure that followed. It came out against her will even as her body tightened, arched against him, her bottom grinding against his throbbing shaft.

"Don't. Stop!" she forced out, reaching behind her to touch him, only to grab his shirt.

Josh couldn't believe this was happening. He should pull away and give her some space. But she pressed against him again and he lost his ability to think. Rolling her over, he shifted until she faced him, and pulled that ridiculously thin tee shirt up and over her head. When he looked down, her breasts, full and ripe, the tips pouted up at him. He couldn't resist the need to taste them.

Perfection! She was so delicious and every time she moved, he sank a bit further into the whirlwind of passion she aroused in him. Every time she arched into his mouth or her fingers sifted through his hair, he was further intoxicated. Those soft, sweet legs of hers wrapped around his waist, her hips cradling him perfectly. He popped the buttons off his shirt in his hurry to remove any and all barriers between her fingers and his skin.

“Touch me,” he groaned, guiding her hand so that it was against his chest. “Damn, it Marni, touch me! I’ve wondered what it would feel like to have your hands on me more often than you can imagine!”

He saw the startled look in her green eyes, followed by desire intense enough to match his own. He heard a groan as her fingers explored his chest and knew that he’d gone to heaven.

He nearly forgot how to breathe when her hands moved lower, her tempting fingers deftly working the button and zipper on his slacks. She shoved the slacks down, growling with frustration when her fingers encountered his boxers and then slid beneath them. Josh froze as those wandering fingers wrapped around his shaft, stroking him, her thumb stroking over the top and around the edge, just below the edge, and...!

“I can’t take anymore,” he growled and took her hands, pinning them over her head. With his free hand, he ripped those pink panties off, grabbed protection – rolling it on with one hand- and...slid into the hottest, slickest, most incredible sensation he’d ever experienced. Filling her up, he gazed down into her eyes, watching those green depths shimmer with desire. It was perfect...and not enough. She arched into him, taking him deeper into her body. Marni wrenched her hands away, then plastered one on his shoulder and the other on his hip, digging her nails into his skin gently.

“Move!” she ordered.

Josh was normally the type who preferred to give the commands, but in this case, he’d forgive her since he was completely on board with her direction.

Slowly at first, he thrust in her heat, moving, sliding against her, gritting his teeth as her inner muscles clenched around him.

“Please Josh,” she whispered, and added in a little wiggle, just to make his brain explode.

Sliding deeply into her heat, he pulled almost all the way out, watching as her mouth opened, then thrusting into her, only to repeat the process, shifting his hips until he knew that he was hitting that nub. Then he released any remaining particle of control and let loose, pounding into her. Watching the expressions on her gorgeous face, seeing those red locks spread out over the white pillow, just like he'd fantasized, made his head spin.

He gave her as much pleasure as possible as her fingers dove into his hair. He loved that! His thrusts came faster now and he felt her body tighten. He reached down, using his thumb to rub over that nub and that little bit of additional friction was all it took to send her over the edge. She clung to him as she cried out, her body throbbing around his shaft as he thrust harder, his own climax coming hard and fast and blowing his mind with the intensity.

When it was all over, he froze, gazing down at her. She had a dreamy smile on her features as her eyes drifted closed. Josh collapsed against her. He couldn't move. He knew he was heavy, and he was so much bigger than her, but he couldn't move.

Marni wrapped her arms around Josh's neck, pulling him closer. He felt so good, the weight of him and the warmth of his skin against hers was intoxicating. This had been a mistake, but oh, what a glorious, amazing, wonderful, mind-blowing mistake!

She wanted to do it all over again.

Marni sifted her hands through his hair, amazed at how soft it was. When he lifted his head, eyes closed, and pressed his head into her hands, she couldn't stop the smile.

"You're a very sensual creature," she told him.

Unfortunately, movement caused him to slide off her to the side, pulling out and settling next to her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in to spoon, kissing her bare shoulder. The soothing comfort of his tall, muscular body wrapped around her was...delicious.

Then a thought popped into her head. “Josh,” she began hesitantly, and he immediately lifted his head to look at her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stroking her back soothingly.

She bit her lip, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Was this...,” she paused and lowered her head so that her chin was resting on her open palm that was flat against his chest.

“Talk to me, Marni,” he encouraged, his hands moving to her hair, brushing it back out of her eyes so that it draped over her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated for a long moment and looked directly into his blue eyes. “Was this about last night? Because I was such a mess during the thunderstorm?”

For a long moment, Josh could only stare at her. She was worried this was a pity lay? He threw back his head, laughing wildly at the insane possibility. When she took umbrage at his amusement, he pulled her closer, pressing his mouth to her shoulder as he tried to quiet his laughter.

When his amusement had faded a little, he looked down at her again. “No, this morning had absolutely nothing to do with last night, Marni. You were scared last night. I helped you through it. But last night and this morning, they are two different episodes. Two very different feelings.” He sifted his hands through her hair. He couldn’t seem to stop touching her. She was fire and ice. Her red hair was like fire but her skin was so pale and delicate. So perfectly unblemished, except for her shoulders and forearms, where he could finally see a light smattering of freckles.

“Then, what *was* this about?”

He sighed and pulled her closer, not satisfied until she was draped over him. “This,” he emphasized by patting her butt, “was all about you prancing around my office, looking delectable for the past...too long.”

She looked indignant for a moment. “I don’t prance!” she growled.

He chuckled. "I know you don't do it intentionally." He stroked her hair gently. "I know I've been obnoxious, Marni. It's just that I was attracted to you from the first second you walked into my office. You captured my fascination immediately and I didn't know what to do about it."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Is that why you were such a jerk to me during the interview?"

He laughed. "Yeah. I was trying to find a way to exclude you. And yet, you answered every question perfectly." His hand slid down her back. "You are an extremely good assistant, Marni. And I think that you'll be a formidable attorney." He stroked her cheek with his finger. "But...don't do it to impress your sister."

She stiffened, those enormous, green eyes shimmering in the morning sunshine. "I shouldn't have told you about Max."

The side of his mouth quirked. "I'm glad that you did. It helped me to understand you better."

She folded her hands over his chest, resting her chin on them. "What about you? After last night, you know my darkest, most painful memories, as well as my motivation. Maxine is one of the most amazing women I know and I count myself lucky to have her for my sister." She tilted her head slightly. "But what about you? What makes you who you are today?"

He shrugged and shoved a pillow behind his head. "I don't have any great revelations in my background. I knew that I wanted to be a lawyer since I was in about fifth or sixth grade. I remember arguing with my history teacher in sixth grade." He smiled at the memory. "There was a question on one of the standardized tests, the kind that everyone has to take at the end of the year?" When she nodded, he continued. "The question was ambiguous and I got it wrong on the test. I argued that it wasn't a clear question and the way it was phrased, the answer I gave was accurate."

She laughed, thinking he was adorable in a manly, intimidating sort of way.

“What was the result?”

He shrugged again, running his hands through her hair. “The teacher was so irritated, he gave me an extra ten points just to shut me up.”

She smiled. “And were you satisfied?”

“No. The man tried to placate me. I was insulted.”

Marni laughed because he didn’t look insulted. He looked...hot!

“What did you do?”

He shrugged again and the gesture tilted her slightly because he was so muscular.

“I forced my mother to take me to a school board meeting. They allowed me to argue my point.”

She grinned. “What happened at the school board meeting?”

He sighed and shifted their bodies so that he was once again braced over top of her. “Well, they told me that I made an excellent point and referred me to the state board of education. After months of waiting, the school board agreed that the question was ambiguous and they would change it for future students.”

She laughed, gently dragging her nails down his chest. “So, you won?”

“Yeah, but I was irritated by the way that everyone talked down at me. So I decided to become someone so powerful that no one could ever patronize me again.”

“But you were just a kid.”

“I was a kid who was *right*,” he corrected, and then leaned back, admiring her breasts. “And you are a beautiful, intelligent woman. Now I know how the school board felt.”

She grabbed his head before he could nip at her breast. “What does that mean?”

He grinned mischievously. “It means that just as I drove the school board crazy with my comments, you have been driving me wild since you walked into my office. And now,” he grabbed her wrists and pinned them over her head, “I’m going to make you pay for every moment of utterly distracting enticement.”

Marni tried to laugh, but it turned into a moan as his mouth found her breast. She loved when his tongue did that thing and his hands...yes, his hands were nothing short of diabolical.

A long time later, they stepped out of the shower and she peered at him over her shoulder. “You don’t have any clean clothes.”

He chuckled. “Actually, I sleep here at the office often enough that I’ve learned to keep extra clothes in the apartment across the hallway.” He pulled her into his arms, and kissed her lingeringly before releasing her and walked out of the apartment wearing only a towel.

Marni followed him across the hall into the other apartment. The door wasn’t even locked. “I always wondered if someone lived here.”

“It’s convenient,” he explained, grabbing a suit and dress shirt from the closet. She returned to her apartment, pulling on a pair of jeans and a sweater. It was Saturday and she wasn’t sure how she was going to spend her day. She’d love to spend it with Josh, but he probably had plans, hence the suit.

But when he strolled back into her apartment, he was wearing a pair of jeans and a fleece pullover. “What happened to the suit?”

He started to reach for the coffee pot, but hesitated. “I forgot what day it was, so I changed clothes.” He winked at her. “Want to get some breakfast at Luella’s?”

She eyed his jeans, then nodded with approval. “I could cook something for us here,” she offered.

He turned and looked down at her. “Do you cook the same way you make coffee?” he asked.

She blinked, not sure what he meant. “I make great coffee!”

He shuddered. “Let’s go to Luella’s.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the stairs.

Marni followed, but she was curious about his comment. “What’s wrong with my coffee?”

He shook his head and glanced at her. “Marni, you’re a seriously amazing assistant and I’m betting that you’ll be a brilliant litigator. But your coffee making abilities are non-existent.”

She threw her hands in the air with a groan. “Everyone says that! I don’t get it!”

He laughed and pulled her out of the office, handing her a coat. “Trust me, Luella makes a delicious breakfast and she knows how to make a great cup of coffee.”

Marni followed along beside him, trying not to grumble as she mumbled, “But I *know* how to make coffee.”

He chuckled and draped his arm around her shoulders. “You really don’t.”

They arrived at the diner early enough to miss the breakfast rush, grabbing a table right by the front window. The waitress arrived and they ordered eggs, toast, and a side of fresh fruit. But Marni ordered orange juice instead of coffee. “Mine is better.”

Josh didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he asked her more about Maxine and her parents, growing up in New Mexico, and why she’d chosen law school.

“Hey Josh!” a big, burly man called out.

“Jim!” Josh called back, standing to shake the sheriff’s hand. “Where’s Tina and the kids?”

The sheriff's hands rested on his utility belt with his big sheriff's hat tucked under his arm. "Tina has the girls at ballet class with Ms. Topsy this morning and the boys are at hockey practice."

"The girls don't play hockey?" Josh asked.

Jim groaned. "Don't go there! I keep trying to get the girls interested in hockey, but all they want to do is dance."

Josh chuckled. "You love their dance recitals, admit it."

The big, intimidating looking sheriff nodded. "Yeah. I really do." He sighed, then changed the subject. "I just wanted to thank you for the head's up on that landlord issue. The guy was abusing the other tenants as well. I had a talk with him, warned him that we'd be checking in with the tenants more often. We gave the number to the housing authority and reported him to the building inspector as well. We'll take care of them."

"Thanks Jim. I appreciate that, but I'd love to take credit for the head's up, but--"

Josh turned, about to introduce Marni but when he looked for her, all he saw was a streak of red hair flying past him. "Marni?" he called out.

Conversation in the diner halted as they all turned to watch as she literally bolted from the diner.

If Marni hadn't turned away to give Josh and the sheriff some privacy, she wouldn't have seen the guy strike the woman and knock her to the ground. Thankfully, she'd seen the assault and raced out of the diner, unaware of the sound of outrage she'd emitted as she'd shoved through the glass doors.

"Stop it!" she bellowed, running across the still-wet parking lot. It was a warmer than usual January day and last night's rain had helped to melt a lot of the snow. Now, it was a slushy mess, but Marni ignored the icy shards as she rushed over to the woman, placing herself between the man and the woman who was now on her knees, cradling her reddening

cheek. Marni turned to glare up at the man who was practically vibrating with fury. “Don’t you dare hit her again!” Marni hissed.

“I don’t know who you are, lady, but get the hell away from her! This is a private conversation! You have no business interfering.”

Marni wasn’t going to let this scene continue! The poor lady was already on the ground. “You’re not having a conversation, you asshole! You’re committing felony assault! And I won’t let you hit her again!”

“Oh yeah?” the guy growled, his voice dropping into a more lethal pitch. He raised his fist to swing at her, “So, you wanna protect her, huh? Then you can take the—”

Without warning he was wrenched around, his arm bent behind his body as he hit the ground. His arms were bent behind his back as the sheriff slapped on a pair of cuffs.

“You ladies okay?” he asked nonchalantly.

Marni blinked, shocked. One moment, she was bracing for a blow and the next moment, the threat was gone. It took her a moment to figure out what was happening. But then, she felt strong arms lift her up. Then she was pressed against a hard chest as Josh pulled her off of the trembling woman and into his arms.

“Marni, what the hell are you doing to me?” Josh growled, kissing the top of her head.

The handcuffed man pulled away from the sheriff, trying to rush Marni. “That bitch is harassing me and my girlfriend!” the guy yelled, thankfully still restrained. “She had no business getting in the middle of a private conversation. We were just talking!”

Several ladies from the diner came out and helped the other woman up, brushing the snow from her clothing. “Are you okay, Beth?” one of the ladies asked, putting an arm around her. “Why don’t you come inside and have a nice cup of tea? We can put an ice pack on that bruise too. Hopefully we can stop it from becoming too swollen.”

“Luella,” the sheriff called out, “once she’s calmed down, can you bring her down to the station to give us a statement?”

“Sure thing, Jim,” the diner’s owner called back, as she squeezed the woman’s shoulders reassuringly. “Honey, that man is no good for you!”

The ladies rallied around Beth, who had burst into tears for a moment, but was rallying, glaring at her boyfriend over her shoulder as she was herded into the diner. Meanwhile, Jim had shoved the boyfriend into the back of his cruiser and drove off.

That left Marni and Josh alone in the slushy parking lot.

“Don’t *ever* do that to me again,” he growled, then kissed the top of her head again.

Marni pulled back a couple of inches, just enough to look up at him, completely confused. “Don’t do what?”

He sighed, tangling his hands in her red hair. “Don’t ever put yourself in danger like that, Marni. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Danger? She gazed up into his amber eyes. “I didn’t mean to. I just—”

“Ran out without thinking and put yourself in danger.” He sighed and pulled her in close again. “I know it’s only eight o’clock in the morning, but I need a drink!” Instead, he led her back into the diner. Their food was just coming out of the kitchen when they sat down and Josh stared at the food, not sure if he could eat.

He looked across the table at her, trying to make sense of his reaction. He couldn’t be in love with her. That was impossible. They’d only known each other for a short while. Love took time to build. It needed trust and understanding. They needed to build a history together, shared experiences and time to argue and make up.

And yet, looking across the table at the woman who was poking at a strawberry with her fork, he realized he didn’t

want to spend another moment without her.

The idea was too wild to contemplate, so he ignored it. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at him and tried to smile. “I’m not sure, actually. It’s...” she blinked and looked outside again. “Why do men think it’s okay to hit women?”

“I have no idea.”

She stabbed the strawberry again, but didn’t eat it. “I’ve read that abusive men claim the women in their lives just make them too angry. But that’s a bunch of BS, isn’t it?”

He didn’t even hesitate when he replied with a firm, “Yes.”

“I mean, if the man can control his temper around everyone else, if he can keep it together at work, with his boss, with his friends, the wait staff at various restaurants, and at the grocery store, but he can’t control himself with his lady, then that just makes him...” She shook her head. “It makes him pathetic. And he *chooses* to hit her. It’s a choice. He chooses not to hit the other people in his life that anger him, because he knows he needs them to like him. He allows himself to not control himself around his significant other.”

“Yes.” Josh took a sip of his coffee, then carefully set it down. When he looked up at her, his eyes were carefully blank. “And you see the wounded souls in this world, don’t you?”

Marni wasn’t sure she understood his question. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You see them, Marni. The rest of the world just keeps walking, minding their own business. But you *see* them. You see all the people who need help, who just need someone to hear them, to pay attention to their wounds.” He shook his head slightly. “You’re a very special person.”

Marni didn’t know what to say. “No. I’m not special.” She sighed and popped the strawberry in her mouth while she thought about her sister and how much she missed Maxine. “I’m just an ordinary person.”

Josh didn't think so, but didn't argue with her. She *was* special. She might not agree, but she was special to Beth. And Marjorie. And probably dozens of others who had experienced Marni's personal attention.

Yeah, he loved her.

Chapter 9

“I’m going to dance at the festival!” Marni announced, bouncing into Josh’s office. They’d been together for a couple of weeks now and Marni knew that she was completely in love with the man. He was kind and gentle, passionate about the law, determined to save his clients whenever possible, and brilliant at using the law to help people who needed his expertise. He was a generous lover that, even now, made her shiver with need, even as she saw his confused expression. Yeah, she loved him. More than she’d thought possible.

Josh had been reviewing a contract for a client before Marni had made her announcement. But as he stared at her, Marni couldn’t keep still. She was dancing with her excitement and wanted to throw herself into his arms.

“You’re what?” he asked, then pushed back as Marni came around the desk. He reached for her, automatically pulling her onto his lap. It was the end of the work day so no one would disturb them. It was their time. A period of the evening when they talked and shared the news of their day.

Marni looped her arms around his neck, and kissed his cheek loudly. “I tried out to be one of the dancers at the Groundhog festival. I’m going to be on the stage during the festival!”

He stared at her for a moment, then threw back his head, laughing with delight. “That’s awesome!” he said, and hugged her. “I didn’t even know you knew how to sing.”

She waved dismissively before returning her arm to his neck. She knew she had only a limited time with him and wanted to touch him as much as possible as long as their affair lasted. “Oh, singing and dancing are just a few of the various talents that I’ve picked up over the years. I worked at a karaoke bar at one point and, every once in a while, we’d put ourselves into the line-up for the night. Or we’d entertain each other after closing while we cleaned up.”

“And you...like singing?” he asked, his arm tightening around her waist as she leaned into him.

“Yeah. I really do.” She kissed him, smiling at him as her happiness expanded. “I wouldn’t want to make it a career or anything, but I think it would be a hoot to say that I danced at the Groundhog festival. How cool is that?”

He chuckled. “That’s pretty cool,” he confirmed, pulling her closer for a deeper kiss. When he pulled back, she was still beaming. “When do the rehearsals start?”

“Tonight!” she practically sang, too excited to sit still. “Rehearsals are every night from seven o’clock to nine o’clock, and then we’ll have an extra rehearsal next Saturday and Sunday before the festival on Tuesday.”

He leaned back in his chair, holding her close. “Will I get to see you after the rehearsal?”

She grinned, tilting her head slightly. “That depends.”

A dark eyebrow lifted, his lips quirking slightly. “On what?”

“Well...” she drew a lazy circle with her finger on his chest. “I was thinking that I could maybe...” she lifted her green eyes to his face. “Maybe tie you up tonight?”

He blinked at her, stunned for a long moment. Then he threw back his head, laughing as he shook his head. “Not a chance!” he replied. When he had his amusement under control, he added, “But I’d be more than happy to tie *you* up and see what naughty things come to mind.” He nipped at her earlobe. “Maybe if you’re tied up at night, you’ll be too tired to save another soul and add to my pro bono hours.”

She giggled, shivering with delight. “Speaking of pro bono work—” she began, only to yelp when he growled, tossed her over his shoulder and carried her upstairs. A moment later, he dropped her on the bed, grabbing the sash of her robe, twirling the ends of the silky sash around his hands. “Now, what were you saying about being tied up?”

Marni squirmed, more turned on than she’d thought possible. “I can’t remember. Why don’t you remind me?”

His laugh was deep and sexy, causing additional shivers as he contemplated her predicament.

In the end, she discovered that she very much enjoyed being tied to her bed while a handsome lover did wicked things to her! She was truly grateful that no one lived in the apartment across the hallway because her screams of frustration and passion, of release and amazement, were loud! And when she turned the tables on him, tying Josh's hands over his head so that she could do equally wicked and amazing things to him, he was just as vehemently loud as she'd been.

Chapter 10

Marni was exhausted, but oddly energized as she stepped onto the bus that would take the performers back to town. The Groundhog Day Festival was over, the rodent prognosticating another six weeks of winter. She would have thought that the letdown after all the excitement leading up to the festival would create an emptiness inside of her. However, she still felt...great! Probably because she was heading home to Josh. Marni smiled, just thinking about him. Goodness, she loved him! He challenged her and made her laugh. He was passionate and wonderful, kind and generous and...! She loved him.

“Good job, Marni!” several of the other “Philettes” called out as they found their own seats on the small bus.

Marni pulled herself back to the present and smiled her thanks. “You too!” she replied.

“Ooh, it’s so warm in here!” someone exclaimed. Everyone was wrapped up in coats now that “big reveal” was over.

Marni snuggled down into her coat, wondering how Josh was doing. He’d had to fly out to New York a few days ago to help a client, but he’d promised to be back in time to see at least the last part of their performance.

“I can’t wait to dig into a whole stack of pancakes!” someone exclaimed, referring to the free pancake breakfast that awaited everyone back in town.

Marni thought that a stack of pancakes would be nice, but a hug from Josh would be even better.

Was she getting too emotionally involved with him? Probably. But Marni didn’t know how to stop herself from falling deeper in love. Yes, he was the first man who had shown her love since her parents had passed away. But there was so much more to what she felt for him. It was...she contemplated that as the bus started the meandering drive back to town.

She'd had boyfriends over the years. But none had ever touched her heart the way Josh had. She'd had great friends too. But Josh...she...loved him. Yes, it was so much more than just passion. She loved him.

"Finally!" someone called out.

Looking around, Marni was surprised to find that they were already back at the community center.

They joked and laughed about how hungry they were, and how hopped up on coffee everyone was. After spending hours performing on the stage, everyone had needed the caffeine to get through the night. But the big event was over for the year. Marni hoped that she could do this again next year.

She froze and someone bumped into her. "So sorry!" she called out to Melanie.

The woman smiled and waved. "No worries." Melanie was about to pass by, but paused, frowning. "Are you okay, Marni?"

The question didn't register immediately. It wasn't until Melanie put a hand on her arm that Marni reminded herself to smile and nod.

Everyone bustled into the community center, eager for food and a few hours of sleep. They'd all been up since before midnight and were exhausted now. But Marni couldn't stop thinking about those two words. Next year? When had she ever thought about being in the same place from one year to the next?

Never, she realized. Ever since the death of her parents, Marni had moved from place to place, running away from the fear of losing someone else that she loved and shame over the way she'd treated Maxine all those years ago. Never had she ever allowed herself to love anyone...until Josh. And never had she contemplated a future, other than anticipation of the next town, the next job, the next...whatever. She'd graduated from high school early just so that she could escape

from the ever present pain of living in that house without her parents. And to escape from her sister's strict rules.

Too late, Marnie had realized that those rules were Maxine's way of protecting her. Now she understood, but years ago, right after their parents' passing, Marnie had resented her older sister.

Now she wanted nothing more than to call Maxine and tell her about the wild performance she'd just given. The groundhog and the "Phillettes" and...yes, she wanted to tell Max about Josh. For the first time, Marnie wanted to ask Max for advice.

Stepping into the community center, she collected her backpack. Flinging it over her shoulder, she turned, more than ready to head out so she could find Josh.

"Marni?"

Marnie turned, smiling as soon as she saw Jim coming towards her. "Hey, Sheriff!" Then she took in his serious expression. "Is everything okay with Mindy? Is her son okay?"

Jim sighed, pushing his hat back on his head. "Both Mindy and Hector are fine," he replied, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, his other hand resting on his equipment belt. "Do you know where Josh is?"

Marnie looked around and shrugged, trying to feign casualness despite her desire to see Josh soon. "He was in New York with a client yesterday but he was supposed to fly back today. I was supposed to meet him back here. Do you need him?"

Jim shifted his weight uneasily. Something was obviously wrong. Marnie stepped closer. "Jim, what's going on? Is something wrong? What can I do to help?"

Jim rubbed his forehead. "I need to speak with Josh. But..."

Marnie's concern ramped up several notches. "It's okay. I can send a message to him. He'll be here as soon as

he can.” She put a hand to his arm. “You know Josh. He’s always able to fix it, whatever is wrong.”

Jim sighed heavily. “I certainly hope so. For your sake.”

Marni’s eyes shifted, changing to confusion. “For my sake?”

He lowered his voice, but his eyes were serious as he said, “Marni Kline, I am serving a warrant for your arrest from Phoenix, Arizona.” He pulled his handcuffs out and Marni felt a group of people turn to watch. Jim leaned forward. “Don’t say a word until Josh gets here!”

In her confusion, she hadn’t been paying attention to Jim’s movements. But then, Marni felt the cold metal of the handcuffs clasp around her wrists. Jim didn’t tighten the cuffs very well. Marni could easily have slipped out of the handcuffs. But she didn’t. Instead, she looked up at Jim with confused eyes, trying to figure out if the man was teasing.

“Marni!” a familiar, but unexpected, voice called out.

Marni turned just in time to see Maxine rushing into the community center, her bright red curls dancing around her gorgeous features. Maxine had always been the prettier, smarter of the two of them. For so long, Marni had resented her older sister, blaming her for their parents’ death as well as a whole host of other issues. It wasn’t until the past few years that Marni had come to realize that her older sister had only been doing what she’d thought best. Marni had finally grasped that Maxine had been just as terrified as Marni after their parents’ murder. Maxine could have abandoned Marni, gone off to college, and continued on with her life. But Maxine had put her life on hold for four years, attending college classes at night while working days and nights to put food on the table for them. Marni had been an obnoxious and resentful teenager to a sister that had done nothing but try to help.

Ever since that realization, Marni had tried to become worthy of her sister’s love. She’d tried to mold herself into someone that Maxine could be proud of.

So it was extra humiliating that Maxine was here, witnessing her arrest, just when Marni was finally figuring out her life.

For a brief moment, Marni considered turning away, wanting to hide this moment of humiliation from her brilliant, wonderful sister. But her sudden terror was overwhelming. So instead, she looked to her sister in the growing crowd of gawkers. “Max!” she called out, needing her sister now more than ever. “I don’t understand!”

Maxine’s beautiful features smoothed into a reassuring smile. “It’s just a misunderstanding,” she yelled back, but a deputy held her back. “I’m here for you Marni!” she called out. Those words, yelled across the space as if nothing in the world mattered except the two of them. “I’ll help get this mistake cleared up!”

Marni’s panic eased somewhat. She nodded, believing Max would fix everything. Max had always been the capable one. It had only been Marni, her aching heart and angry soul that had ruined their relationship. Max had tried calling Marni over the years. And what had Marni done in return? She’d sent stupid post cards and text messages!

She’d wanted to get to a positive place in her life so Maxine could be proud of her. But a freaking post card? Maxine deserved better! She deserved so much more than Marni’s callous treatment.

She turned to Jim, her heart pounding frantically against her ribs. “Why am I being arrested?” she asked, needing more information.

There was a commotion behind her and Phyllis called out, “Sheriff, you have the wrong person!” Marni twisted around even as Jim nudged her gently towards the back door. Her heart soared when she spotted one of the festival volunteers about to shove one of the other deputies out of the way as her anger soared. Phyllis called out again, but Marni was too absorbed in her current panic to hear what she said.

Jim said something to Phyllis and Marni’s mind started working again. Josh! Josh would know what to do.

She turned again. “Max!” she yelled, waiting until Maxine focused on her. “Max, call Josh Alexander,” she called back, enunciating her words carefully, praying that Max understood. “He’s my boss, but also...” she paused and glanced around, noticing that the other townspeople were watching. Ignoring them, she focused only on Max. “He’s a very good lawyer. Call him okay?” she pleaded, gripping the handcuffs so they wouldn’t fall off and embarrass Jim. “Tell him what’s going on!”

Marni waited only long enough for Maxine to nod her understanding before she allowed Jim to lead her out of the community center. He was very gentle when he helped Marni settle into the back of the sheriff’s cruiser, but Marni was still terrified. She was under arrest! For what? She thought back to the speeding ticket. That was the only thing she could think of that she’d done wrong. That horrible speeding ticket. She’d only been going ten miles over the speed limit, so why had the judge, that despicable, disgusting, scrawny judge, said she’d been going thirty miles over?

That had to be the problem. Then she thought about Josh. He’d figure this out. He’d fix this! And Maxine was here. Maxine was so smart, she’d help get this all cleared up.

Josh heard the phone ring and eased his foot off the accelerator. He’d been speeding, hurrying to get back to Marni. What was it about her that was so...amazing? Granted, she had the biggest heart he’d ever known. She could, and would, find the lost souls in any group. He adored her for that. He also loved that she trusted him enough to bring those lost souls to him for help. Hell, Marni reminded him of why he’d joined the legal profession. He’d become so caught up in billing hours and demanding justice for his clients, his rich clients, that he’d forgotten about the people that *really* mattered. He considered his latest work and the total in his bank account. He had enough money in the bank and in investments that he’d never have to work another day in his life unless he wanted to.

He wondered what Marni would think if he stopped working for paying clients and dedicated his efforts to helping

those who couldn't afford a lawyer like him. The thought send a jolt of joy through his system. Yes, he'd moved to Punxsutawney to get away from the law firm pressures. But too many of his previous clients had followed him. So he'd never really gotten away from the mad rush of increasing the billing hours.

It was time, he thought. Time to do what he really loved. He wanted to defend people who truly needed his help. Not rich, pathetic clients who got themselves into a stupid situation due to their own profligate, idiotic choices.

Marni had shown him the way. She'd brought him back to the world of the living by bringing him clients that needed his help.

He loved her. She was...everything he wanted to be! She was glorious, he realized. Amazingly glorious.

His cell phone rang and this time, it was a number he recognized. Marni's phone.

"Hello?" he answered, exiting the highway. Home was less than five minutes away.

A strange, male voice spoke. "Mr. Alexander, this is Dash Phillips. We're heading over to the sheriff's office to help with Marni Kli--"

"Is Marni trying to save another lost soul?" he asked, amusement lacing his tone.

"This is Maxine, Marni's sister," a second voice interrupted. "And no. She's been arrested."

Everything inside of Josh turned to ice. Arrested? What the hell? Marni was arrested? "When?" He demanded, pressing his foot down on the accelerator. The streets were busy with tourists and he cursed himself for not arriving before Marni had finished her performance. But he'd apologize later. Right now, he had to figure out what the hell was going on! "What are the charges?"

"Just now and murder. We're heading to the sheriff's station now. Can you-?"

“I’m on my way. Who the hell do they think Marni murdered? I can’t believe that Jim would arrest Marni! What the hell is he thinking?” He muttered several expletives. “Marni couldn’t even kill a spider, much less commit murder.”

“These charges are related to Arizona,” Maxine explained. “Her former roommate, a guy by the name of Jimmy Manugo, was found dead a few weeks ago. A couple of detectives contacted me last week, asking me if I knew where Marni was. At that point, she was only a person of interest.”

“What changed?”

The three of them were silent until a text message chimed. “This is Dash Phillips again. I have one of my investigators on the line. I’m going to conference him in. He’ll have more information.” There was a silence, then Dash came back. “Everyone on the line?”

“I’m here,” Dash snarled, trying to maneuver around a slow moving vehicle. Then a new voice spoke up. “Mark here. I think it’s the judge,” he commented.

Josh’s eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

Mark’s sigh echoed through the phone line. “Well, it’s nothing official. I also gave this information to Tim, another investigator, for confirmation, so take what I’m telling you now with a grain of salt.”

“Got it. Give us the information and we’ll use it carefully,” Dash confirmed.

“Well, there are rumors, but no evidence, that the judge who signed the arrest warrant for Marni Kline has been...uh...using his position of power to coerce women into performing...sexual favors.”

Maxine’s gasp had her hands flying to cover her mouth. “Oh Marni!” she whispered.

“Go on,” Josh urged, feeling about ready to commit murder himself. “How did your investigators hear about the accusations? And are they just angry people who lost during a trial in front of the judge?”

“Well, yes and no,” Mark continued. “Yes, all of the rumors are from women who have complained about the judge. Yes, they all had cases in front of the judge, but from what I’ve been able to gather so far, those cases were dropped by the police officers after an initial hearing.”

Josh’s hands curled into fists. “In other words, the judge told these women that if they didn’t perform sexual favors for him, then they’d face higher legal penalties in his courtroom. But after the sexual favors were performed, the judge dismissed the cases?”

Mark grumbled. “That seems to be the situation. But again, we don’t have any proof.”

Josh couldn’t hold still. The idea of some judge manipulating Marni...it made his stomach twist with revulsion.

“What’s the judge’s name?” he asked, his voice low and controlled. But everyone on the phone call understood the control that it took to utter the words so carefully.

There was some paper shuffling on the other end of the phone call, then Mark said, “The rumors are about a Judge Henry Endo.”

“I’ll be right back,” Josh snapped. He pulled into the parking lot of the sheriff’s office. He might have dropped his transmission as he parked and turned off the engine too quickly. Then he walked through the parking lot to the front of the sheriff’s station, nearly ripping the door off as he walked inside. Vaguely, he was aware of another redheaded woman and a tall guy that looked vaguely familiar. They walked into the sheriff’s station right behind him, but Josh’s focus was on getting Marni out of here!

It was cold, but nothing could penetrate the cold inside of him, the horror that Marni had been coerced!

“Josh?” Jim called out, startled to see him again so quickly. “What are you-?”

Josh walked right up to the counter separating the sheriff’s office with the public’s access area. “Who signed the

warrant for Marni's arrest?"

Jim shrugged. "I'm not sure. But it's all legal and—"

"I need a name, Jim," Josh interrupted. "I need the name of the judge who signed the warrant!"

Jim finally grasped there was something more going on than a lawyer and friend asking a simple question. By the wild look in Josh's eyes, this was bad.

He picked up the case file he'd just organized on Marni Kline. He opened the file and started to look at the arrest warrant, but the file was snatched from his hands.

"Josh, I'm not sure if—" Jim stopped when Josh snarled.

"It was Judge Endo." Josh handed the file back.

"Is that significant?" Jim asked.

Josh didn't bother to answer. All he said was, "I need to speak with Marni *now*."

Jim didn't hesitate as he pulled his keys off of his utility belt and walked expeditiously to the back where the holding cells were.

Josh followed, searching the cells for Marni. He wanted to bend those metal bars wide just so that he could hold her, comfort her. But he had a job to do. He had to keep his head on straight and get Marni out of here.

"You put her in a separate cell?" Josh asked, noticing that the main holding cell was filled with drunks from the previous night. It smelled like vomit and urine. Meanwhile, Marni was in a cell far away from the others.

"Absolutely," Jim replied. "Something about this didn't feel right," he muttered under his breath. "Care to offer a little insight?"

Josh stared at Marni, who was dozing on the metal bench, her glorious red hair draping over the side, the ends nearly brushing the floor. Her already pale skin was nearly

dead white and she'd wrapped her thin arms around herself, as if she was struggling to keep warm.

"I'll give you more as soon as I speak with Marni. I need some information from her." He paused, pulling his eyes away from Marni for a moment. "But do me a favor?"

Jim pocketed the keys. "Anything."

"Marni got a speeding ticket in Phoenix several weeks ago. Can you speak with the original officer and get more information on the ticket?"

"Sure. What kind of information are you looking for?"

Josh shook his head. "I'm not sure yet. Just...get me the details."

Jim walked off, leaving Josh alone with Marni. This was a pretty major breach of protocol. Marni should be escorted, handcuffed, and led to an interrogation room. She never should have been left alone, even with her lawyer.

Josh appreciated that fact and wasn't going to abuse Jim's trust in him. So he walked into the holding cell and knelt down, carefully touching Marni's arm to wake her up.

She woke with a start, looking wildly around, trying to get her bearings. Then her eyes landed on him. "Josh!" she whispered, throwing her arms around his neck. She was shaking like a leaf as she buried her face against his neck. "I didn't do it! I didn't kill anyone! I swear to you, I didn't!"

"Hush!" he whispered, settling her on his lap as he sat down on the hard metal bench. It was uncomfortable even to sit on and his precious Marni had managed to fall asleep on it. She'd performed all night as a volunteer for the Groundhog Day festival, and this is how the city thanked her for her efforts? He was going to sue the hell out of someone!

Then he remembered why he'd come. "Hey, I need to ask you something." He touched her arms and pulled back, but kept her within the circle of his embrace.

“What’s that?” she asked and his chest ached at the sight of those salty tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Do you know a man named Judge Henry Endo?”

Marni almost fell off his lap in surprise. “He’s vile!” she hissed and backed away from him. “Don’t ever say his name in front of me. Ever!”

Josh stood up, extending his hands, palms out. “So, you’re one of his victims too?”

Marni’s eyes widened. “You...know?”

“I know,” he replied softly, but with a tone that told her that he was angry. On her behalf! “But I need you to tell me what he did to you. I need details.”

Jim came back into the cell, not mentioning that Marni and Josh should be in an interrogation cell.

“I have the information,” he announced, lifting a piece of paper. “According to the officer, she received a speeding ticket for going sixty-five in a fifty-five mile per hour zone.” He rubbed a hand over his head, then shook it as he continued. “But according to another report,” he sighed, obviously confused, “the ticket was actually for going eighty-five in a fifty-five mile per hour zone.”

“He lied!” Marni hissed. “Judge Endo told me that he would have to revoke my license for the speeding ticket.” Her face cleared as she pleaded with Jim. “But you know the car I drive. It’s ancient, Jim. My little rust bucket can barely get up to fifty-five on the highway, and that’s on a good day. There’s no way that my car could go eighty-five miles per hour.”

Jim nodded, looking over at Josh. “She’s right. I’ve seen it,” he replied, then chuckled. “I was wondering when you were going to get her a new one.”

“I ordered a new car for her last week,” Josh replied.

Jim chuckled appreciatively, then nodded. “I figured. So how the hell did a ten mile per hour ticket get ramped up to a thirty-mile per hour ticket, reckless driving, and possible revocation of a driver’s license?”

“That’s Judge Endo,” Marni replied. “I have no idea how he knew I was coming in to pay the speeding ticket, but when I got to the cashier, she told me I couldn’t pay the ticket, that I had to appear in court. She gave me a slip of paper and recommended that I speak to the judge prior to the court date and maybe the judge could help me.”

“So, you went to the judge’s chamber?” Josh asked, his temper rising. He fisted his hands on his hips, pushing his charcoal suit jacket back. “Without a lawyer present?”

She huffed a bit. “Josh, I was a law school student and a bartender. I didn’t have the money for a lawyer back then.”

He shot a glare at her. “Go on.”

“I got to the judge’s chamber and this mousy clerk stared at me through these huge glasses and told me to go on in to speak with the judge. But when I entered his office, he told me that if I didn’t want to have my license revoked, then I’d meet him at an address that he provided for me.”

“Are you serious?” Jim demanded, then looked over at Josh, who was just as horrified.

“Yes. I’m serious,” she replied shortly. “I didn’t go in blind, though. I recorded everything.”

Josh’s hands flew to his hair and he paced around, muttering under his breath. When he turned to look back at her, he nodded. “Go on.”

She looked up at him warily, but focused her attention on Jim. “I went to the address, thinking it was just another cashier from the court. But it was a parking lot. A guy tackled me and put a black hood over my head, then pushed me into a car.”

Now it was Jim’s turn to start muttering curses.

Marni ignored their antics as she continued her story. “I was taken to a house and told to strip off my clothes. The judge would be with me soon.”

“Tell me you didn’t strip!” Josh snarled.

“I didn’t strip,” she assured him.

He sighed, then walked over and pulled her into his arms. “Damn Marni, you’ve gone through hell!”

“There’s more,” she told him.

He froze, pulled away and looked down at her. “Okay, what happened next?”

She leaned her forehead against his chest for a moment, then looked up, and over at Jim. She couldn’t look at Josh right now, but she appreciated his strength so she leaned against him more heavily. “I was recording with one of those button cameras and, when I told him I wasn’t going to take off my clothes and play his kinky games, the judge got really mad. But he wouldn’t say that he’d drop the charges against me in exchange for sex. So I bolted and made my way home.” She sighed and continued. “I got to work that night and, it was busy so I forget about everything. Then that night, my housemate, the guy who owned the house I was renting from, visited me at work. I caught him selling drugs at the bar while I worked.”

“You didn’t know he was a drug dealer before that night?”

She shrugged, still leaning against Josh, but now she couldn’t look at Jim. “I should have put it together. Jimmy was a sweet guy, but he never worked. He’d just bar hop every night, then sleep until noon, play video games on a massive television, and do it all over again the next night.” She shook her head. “I turned a blind eye to everything until it was in my face and I couldn’t keep ignoring it.”

“What did you do?” Jim asked.

She shifted slightly. “I got home from work, packed up my bags, and waited for Mark to come home. I told him that I had to go, told him he was better than just a drug dealer. I promised to come back for his birthday if he would stop selling drugs and do something worthwhile with his life.” She wiped a tear from her cheek and sighed. “I really thought he was going to do it too. I doubt anyone had ever told him that

he was good enough for more.” She looked up at Josh now. “Maxine always told me I was better. She was my biggest cheerleader. No matter what crazy idea I proposed, she told me that I’d be the best at it.”

“She’s worried about you,” Josh told her, smoothing a hand over her back.

Marni laughed softly. “I’m worried about me too!”

He smiled crookedly. It was the first smile since his phone rang.

“So, what happened to the video” he asked her.

She turned to Jim. “Do you have my phone?”

Jim nodded, then left the cell. Josh pulled her closer and some of the ladies in the next holding cell call out, “I need a bit of luvin too, big guy!” There were several cackles and blown kisses, but Marni ignored all of it. Josh was here. Maxine had found her. It was going to be okay!

Jim returned with her whole purse. Marni fished the cell phone out and turned it on, then flipped through the gallery. When she tapped a picture, she then spun the image around so that Josh and Jim could watch it.

There was a choked laugh from Jim when the scrawny judge, completely naked, strolled causally out of a back room. But they turned serious when the man glared and ordered her to strip.

They didn’t comment until the end of the video, which was actually a lot of running and gasping for breath. Marni vowed right then and there that, when she got out of this mess, she was going to start jogging. It was embarrassing how bad she sounded on the video.

“That’s it,” she explained and turned off the image.

“Email that to both of us,” Josh announced. He turned to Jim. “I’m going to find a judge to sign an emergency release, based off of the evidence we have now. Can Marni leave with me?”

Jim shook his head. “She can’t leave, but I can bring her out to the front. I won’t make her stay back here. Not after what I just saw.” He sighed. “Damn it! A freaking judge!”

“He’s nasty,” Marni replied.

“Keep her safe,” Josh replied, then pulled Marni into his arms and kissed her. Hard! When he released her, he gazed down in her face. “I’ll be back. Trust me?”

“Completely!” she told him.

He stared at her for a long moment, then nodded and rushed out of the cell.

Jim chuckled as they watched him disappear out front. “Come on out to the front Marni,” he said, then looked at her apologetically. “I shouldn’t have put you back here anyway. Who knows what bleeding heart story the other ladies,” he jerked his head towards the women in the next cell, “might give you if you’re back here without supervision?”

Marni giggled, but she looked back at the ladies in the other holding cell.

“Don’t even think about it!” Jim warned, taking her arm and tugging her after him.

Chapter 11

Josh snapped a picture of the document, then emailed it to Jim at the sheriff's office. It had taken less than fifteen minutes to find a judge who would sign the emergency release based off the video. On the way, he'd called Dash Phillips and Marni's sister. He explained that Marni would be released soon but she had to remain at the sheriff's department for now. However, she was out of a holding cell.

They were grateful for his help and promised to stay with Marni at the sheriff's office. Since he was heading there himself, his only thought was that they'd better not slow him down. He needed to hold Marni. He needed to feel her and reassure himself that she was safe and unharmed. Jim had done him a favor by holding Marni in a different cell, but he was damn sure that she'd been terrified. The others in the holding cell had the advantage of being numbed by alcohol. But Marni had been working all night at the festival. She'd planned on eating a big pancake breakfast, then sleeping the rest of the morning.

However, he'd have a serious conversation with her about taking an investigation into her own hands with no backup. The images on that video kept flashing through his mind. He shuddered, thinking about what could have happened to her.

He was definitely going to get the FBI involved. From what he could gather, it wasn't just the judge that was using his position of power to coerce women, there had to be others. Someone in the chain must have altered Marni's speeding ticket information. Because she was right, that bucket of rust she drove was the reason she tended to walk most places. He'd ordered a nice, red Mercedes coup for her that was supposed to arrive next week. The small, nineteen sixty-four Volkswagen beetle that she was currently driving should be in a museum. It toddled along well enough, but it was held together by rust and prayer. No way could that pathetic contraption hit eighty-five miles per hour!

Plus, there was the person who drove Marni to the house, the person who had covered her head with the black hood. Yeah, he wanted to take that person down too! That reeked of kidnapping, although probably not. He suspected that the women got into the vehicle “willingly”, even if they were terrified by the monetary or criminal penalties if they didn’t follow instructions.

He stopped listing the number of felons when he pulled into the parking lot of the sheriff’s office. The SUV was still there, but he ignored everything, his mind focused on one thing; getting back to Marni.

As soon as he entered the office, she jumped up from her chair where she’d been sitting and talking with her sister. Marni raced through the wilderness of desks and chairs, and threw herself into his arms.

Josh closed his eyes as he held her, even lifting her up off the floor, and spinning her around. They were in relative privacy so he pulled back only far enough to kiss her. Thoroughly!

When he finally lifted his head, they were both breathing heavily. Good! He loved seeing her like this with her eyes all misty and her body soft against his.

“Marry me,” he muttered.

The startled look in her eyes was amusing, until he sensed she was going to tell him no. So he kissed her again, stopping her rejection.

When he lifted his head this time, he explained, “You love me. I love you. You’re going to become an incredible lawyer and I’m going to need someone to steer me towards the clients that need our expertise the most.” He paused briefly, letting that information sink in. “Marry me, Marni. Let’s figure out this world together.”

As he waited, those fabulous lips curled at the corners. Her eyes sparkled. Her body shifted against his, letting him know that she was fully aware of his body’s response to their kisses. “Yes,” she whispered.

All Josh could do was groan. And kiss her again!

Someone clearing their throat behind Marni interrupted what was turning out to be an excellent engagement kiss and he lifted his head, ready to snarl. But the lovely redhead standing behind Marni wearing a familiar smile forced him to restrain himself.

“I’m so sorry to have to break this up, but Marni needs to sign some documents for the sheriff. And he’s already informed the FBI that the judge needs to be investigated. They’d like to organize a conference call with Marni and her legal representative,” she paused, smiling wider, “and I’m guessing that’s you.” She shifted slightly. “And I’d like to thank you as well as introduce myself, since I understand that you’re about to become my brother-in-law?”

Marni turned, feeling a burst of happiness wash over her. She pulled out of Josh’s arms, turning to face her sister. “Max, thank you!” she whispered, twining her fingers through her sister’s. “Thank you for being here for me. I know that I was a total pain in the butt in the past,” she lifted her eyes and peered into similar green ones, “but I’d like to start over.” She cringed, “Minus the obnoxious teenager attitude?”

Maxine laughed and squeezed her sister’s hands. “I’d love that!” she whispered, those green eyes glistening with tears. “I love you! And I don’t want to forget anything in our past. But I’d love to change things in the future. If you can forgive me for those horrible guardianship years?”

Marni shook her head. “Not a chance. I love you for those years! You were just trying to take care of me. We were both so terrified after losing Mom and Dad.”

“I was,” Max acknowledged. “I was terrified that I’d lose you too!”

Marni beamed at her sister, then at their clasped hands. Then she did something that she’d needed to do for a long time. She threw her arms around Maxine and hugged her tightly, sobbing. “I didn’t mean any of the horrible things I said!” she cried. “I am fixing my life. I’m getting better! I’ve already finished one year of law school and I’m signed up for

the next semester here as well. I'm going to make you so proud of me, Max! I wanted to come back to you a success, but then this stupid mess happened and..."

They pulled apart and Maxine held onto Marni's upper arms. "I'm so damn proud of you! You're the most amazing person, Marni! I love you so much!"

Marni sobbed harder and Maxine hugged her tighter for a long time, completely unaware of the two big men standing uncomfortably behind them, watching the tableau unfold.

"Uh...I hate to break this up," Josh commented hesitantly, "but perhaps we could take this reunion over to my office?"

Marni and Maxine pulled apart and looked around, startled to remember that they were still in the sheriff's office. Jim and the other deputies were trying to pretend that they were busy, but the men were obviously very uncomfortable with the emotional display.

"Yeah," Marni replied. "Let's get out of here."

Maxine handed Marni her purse and coat, which had been taken from her during her arrest. Marni was just about to put them on when she paused. She walked over to the window and looked for Jim, then beamed at him. "Thank you!" she whispered. "I owe you!"

Jim shook his head. "You don't owe me or anyone anything, Marni," he said firmly. "Someone messed up and I'm going to do my best to fix this for you!"

Marni wiped another stray tear off her cheek as she nodded. "Thank you!"

Josh immediately put an arm over her shoulder, pulling her in close. The four of them walked out of the sheriff's office together and silently climbed into their vehicles. Marni peered worriedly out of the passenger door window, making sure that Maxine would follow.

"She'll be there," Josh assured her. "She's a great sister."

Marni nodded, watching Maxine as she stepped into a big SUV. “Yeah, she’s the best!”

Josh didn’t lead them back to his office. Instead, he drove another two blocks and parked in front an old building with nineteen-forties style architecture. It was a three story, concrete building with ornate decorations over the door and the windows. He parked in a detached garage and directed Maxine and the other man, Marni couldn’t remember if she’d heard his name, to park in the space right beside the garage.

“Is this your home?” she asked

He turned to smile at her. “Yes, this is my home. If you don’t like it, then we’ll find another place to live.”

She gazed up into his blue eyes, her heart swelling with love for this man. “Is it anything like your office?”

He hesitated and then nodded slowly. “I love antiques. They give me a connection to my past. But if you don’t...?”

She stopped his words by kissing him. It seemed expedient enough and it was becoming one of her favorite pastimes. When she pulled away, she smiled up into his eyes. “I love your office. I love the antiques. They are part of you and I just want to become a part of your life.”

He shook his head. “You’ll never be *just* a part of my life Marni. Ever since you stepped into my office for the first time, you’ve become my whole life. I love you.”

“I love you too!”

Epilogue

“Are you sure?” Maxine asked, bending to adjust the train of Marni’s gorgeous wedding dress. It was a vintage dress that she’d found in an antique shop several months ago and had altered to fit her figure. The beaded bodice hugged her breasts, and the silk skirt trailed into a waterfall train behind her. It was both simple and elegant, and she looked stunning in it.

“I have no doubts at all,” Marni replied.

Maxine stood and handed her the bouquet of white roses. “I still don’t understand why you waited until after you graduated from law school.” She took her own bouquet and smiled into green eyes so like her own. “But I respect that you had your reasons.”

“I wanted to come to him as a success, Max,” Marni explained. “I paid for my law degree myself. I didn’t want him to pay my tuition.” She smiled again and looked at her reflection in the mirror. “I know that sounds stubborn of me but...” she trailed off when Maxine put a reassuring hand on her arm.

“I love you, and if waiting until you’d finished law school was the right decision, then it doesn’t sound stubborn. I respect your decisions, even if I don’t understand them. You’re a smart, beautiful, incredibly wonderful person, Marni. Your decisions don’t have to make sense to anyone but you.”

Marni’s eyes glistened with tears and she whispered, “Thank you!”

The two sisters hugged each other tightly, then pulled back, laughing self-consciously as they checked the mirror to make sure that their makeup wasn’t messed up.

“Let’s do this!” Maxine whispered. “I know that Josh has been waiting for this day for too long. Let’s put him out of his misery!”

Marni laughed in agreement.

Marni watched as Maxine paced slowly down the aisle, so proud of her sister and the green gown that trailed after her. It had been a long road to get to this point in her life. But every moment was worth it. When the music changed, Marni stepped out and raised her chin.

Immediately, she sought out and found Josh. He looked so breathtakingly handsome in his morning suit! Dash was beside him, standing up as his best man, but Marni had eyes only for Josh. He stared back at her and she felt all of the love in his gaze.

When she finally reached him at the front of the small church, she beamed up at him. “I love you,” she whispered. “Thank you for waiting.”

His fingers tightened on hers. “I love you too. And it’s about time!”

She laughed, then they turned to face the minister, hand in hand.

“And in the latest news tonight,” the news anchorwoman began, “Judge Endo was arrested today on charges of murder for hire, kidnapping, abuse of power, rape, attempted rape, false imprisonment and a slew of other charges.” The camera changed angles and the anchor woman seamlessly continued. “Apparently, Judge Endo hired someone to kill one of his victim’s roommates as a way to intimidate her into a sexual relationship. As the traffic judge was led into the jail for processing, approximately twenty women screamed at him. Several witnesses to the scene explained that these were the victims that the judge abused during his years as a traffic judge.” The woman smiled into the camera. “Will this heat continue? We’ll have the weather next!”

A message from Elizabeth:

Someone mentioned that Maxine and Marni’s stories didn’t have the team interaction that you’ve all enjoyed in the previous stories for this series. I apologize for that, but hopefully, the plots of both stories held your attention? But I took that comment to heart and will endeavor to have more

character interactions from one book to the next going forward.

Having said that, did you enjoy Marni's story? Any chance you could take a brief moment to leave a review?. Here's a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!

(As usual, if you don't want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com. I answer all e-mails personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don't be offended if I don't respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.)

Elizabeth

*(Keep scrolling for a fun excerpt from “Staking a Claim”!
Lots of interactions with all of the characters from the previous stories in Callum's story!)*

Excerpt from Staking a Claim

Release Date: December 16, 2022

Click [HERE](#) to Get Callum
and Fiona's Story!

Revenge.

The need for revenge had fueled him for so long, it had become part of his personality.

Tossing the folder from DP Investigations on his desk, Callum MacGreggor contemplated his next move. Turning in the leather chair, he gazed out at the skyline beyond but he didn't see the buildings he owned. He didn't calculate the next property he might acquire or the construction needed on his current properties to bring them to the point where he could sell them for a profit. At this moment, his mind was focused on only one thing.

Revenge.

After years, *decades*, of planning and plotting, researching and waiting...soon, he'd gain his revenge. His eyes dropped to the folder. The information he'd just read would give him that revenge. It would take a bit of charm, but Callum had learned to charm early and well. A brutal life had taught him when to be charming and when to be tough. He'd figured out how to weigh a person's priorities and how to use their weaknesses against them. He'd learned how to tell when someone was lying and when they were telling the truth, even if they didn't mean to. And an even more powerful tool, Callum had learned how to use the system to his advantage.

And he'd learned all of that in the tough, unforgiving streets, fighting for his next meal, barely sleeping for fear that someone would sneak up on him and steal what was his, or worse.

He wasn't angry with the person who had shoved him into that life. That lying, cheating bastard had forced Callum to learn how to survive. Looking around his office, he knew that he'd never have gotten so far, accumulated so much wealth and power, if he hadn't been forced to survive on the filthy, brutal streets.

No, his revenge wasn't because of the loss of his home and the lessons in survival that had been forced upon him. His plans weren't to avenge the loss of his childhood. He was going to punish the person he considered responsible for his parents' death.

Chapter 1

Surprises were few. After years of working twenty hour days, Callum MacGreggor was rarely, if ever, surprised.

But the view in front of him was...surprising.

Flowers in full bloom surrounded lush trees, bushes that complemented the landscape and various textures from unusual plants increased the visual interest. Colors, textures, and scents enveloped him. As he paused, even the sounds were surprising. Birds sang, crickets chirped, and the wind whispered softly through the leaves of the towering trees.

And yet, none of that was nearly as impressive as the woman standing in this magical oasis. As he watched, she reached forward, straining to pull something out of the ground, then leaning back to toss the offending weed into a wheelbarrow. Then she said something. He wasn't sure who the woman was talking to, but nor did he really care. She was lovely!

No, lovely was too tame of a word for her. Reddish blond hair shimmered in the sunshine, her skin turning a soft pink from the abusive rays. She should be wearing a hat, he thought. That skin...it was beautiful and his fingers itched to touch that softness, discover the texture and temperature, know if she had freckles or just alabaster beauty.

Again, she spoke and he looked around, his eyes narrowing behind his sunglasses as he tried to locate who she was talking to. But he didn't see anyone.

His eyes returned to her as she laughed. Laughed? Once again, he looked around. She was gardening. What was funny about gardening?

Nothing! Gardening was mucking around in the dirt. Callum hated gardening and paid a significant amount of money to his expensive gardeners just so that he never had to see dirt under his fingernails again.

Who the hell was this woman talking to? Who was making her laugh?

Jealousy unexpectedly surged inside of him but Callum tamped it down. Jealousy? That was ridiculous! What the hell could he be jealous of? This woman, was she his enemy? She would become the tool he would use to extract his revenge! She was the one obstacle in the way of his plan to crush the man who had killed his parents!

Stepping forward, he heard the pea gravel crunch under his foot. The noise caught the woman's attention. He froze as she looked up, the weight of her gaze like a gut-punch, stopping his breath for a moment.

How the hell could she do this to him? He was tough and hardened by life! He'd grown up in the streets, fighting for his next meal, scratching and saving, living in an abandoned warehouse until he had enough money to find decent shelter. And even after he'd saved enough, he'd remained hidden in that warehouse, saving more of his hard-earned money.

Saving it for this moment!

"Can ah help ye?" the soft voice asked, her Scottish accent brushing over his skin like a sensuous whisper.

Callum stood there, staring as the woman blinked, her long, dark lashes fluttering in the sunshine.

Hat. The damn woman needed a hat!

He spotted a hat on one of the benches. He wondered why it was pointlessly resting on the bench instead of protecting all of that glorious, pale skin.

With a fury he hadn't known he was capable of, Callum stalked over to the bench, grabbed the hat, and stormed over to the woman. Hiding his anger at her callous treatment of her lovely skin, he handed her the hat, bowing slightly as if presenting a coronation crown. "The sun is extraordinarily hot today," he said by way of an explanation.

The woman blinked up at him, but she accepted the hat. Unfortunately, she didn't put it on.

Grinding his teeth, he snatched the hat back and plunked it on her head, then adjusted the angle of the brim so

that it covered more of her delicate skin. With a nod of approval, he stood up and backed up a step.

“I’m Callum MacGreggor,” he announced.

The woman stood as well and he was struck by how short she was. The information he’d been given had put her height at five feet, five inches. That wasn’t necessarily short for a woman, but for some reason, this lady seemed smaller.

“MacGreggor?” she parroted, her soft, pink lips forming a soft O in surprise. “As in, Castle MacGreggor?”

Callum nodded sharply. He glanced behind him and, for the first time, noticed the ancient, stone castle rising proud and strong. The gardens around the castle had blinded him to the building, which was startling. Castles were built to intimidate, to show grandeur and strength, power and the financial acumen of the laird and lady.

However, it was the gardens surrounding the castle that caught one’s attention. The colors and splendor of these gardens were more astounding and eye-catching than the magnificence of the castle.

He realized that the woman was still waiting for an explanation. “I was born here, actually.”

Those full, pink lips curled into a smile of welcome. “Aye?” she gasped, stepping forward and pulling off the hat. Several curls danced at the gesture, but Callum ignored them, focusing on her exposed skin.

“Yes. I was just—”

“Come inside!” she replied, interrupting his explanation. “Oh, it’s so wonderful to finally meet someone who lived here before! Ah canna tell you how many questions ah have!”

Callum was startled. He hadn’t expected friendliness. Didn’t she realize that he was the enemy? That he was about to steal her home from her?

The woman needed a keeper!

And she needed to put the damn hat back on!

When she registered his hesitation, she smiled up at him, her sky blue eyes sparkling, clasping his hand with both of hers. “Please? Won’t ye come inside and have some tea?”

He listened, enjoying her soft brogue. It wasn’t the harsh accents of some who had lived in the highlands all their lives. Instead, it was just a soft, occasional rolling of her vowels that captured his attention.

She’d already taken several steps, then turned to look over her shoulder. “Please?”

He couldn’t deny her request. A cup of tea wouldn’t be a violation of his vow, would it? Revenge could be had over a cup of tea!

“I would enjoy that,” he finally replied, causing that lovely smile to brighten. And that, in turn, caused his body to tighten as lust, unexpected and unappreciated, surged through him. “Who were you talking to a moment ago?” he asked as he stepped forward.

The woman paused and looked up at him, those pink lips parting slightly. She glanced back over her shoulder at the weed filled wheelbarrow. “Oh! Well...” she stopped and shrugged. “I wasna...I just...the plants.” She stopped and looked around, then up at him. “I just give them a bit of encouragement.”

Then she walked on, her pace a bit faster now. As she reached a side entrance to the castle the penny dropped for him. The woman spoke to her plants? No, that wasn’t exactly what she’d said. The daft woman encouraged them!

Had he entered into Bedlam?

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and Fiona’s Story!