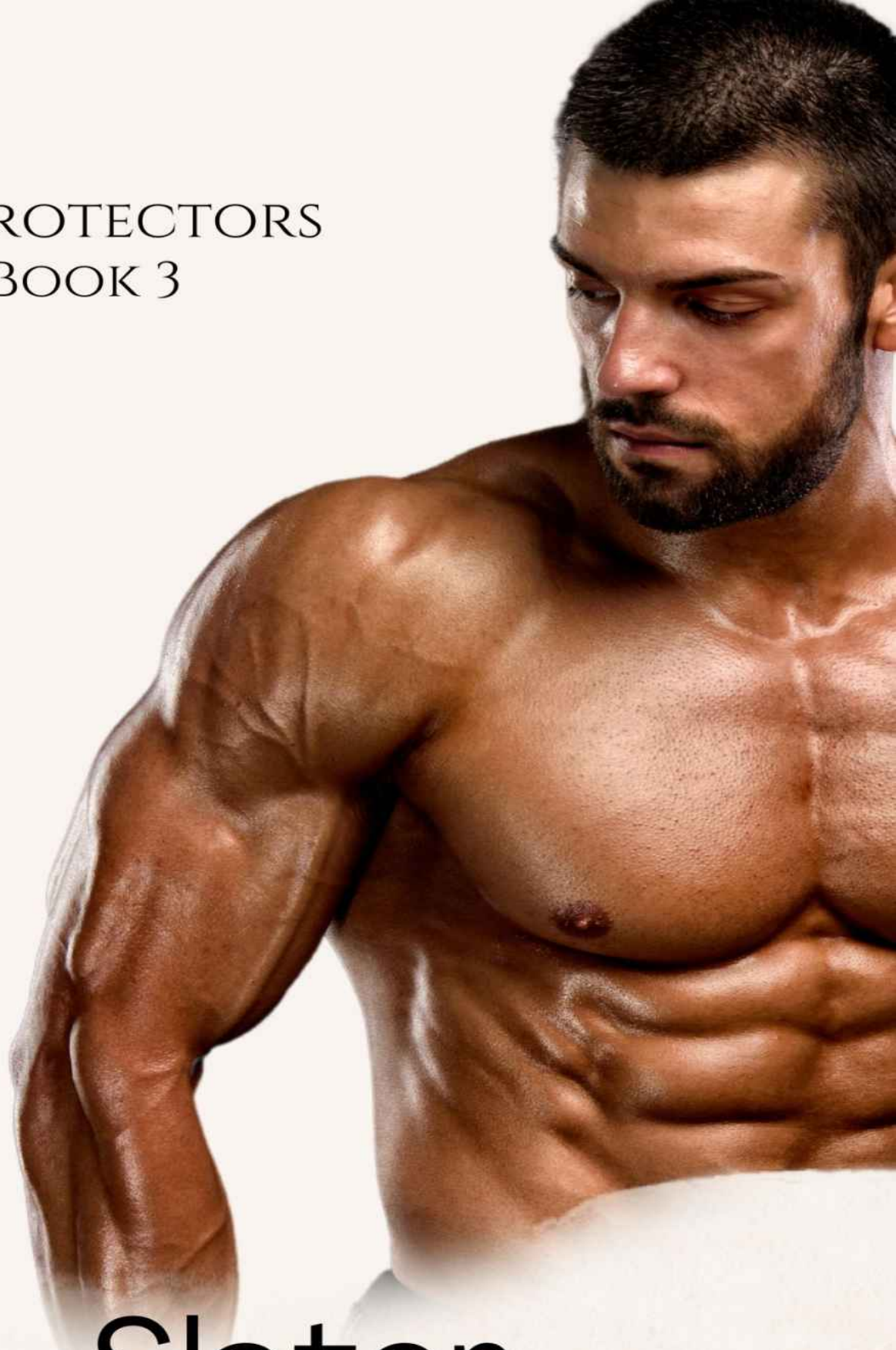


FBI PROTECTORS
BOOK 3



Slater

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH LENNOX

Slater

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Chapter 1

“Why are you here?!”

Slater stared down at the petite woman with dark, curly hair, amused by her fury.

“And a very happy good morning to you, as well, Rebecca James!” Slater replied, trying to irk the woman. She’d certainly driven him crazy enough over the past couple of weeks. Ever since meeting the woman with dark, curly hair and a get-out-of-my-way attitude, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her.

“Good morning,” she grumbled, obviously irritated at the idea of societal niceties. “What are you doing here?”

He laughed, delighted with her grouchy disposition. “Well, you gave us information. And now we’re acting on it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Acting on the information... how?”

He wanted to reach out and...not kiss her. Definitely not kiss her! This woman was so different from the women he normally dated, she was almost a completely different species!

So why did he keep thinking about kissing her? Why did her soft, rosebud lips continuously wake him from his dreams, hot and bothered, aching for her? And why did all of the other women he ran into lately seem so...boring? Compared to this woman, the other women that crossed his path should be a balm to his ego. The lovely...no, not lovely! The *irritating* Rebecca James was definitely not lovely! She was cute in an odd sort of way. That nose...definitely cute. However, button-like nose excluded, she was...cute. Okay, all of her was cute. She was just...cute!

But Slater wasn’t attracted to cute. He liked tall, sultry blonds. Not short, grumpy brunettes with an attitude

problem.

“Well?” she prompted. He looked down and, sure enough, the cute woman was tapping her booted foot with impatience.

“I’m here,” he replied finally, leaning closer, enjoying the flush that covered her cheeks, “because I’m an FBI agent. And there is a racketeering ring going on in Minnow, Pennsylvania, similar to other towns in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey.” He watched those pretty brown eyes narrow to slits of anger. “That’s what we do, Becca. We investigate. We protect and serve. And right now, it’s Minnow’s turn to be protected.”

Her huff of impatience was adorable. “We’re fine! You caught the bastard who had organized the racketeering ring. Everything is fine.”

“Is it?” he asked, tilting his head as he watched her carefully. Sure enough, her eyes dropped and he knew that something more was happening. “Care to share so we can help you fix things here in Minnow?”

“We’re fine,” she asserted again. “As the deputy mayor, I can assure you that everything is going smoothly now. Business is picking back up and, now that fishing season is underway, the tourists are even coming back. The economy is thriving.”

Slater tilted his head in acknowledgment. “Okay, well, then this will be a short stop. But until we’ve assured ourselves and the powers-that-be in the FBI that everything is copacetic here, then me and my team will be here.”

“Your team?” she echoed, pulling her eyes away from him and looking around. “Who else is here?”

“My boss, Agent Maddox Turner, as well as my other teammates, Agent Lex Murdock, Agent Bartholomew Hudson and our tech guru, Josephine Clairmont. Any objections?”

Her lips pressed together at his question, but she feigned a casual air and said, “None,” with a swift shift of her

shoulders. “Have fun!”

“We will,” he replied, watching as the too-lovely Rebecca James turned and walked...uh, stomped...away.

If his eyes lingered on her cute ass for a bit too long, well, he was a man and she was...too short, he reminded himself. At six feet, four inches tall, a woman who barely hit five four was not a good candidate. They simply wouldn't fit properly. He liked tall women who wore high, sexy heels. Heels that brought her up to his height.

He definitely wasn't attracted to a petite woman more than a foot shorter than he was!

So why was he still watching her as she entered the diner across the street?

Hell if he could figure it out! Slater couldn't even figure out how to sleep through the night! Ever since Rebecca James had contacted him and dumped evidence into his hands last month, he'd dreamed about her, waking up with his body so on fire for her, it was making him crazy!

So when Maddox had announced that they were heading to Minnow to ensure that the DeFila racketeering scheme was thoroughly cleaned up and all of the remnants of the operation swept away, Slater had thought it would be a good time to get the woman out of his mind for good.

“Is that her?”

Slater turned to glare at Maddox. “Is that who?” he demanded, irritated to find his boss staring at Becca. She was his, damn it! Until he could work her out of his system, he didn't want any other man ogling his woman.

Not that she was “his woman”. Nope, this was merely a cleansing exercise!

Maddox chuckled and slapped Slater on the back. “Give up, my friend. Stop fighting it and your life will be a hell of a lot happier.” Maddox walked away, heading into the

police station where they were set to speak to the chief of police.

Slater sighed, rubbing the top of his head. He was normally the laid back member of their team. But over the past three weeks, he'd had the craziest need to...tear something apart!

Rebecca slumped down into her office chair, pulling herself towards her desk. Once settled, she laid her hands down on top of the files, trying to calm her racing heart.

Goodness, that man just...he made her so furious! His arrogant smile and his too-handsome face, those overly muscled shoulders and...just...all of him! He was just too arrogant, too sure of himself. And he needed a haircut! From the first moment she'd met the man a month ago in Elsa, she'd known Agent Slater would be trouble.

Okay, so he was an excellent agent. He'd taken the information she'd given him and taken down a racketeering scheme that had almost devastated her precious town of Minnow, Pennsylvania. She loved this town. It was small, only about ten thousand residents during most of the year. But the population swelled to over fifteen thousand during the late spring, summer, and early fall months as soon as the weather warmed up enough. That's when the kayakers, fishers, white water rafters, hikers, and a slew of other outdoor enthusiasts descended upon the town, searching for a rural experience. The weekends helped the businesses in her small town thrive!

If Rebecca was starting to feel as if something wasn't quite right lately, well, that was just a phase. Only a temporary blip in her normally perfectly planned out life. As a fourth generation Minnow resident, as well as a descendent of the James family, Rebecca knew what was expected of her. She was the unofficial mayor of the town, even though she was really just the deputy mayor. She never ran for office, but the elected mayors over the years kept her on their staff as "deputy" because...because she knew how to run everything.

She knew how to organize the annual festivals, manage the pancake breakfasts during the summer months, control the tourists' traffic, liaise with the police department and hotel staff. She knew how to ensure that all of the summer college students who arrived for the hourly jobs were housed and fed and stayed out of trouble.

In other words, Rebecca managed the tedium.

No, that wasn't right. Her job wasn't tedious. It was...interesting. Yes, she loved her job. If it seemed a bit boring lately, as if something didn't fit quite right, then she was just feeling off. It would pass.

She glanced out her office window, her eyes following a tall, handsome man with too-long hair wearing a flannel shirt and loose jeans that still managed to show off his extremely nice behind.

And when did she ever notice a man's butt?

Rebecca purposely turned away from the sight, forcing herself to open the next task. It was the file for the annual bike race. She had about a hundred details to nail down. She needed to contact all of the normal vendors and food trucks and breweries and portable toilet suppliers to make sure that they had all of their supplies ready.

If her eyes shifted to the window once more as FBI Agent Slater DeBrasio walked into the police station with his coworkers, well, she was a female underneath all of this paperwork, wasn't she?

Chapter 2

“Is it going to move?”

Rebecca jerked out of her contemplation of her sandwich, blinking as Agent Slater Debrasio sat down on the other side of the table, placing his enormous meatball sandwich in front of him.

The meatball sub, with melted provolone and spicy tomato sauce, smelled heavenly!

“What are you doing here?” she demanded once again, trying to push the temptation of a meatball sub out of her mind.

“I saw you come over here for lunch and decided to join you.”

Rebecca watched as he lifted the sandwich up to his mouth and take a big bite. He closed his eyes, savoring the flavors before putting it down again, using the napkin to wipe his mouth.

“You aren’t hungry?” he asked, glancing at her turkey and Swiss on rye bread with brown mustard.

She sighed, but pushed the sandwich away. “I’m starving actually.”

“And the turkey sandwich isn’t tempting?”

She looked up at him, her mouthwatering at his use of the word “tempting”. Because he was. Goodness, he really was! Tempting, that is!

“I guess I’m just not in the mood for a turkey sandwich today.”

He popped a potato chip in his mouth. “Why don’t you get something else?” he asked. “You could just wrap that one up and have it for lunch tomorrow.”

She glanced down at the turkey sandwich. “I always get turkey and Swiss. It’s my favorite.”

His blue eyes blinked after that statement. “But...you aren’t interested in it today?”

She tried to work up her normal enthusiasm for her lunch, but the thought of taking a bite of the sandwich made her stomach churn. With a mental groan, she explained. “No. I have a turkey and Swiss sandwich every Thursday. But for some reason, I just can’t eat it today.”

“Every Thursday? What do you eat on the other days of the week?” he asked, an amused twinkle in his eyes.

“Salads,” she replied, almost cringing at the thought. “I tell myself if I’m good and eat a healthy salad all the other days of the week, I can splurge and have a turkey and Swiss sandwich on Thursday. It’s sort of my cheat day.”

“You have to eat salads every day in order to justify having a sandwich one day of the week?”

She lifted her chocolate eyes to him, glaring at his chuckle. “I’m short,” she explained as if he were a toddler.

“And?”

“And, short people don’t have the same metabolism as giant men with...” her eyes glanced at the bulging biceps and she wondered if she needed to wipe the drool off of her mouth. Pulling her eyes away, she glanced away, watching the kids playing across the street. “I have to be careful.”

Something thumped down in front of her and she looked at her plate. Half of her turkey sandwich was gone and in its place was the other half of Slater’s meatball sandwich. She looked at him as he took a huge bite of her turkey sandwich.

Outraged, she straightened her spine, ready to berate the man for stealing her “treat”! “What are you doing?”

“I’m giving you half of my sandwich,” he explained, jerking his finger towards the half of his meatball sandwich

now on her plate. “Eat mine. You look deprived and I just can’t stand a woman looking so forlorn about food. It’s not right.”

She stared down at the meatballs, her stomach growling loud enough for him to hear it. “I can’t eat this,” she whispered, clasping her hands under the table so she didn’t give in to the urge to take a bite.

“Sure you can,” he argued. “Just lift it up and sink your teeth into it. I promise, it works every time for me.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t eat it because it isn’t healthy. It has lots of cheese and...and delicious meatballs and white bread and...!” She couldn’t resist any longer. She lifted the sandwich to her mouth and took a small bite. Just a small one! Just enough to taste what she would be missing.

“Oh, this is sooo good!” she sighed, closing her eyes and savoring the tangy, spicy flavor. And because it was so good, she took another bite. Then another, loving the decadent treat more than she’d thought possible!

When she finally looked down, the half of the sandwich gone, she even licked her fingers, getting the last bit of sauce off of her fingers. “Thank you!” she whispered, almost embarrassed about how much she’d enjoyed the food.

“You have...” he reached over, taking his napkin and wiping the side of her cheek with it. “There. Now you’re perfect again.”

She stared at him. Perfect? She’d never been perfect! She was too short to be perfect! She was the invisible person who worked behind the scenes. Perfect people were in front! Perfect people headlined the shows. They didn’t organize them.

“I’m not perfect,” she whispered up to him.

He tilted his head, appearing confused. “You’re beautiful, Becca.”

“My name is Rebecca. No one calls me Becca.”

“Then I’ll be special,” he teased. “What’s on your agenda this afternoon?”

She sighed, looking down at the other half of her sandwich. She wasn’t hungry anymore, the meatball sandwich half already filling her up. A tanned hand swooped into her line of vision and grabbed the other half of the turkey sandwich and, as she looked up, Slater took a huge bite out of it.

Becca almost laughed, so relieved that she didn’t have to eat that sandwich!

“I have to inspect the cabins,” she announced.

He became instantly alert. “What cabins?”

She leaned back in her chair, feeling good for some odd reason. “A few years ago, I hired a company to build about a hundred cabins in the woods. We rent them out to the staff that will fill all of the weekend and summer jobs. The town owns them, and they are a good source of revenue during the tourist seasons, but, because the city owns them, we also get to keep the rents reasonably low. It frees up the hotel spaces for the tourists and the hotel owners can charge whatever they want for those rooms.”

Slater paused, his eyes widening. “That’s brilliant!”

She shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. The cabins are pretty basic and are shared by four people. They just have a rudimentary bathroom and kitchen, but the college kids that come to fill all of the jobs in town don’t seem to mind. It saves them money, makes the town money, and everyone is happy.”

“Care for some company while you inspect the cabins?” he asked, standing up when she stood.

Becca blinked. “Company? Why would you want to come with me? It’s a pretty dirty job.” She pulled the clipboard closer. “I’m going to be trekking through the woods. After all of the snow and rain over the winter and early spring months, there will be lots of mud.” She stood up

and collected her belongings, tossing their trash into the garbage can.

He put a hand to the small of her back, leading her out of the park where they'd eaten their sandwiches. "We're still looking for evidence on the DeFilo crime ring. We haven't found out where they were living when they were here."

She stopped and his strong hand pressed more firmly against her back. "You think they were staying in the cabins?"

Slater shrugged. "I don't know. But it's a good place to start."

Becca was so damned cute as she blinked up at him. Those brown eyes and her long, dark lashes made him think of hot, sexy nights rolling around in a bed with her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her. Gone were all of his preconceived notions about the perfect woman for him. After waking up last night in pain from his latest erotic dream, he knew that Becca was it. He wanted her. It didn't seem to matter that she wasn't tall or blond. Or maybe he wanted her because she was so different from the other women in his past. He was bored with them, and Becca, she fascinated him! Just watching her expressive eyes made him want to laugh with her, talk with her, make love to her until she screamed out his name and forgot every other man who had ever approached her.

So no, he didn't necessarily need to inspect the cabins. There might be something in one of those cabins that would be useful, but he doubted it. The men his team had arrested over the past several weeks were talking more and more, each of them trying to get a better deal than the other and cut down on their prison sentences. They'd even found the top guy, a pale, creepy man with a vicious bent, although the guy hadn't spoken a word since his arrest last month.

What he wanted was to spend some time with Becca, to get to know her. So far, he knew that he lusted after her, but

Slater wanted to truly know her.

Again, he was treading in strange waters. Normally, he only needed a superficial knowledge of the women he took to his bed. His interludes had been purely sexual in nature and both parties had enjoyed that kind of existence.

Becca was truly throwing him completely off kilter.

And he kind of liked it!

“So how many cabins are there?” he asked.

Becca told him about the cabins and the pathways through the woods, the college kids that flocked to the town during the summer months for seasonal jobs and beautiful weather. She explained the challenges and quirks of living in a town that depended mostly on tourism dollars during warmer months and gossip during the calmer, boring winter months.

“It sounds nice,” he replied as they stepped into the first cabin.

Becca shrugged, making a few notes about various repairs that each cabin needed. “There are pros and cons.”

“What are the negatives to living here?” he asked, stepping out beside her.

She wondered why he was really doing this. It couldn't be because he was looking for additional evidence. The man was barely glancing around. Besides, most of these cabins were empty except for bunk beds and a few chairs. They were too small for tables in the kitchens. They'd all been crafted with countertop eating areas instead. Everything had been designed to reduce cost and space, but maximize amenities.

“You're not really looking around for any evidence, are you?” she asked after they'd gone through the tenth cabin.

He turned and looked down at her, his green eyes heating up with an intensity that scared her. This was Slater!

Super hero and FBI agent. He was too big and too tall for someone like her. Plus, he was probably one of the guys that dated supermodels! He definitely wouldn't be interested in...!

Suddenly, Rebecca was down on the ground, Slater's big body protecting her from...? She wasn't sure what was going on. The ground was harder than she'd realized! And why the hell were they on the ground? Why was Slater pointing a pistol towards the woods?

"What are you doing?" she demanded, trying to push him off of her. He might be lean and fit, but the guy was padded with muscles and he weighed a ton! Not to mention, he was ignoring her efforts to get him off of her and doing a damn good job of keeping her pinned to the ground.

"Stay still," he ordered, his eyes sharpening as he focused on something in the distance.

"Why? Why are you smothering me on the ground?"

"Quiet!"

She stopped, sensing something in his tone that finally broke through to her shock. She stilled and went absolutely silent. Slater moved the direction of his weapon slightly, his eyes not seeing something but his mind sensed the danger.

For a long moment, she remained still. Then he growled and stood up. "He's gone!" he announced with frustration, stuffing his pistol back into whatever space he had hidden underneath that flannel shirt. He then turned and extended his hand, pulling her up to a standing position. "Are you okay?" he asked, moving to the back of her and swiping his hand down along her back and thighs. "You're not okay. You're all muddy and wet." He pulled her into his arms, tucking her against his chest while he pulled his cell phone out.

"Yeah, I'm out in the woods," he said to the person at the other end of the phone call. "Someone just tried to kill Becca James, the deputy mayor."

“What?” she squeaked, trying to look around but Slater’s arm merely tightened around her, holding her still as if he were still trying to protect her from danger.

“A bow and arrow. Can you go around to the south side? There’s a dirt road intersecting with Fisher Street. It seems like the most obvious escape route from where we are at the moment.”

While he listened, Becca twisted around, trying to figure out why he thought someone was trying to kill her. Sure enough, stuck in a tree about ten feet away from where they were standing was an arrow, still quivering in the slight breeze. Surely that hadn’t been aimed towards her! She wasn’t the type of person who generated either anger or happiness. She was the invisible hand that made everything work! Why would someone hate her enough to try and kill her?

This just didn’t make sense!

“They were trying to kill *you*, Slater,” she announced, poking him in the side. He didn’t even grunt, but pulled her in closer in order to stop her poking.

“Right. I’m getting her out of here,” he continued, talking into his cell phone to some mysterious person.

“I can’t leave!” she whispered, then started to look around for her clip board. “I still have...”

He didn’t let her finish that sentence. He ended the call, shoved the phone back into his pocket and then took her hand. They hightailed it out of the cabins, Slater pulling her along behind him. Becca tried to keep up and she knew that Slater was shortening his strides in order to allow her to run alongside him, but it was still difficult and she wanted answers.

When they reached their cars, Slater didn’t hesitate. He lifted her up into his arms and deposited her into the passenger seat of his black SUV.

“I’m filthy!” she gasped, trying to slide back out.

“Don’t!” he ordered, then walked quickly around to the other side and slid into the driver’s seat. “I don’t give a damn about the mud, Becca,” he growled as he started the SUV and headed out of the small parking area. “I need to get you to safety. The car can be cleaned.”

“But your seats are leather!”

“Still don’t care,” he replied and focused all of his attention on getting down the mountain and into town. Once there, he was still cautious, but at least he could relax slightly. “Good,” he breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s go fill out a police report.”

Becca shook her head, unbuckling her safety belt and sliding out of the SUV. She grimaced at the mud, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it now. It would be better if she let it dry, then she could brush most of it off. “I’ll get a hair dryer. Maybe that will dry the mud faster.”

Slater was already around to her side of the SUV by the time she finished her statement. He gripped her upper arms with both of his hands and looked into her eyes. “Becca, you don’t get it, do you? You are important! You are a hell of a lot more important than the damn leather on my SUV. I want you inside, safe from a murdering ass trying to make you into a shishkabob! You need to get into the police station and fill out a police report so that whoever tried to kill you can be stopped. Do you understand? No more concerns about the damn leather in my truck!”

Becca sputtered for a moment. She’d never been spoken to in that tone before and she wasn’t going to take it from a man who had driven her nuts ever since the first moment she’d spoken to him. And that had been on the phone, so that was saying a lot!

“Don’t provoke me, okay?” she yelled right back. “First of all, I was the one mashed into the cold, wet mud while you wiggled around on top of me, pretending to be some sort of hero! I’m cold! I’m hungry for chips because you made me eat your...thing,” she spat out, not remembering the

name of his lunch because she was so furious, “and I really don’t like your attitude!”

He’d taken two steps away from her, but when she came back at him, his eyes narrowed. “First of all, you didn’t eat all of my ‘thing’!” he replied back with fury. “You could only handle half of it because you force yourself to eat anemic, pathetic...salads all the time for some weird reason. And secondly, you were rolling around in the mud because I was trying to save your life!”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” she yelled right back, pushing a lock of muddy hair out of her eyes. Unfortunately, half the mud had already dried at this point, so it merely flipped right back at her, flecks of dried mud flicking into her eyes. “Well, I’ve got news for you! I don’t like mud! And I especially don’t like cold mud! And if you hadn’t eaten my stuff, then I wouldn’t have devoured your ‘thing’ so quickly!”

Slater was livid now. He pointed a finger towards her face and bellowed, “You ate my ‘thing’ because it was delicious!”

“Yeah, you’d like to think so, wouldn’t you?!”

“You...!” he sputtered. Becca felt a stab of joy because she suspected that Slater was rarely, if ever, at a loss for words.

Unfortunately, she was right. Slater wasn’t sure what to say and he took his confusion out in a very strange, albeit, effective way. He kissed her.

Yes, he kissed her right there on the sidewalk in front of the police station. Unfortunately, they were both unaware that their conversation, innocent in reality, had taken on a more...salacious interpretation by the people looking on. So when Slater took her into his arms to kiss her, the rest of the crowd was fascinated.

The kiss ended too abruptly for Becca’s preference, but she turned a bright red when she realized that about twenty

people were standing around. Applauding!

“What have you done?” she gasped.

Slater was just as confused as she was, but he pulled her against his chest, hiding her as much as he could from the crowd.

Unfortunately, their public humiliation wasn't quite over. Maddox, Lex, and Bart stepped out from the crowd. While the rest of the onlookers continued on with their day, all of them bending their heads together to rehash the very public argument, his friends and co-workers weren't as polite.

Bart used to be the grumpy member of their team, until he'd met Josephine, his fiancée. Now he wasn't exactly smiles and sunshine, but the man was a lot less grumpy. In this situation, the lead up was just too good to ignore. “So...” he started off, clapping his hands together. “Becca loves your...thing.”

Lex, Maddox, and Bart crossed their arms over their chests, looking smugly amused.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Slater demanded, still keeping Becca in his arms. That protectiveness only reinforced everyone's opinion that the two of them hadn't actually been arguing about a meatball sandwich.

Lex chuckled. “She said that she didn't like eating your ‘thing’.”

Bart turned to the other two. “He did say that she thought it was delicious.”

Maddox's eyes sparkled with mirth as he added, “I'm sorry she could only handle half of it though.”

Lex nodded sagely. “Yeah, it's tough when a woman can only handle half. It's so much better when she can eat the whole...”

“You're all going to hell,” Slater interrupted, taking Becca's hand and leading her into the police station. “She was

talking about sharing a meatball sandwich with me!” He ignored everyone’s hilarity as he walked into the police station. “Someone tried to kill Becca James,” he announced, slapping his hand down on the countertop. “She needs to fill out a report and you should probably get a forensic team up to the woods. The ground is soft enough from the recent rain and there will most likely be footprints.”

The police officer stood there, stunned by what he was hearing. Finally, his brain caught up as he processed the words. Turning to Becca, he said, “Someone tried to kill you?”

Becca rolled her eyes. “No! No one tried to kill me. There was an arrow in a tree, but it was probably fired off by someone who was just doing some hunting practice and missed their target. They definitely weren’t trying to kill me.”

The officer sighed with relief. But that moment was short lived.

“They were trying to kill her,” Slater countered with absolute authority.

She groaned, leaning her head back with exasperation. “Seriously? Why do you think they were trying to kill me? Why don’t you assume that you were the target?” She looked at Officer Benington then. “Not that I’m admitting anyone was trying to kill anyone. It was just an accident and there’s no need to get a forensic team up into the woods,” she turned to glare at Slater, “especially since we don’t *have* a forensic team,” she replied as if that should be obvious.

Slater wasn’t giving in. “Then I’ll get a team out here from Philly. We’re only an hour out. They could be here by...”

“Stop!” she yelled, holding her hand up in the air. “Just stop,” she repeated, more quietly this time. When he stopped, she sighed and turned to the officer. “Could you give us a moment of privacy?”

He nodded, more than eager to step away from what was turning out to be a very odd argument. Not many people argued about whether or not someone had tried to kill them. It was generally pretty clear. Attempted murders aren't usually an ambiguous issue.

“Look,” she said softly, putting a hand to the middle of his chest, “I really appreciate your concern. But no one is trying to kill me. That arrow, granted, it came pretty close. But it wasn't meant for me. It isn't hunting season right now, but I know that there are kids that head out into the woods when they aren't supposed to. They try their luck at shooting bows, but it's just practice.” She let her voice sooth him, trying to bring down his fury. “I know the kids around here. I'll start asking around, try to find out who was out messing in the woods near the cabins. If they weren't shooting at a target, then the worst they were doing was aiming for a small bird and their arrow got off track.” She lifted her hands out to her sides. “I'm not hurt, so no one should get into any kind of trouble, okay?”

Slater wasn't convinced. Someone was out there trying to hurt Becca. He didn't understand why, but he was sure as hell going to find out!

“This isn't over,” he snarled, but took her hand and led her back out of the police station. Once back out in the sunshine, he glared at his co-workers before turning back to Becca. “We both need to get back to work. But promise me that you'll be extra careful, okay?”

He pressed a hand to her cheek, looking into other eyes. She looked stunned, startled by his concern and he wanted to punch whoever had done this to her. She was a gorgeous woman with spunk and intelligence. He wanted to make love to her so badly, his toenails ached. And yet, Becca had absolutely no idea of her appeal. She was oblivious!

That would have to change. He wanted her to know exactly how stunning and wonderful and amazing she was!

“I’ll be very careful,” she promised and for a brief moment, she covered his hand with hers. Then she realized the intimacy of the moment and pulled away, looking around self-consciously.

Slater watched her, noticed her self-conscious reaction. Hadn’t she ever indulged in a bit of affection on the streets?

Probably not. Becca was a very private person. That was fine, he thought as he watched her walk away towards her office a few doors down. But soon, he was going to demonstrate to her just how incredibly beautiful and sexy and amazing she was.

Muttering under his breath, he headed back to the temporary conference room he and the other FBI employees were working out of while they were in Minnow.

The others were already there, calling out the information that they’d gathered during the morning. It appeared that most of the town had fully recovered from the racketeering scheme that DeFila and his cohorts had put into place. Minnow was smaller than the other towns he’d infiltrated, but it was also more dependent on seasonal workers and seasonal businesses. So perhaps most of the businesses that operated out of Minnow hadn’t been open and running during the time that DeFila had controlled the area.

Josephine, now a permanent member of the team, was tasked with analyzing the economic trends of the town to determine if their assumptions about the seasonal aspect of Minnow’s business was the reason for the smaller impact of DeFila’s efforts. Maddox didn’t want to pull out early and move on to the next town without ensuring that everything was back to normal in Minnow. Plus, it was dangerous to leave a power vacuum behind. If DeFila was truly in charge and commanding what happens within the town, then the people left behind would need a new power structure. That wasn’t something that their team would handle, but it would be reported up the chain, most likely to the appropriate state

government agencies. Plus, there was the accusation from Baridan about private citizens being a part of the operation. So far, they hadn't found any evidence of that, but the team was looking into that aspect as well.

As each of the team members once again dispersed to follow through on their assignments, Slater pulled out his phone and typed a message to Becca. "Dinner tonight?"

He slid his phone into his pocket and stepped into Lex's SUV, since he'd dropped his off at the car wash for a thorough cleaning.

"Becca?" Lex asked, starting the engine and pulling out of the parking space.

"Yeah. I'm hoping she'll have dinner with me tonight."

Lex smirked. "'Things' aren't on the menu, I hope."

Slater rolled his eyes, but didn't respond. The more he reacted to their teasing, the longer they'd persist. "I was thinking about that Italian place we saw on the way in. It wasn't fancy, but everyone I've spoken to says that the food is excellent."

"Good plan," Lex replied, then concentrated on driving through the increasingly busy streets.

Chapter 3

“This is stupid!” Becca muttered, pacing back and forth across the small expanse of her foyer. “Why? Why did he ask me out for dinner tonight?”

She didn’t have an answer and before she could pull out her phone and text him to cancel, the doorbell rang.

Becca stared at the door for a long moment, but when the bell rang again, she sighed and walked over to it. Yanking it open, she glared up at the man, once again startled by his height and brawn.

“This isn’t going to work,” she told him, forgetting the social niceties of a regular greeting.

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “Of course it will. We’ll eat. We’ll talk. It’s a common enough practice. It should work fine.”

Becca sighed. “You know what I’m talking about!”

He stepped into her small, craftsman style house and closed the door. Leaning his shoulders against the wood, he stared down at her. “Tell me what isn’t going to work.”

“You,” she snapped. “Me!” She waved her hand frantically between their bodies. “We’re completely different people and we want different things out of life.”

“What do you think I want, Becca?” he asked gently, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe.

She huffed again, crossing her arms over her stomach. “You look like the kind of man who wants a one-night stand with whatever woman might cross his path.”

He looked stunned by her comment, then his features hardened. “You’re wrong about that.”

“I am?” She didn’t believe him. Not for a moment. “How am I wrong?”

He moved closer, stepping into her space and she took a step backwards. “First of all, I’m much more selective in my romantic partners. I don’t pick up random women off the street.”

She made a disgusted sound. “I don’t believe that you’ve ever had a romantic relationship.” She took another step backwards. “I think that most of your relationships are purely sexual in nature.” Becca lifted her eyes, daring him to contradict him.

“And secondly,” he continued, ignoring her accusation about his sex life, “I don’t want just one night with you.”

She backed up again, but he closed the distance. “Okay, so you want a sexual partner for the time that you and your team are here in Minnow. What’s the difference? A night? A week?”

“A lifetime?” he offered.

That stopped her and she grabbed onto the chair behind her. “You don’t mean that! You don’t want me for a lifetime!”

“Why not? You’re beautiful,” he reached up and touched one of her dark curls, smiling as it bounced against her cheek. “I think you’re amazingly talented, since it seems as if you’re running the entire town without even a staff.”

“I have a staff. And I don’t run the town. I’m only the deputy mayor.”

“You run it, and everyone knows it. The mayor is merely a figurehead. I spoke to him today. He sang your praises. He was thrilled that you were the one that took down the entire racketeering operation.”

“I didn’t take down the whole operation,” she asserted firmly. “I merely brought you the last piece of the puzzle. You and your team members are the ones that dismantled the scheme and released all of us from their grip.”

“You worked silently and diligently, gathering the evidence that we needed to find the head of the process, Becca,” he asserted gently, taking her hand in his and lifting her fingers to his lips. “You were instrumental in solving the mystery. Don’t ever doubt yourself, honey. You were great!”

Becca didn’t say anything else because she knew he’d simply counter her comment. “Are you going to take me out for pasta?”

“Yes,” he replied, but didn’t move. She still felt trapped. Deliciously trapped.

“I’m not paying for dinner.” She was startled by that announcement. She always paid for the meals during dinner dates!

“Good. I don’t want you to pay for dinner.”

Had he moved closer? Becca’s breath caught in her throat and she stared up at him. “Are you going to kiss me?”

He smiled casually, but the heat in his eyes increased. “By the end of the night, I’m going to kiss you.”

“But not now?” she whispered, wishing he’d kiss her. Oh, she really wanted this man to kiss her! What a dangerous thought! She shouldn’t want Slater to kiss her. He was so dangerous. And yet, she’d never lived dangerously. Her whole life was all about routines and safety and doing what was expected of her. For once, just for tonight, she wanted to do something that was crazy! Something naughty! And Slater seemed like the perfect man to introduce her to the naughtiness of the world!

“Not yet,” he came back, moving even closer. The man actually leaned his head to the side and...did he just sniff her? “You smell good. What perfume is that?”

Perfume? “I don’t wear perfume,” she replied, but the words were barely above a whisper now. She could feel her heart pounding, sense her blood thrumming through her veins.

“Mmmm.” He sniffed again. “That scent is... amazing!” His voice was raspy. Hoarse.

“Why aren’t you going to kiss me?”

He pulled back slightly, his eyelids almost covering his irises as he looked down at her now. “Because if I kiss you, we’ll never get out of here.”

Becca could feel his body around her, feel the heat of him as his eyes took in each of her features one by one. Unfortunately, she didn’t have a response to his statement. He was probably right. That daring naughtiness reared its enticing head once more.

“Are we going then?”

“Yes.” But he didn’t move. He remained close, so close she could see the gold circle around the blue of his irises. Fascinating!

He sighed and pushed away from her. Becca’s instinctive reaction was to grab him and pull him close once more. Instead, she curled her fingers into fists and told herself that this was good. They’d head out of her house and go have dinner. With distance from his scent and that delicious heat, she felt stronger, more in control.

Then he took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers and that traitorous heartbeat sped up. “Let’s get out of here,” he said and tugged her along to the front door. He only paused when they reached her door so she could grab her purse, then he was pulling her along behind him out the door.

At his truck, he pulled open the passenger side door then turned around and...Becca squeaked when he lifted her up to the passenger seat.

“I can get in by myself, you know,” she grumbled, feeling like a toddler. It was only because she was short that he’d done that. She’d even worn heels tonight so she didn’t feel so petite. However, because of Slater’s crazy height, she needed to accept that nothing was going to help her eliminate the height difference.

“I know you can,” he replied back, then placed his hand on her knee. It was hot and heavy and caused her mind to blank all over again. “I just like any excuse to touch you. If you don’t want me to touch you, I won’t.” He stilled and she looked into his eyes. She should tell him not to touch her. She should tell him to just back off. He was mysterious and dangerous and scary and enticing and a whole host of other adjectives that eluded her lust-fizzled mind at the moment. Plus, she really loved him touching her.

When she didn’t say anything, his hands slid higher, nudging the hem of her skirt higher. Suddenly, his fingers weren’t on the fabric covering her knee. One of his hands was touching her bare skin! Had she thought his hand was hot before? Right now, it seared her! She gasped, her back straightening and they both looked down at his hand.

It moved higher! Say something, she thought. And yet, her only response was to move her legs wider, giving his hand space between her knees to touch her, to slide higher!

She heard his groan, her eyes pulling away from that hand. She looked at his face and realized that he was staring at his hand. No, not his hand. His eyes were hungry on her knee and her legs automatically parted wider.

“Becca!” he growled, his fingers tightening on her thigh. Then his hand was gone, and he looked directly into her eyes. Her knee felt cold now and she wanted to tell him to put it back. “You have to work with me to stop this!”

“Stop what?”

He stepped back, away from the V of the door. “We’re going to dinner!” he told her firmly, then slammed the door closed.

As he walked around the front of the SUV to the driver’s side, she noticed that his gait was stiffer now, not as laid back as normal. And when he pulled himself into the driver’s seat, she noticed a very impressive erection pressing against the front of his jeans.

“If you could stop looking at it, it might go away,” he growled as he pressed the button to start the engine.

Becca couldn't stop the bubble of laughter from erupting from her throat at that point. It was just...funny!

“Sorry!” she replied, covering her mouth with her fingers. Then she shook her head. “No. I'm not sorry. You did this to us.”

He was backing out of her short driveway but paused, looking over at her. “I did it? You're the one that chose to wear that outfit!” he snapped.

She looked down at herself. “What's wrong with my outfit?”

He concentrated on pulling out of her driveway and starting down the street. “It's all filmy and sexy. Plus, there are your lips.” He glanced over at her briefly before bringing his attention back to driving down the street. “What the hell did you put on your lips?”

She blinked. He thought her skirt was sexy? It was just a simple skirt. It was pink, for goodness' sake! She'd topped it with a white cotton top and a pink cardigan, buttoned at her waist but stopping just under her breasts. She'd thought her outfit was pretty. But he thought it was sexy? She liked being sexy! She loved the idea that a man like Slater was having trouble keeping his hands off of her! It was a wonderful sensation!

And what was he complaining about now? Her lipstick? “It's called ‘pink perfection’ and it's just regular lipstick, Slater.”

As she spoke, she noticed his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. “It's...nice.”

She smiled and settled into her seat a bit more. He liked her lipstick. He liked her outfit! He thought she looked sexy!

“You look very handsome tonight as well,” she hesitantly replied. He was wearing a pair of jeans that hugged his body, those muscular thighs pressing against the material. Well, his thighs and...that other part of him. Pulling her focus away from all the parts of his body that were pressing against the denim, she wondered what his blue sweater would feel like. He’d pulled a white tee-shirt underneath the sweater and just a small bit of it was visible over the V neckline. He looked a bit like a surfer dude transplanted to a cold environment. Very hot!

“Stop staring,” he growled, turning into the parking lot of the Italian restaurant.

She laughed as he pulled into a parking spot, feeling very brave and daring. “I can’t help it,” she replied. He parked and she pushed open the passenger side door, hopping down. Before closing the door, she turned and looked at him over the seats.

Slater had to restrain his instincts again. Becca was looking at him with that enticing sparkle to her pretty eyes and he wanted to pull her right back into the SUV and make love to her.

Dinner, he reminded himself. He was going to take her to dinner, and they were going to talk. They were going to learn about each other and talk about non-sexual subjects.

And he wasn’t going to maul her in the car! He wasn’t a teenager. He could restrain himself and behave.

He met her at the side of the SUV and he couldn’t stop himself from taking her hand again. Holding hands was innocent. Or it should be, he mentally groaned. Holding Becca’s hand wasn’t very innocent though. Touching her was dangerous. The skin-on-skin contact reminded him of what he really wanted to do. And it wasn’t just holding hands.

But this was nice, he thought. It was nice and normal. He needed a bit of normalcy with Becca. It grounded

him.

He reached out, pulling the door open and waited for her to walk inside the restaurant. That's when all thoughts of normal vanished from his mind. He realized she was wearing pink, strappy sandals. Where the hell had she found pink sandals? And the skirt seemed to flip and skim around her legs. She had great calves. What would her thighs look like?

"Good evening!" a teenaged host greeted them. "Just two of you for dinner tonight?"

Slater noticed several other men ogling Becca and he stepped forward, putting a proprietary arm around her waist. He felt her lean into him and relaxed, her move easing the anger slightly. It also helped that Becca was oblivious to the other men's interest.

"Yes. Just the two of us, Tammy," Becca answered with a polite smile.

The teen smiled back while grabbing two menus. "This way," she said, glancing over her shoulder and throwing a flirty look at Slater. He didn't roll his eyes as he followed Becca through the restaurant, but he didn't reciprocate the girl's hungry gaze either.

Tammy led them to a small table towards the rear of the restaurant. "Is this okay?" she asked.

Slater wondered what the girl would say if he replied, "Hell no! I'd like a to-go menu so I can continue ravishing the woman by my side." He nodded curtly before taking the seat on the opposite side of the table, then picked up the menu. "Since you obviously know this place pretty well, what would you recommend?"

"Everything," Becca replied, setting her menu down beside her. "The lasagna is amazing!"

He set his menu down as well. "Lasagna it is, then."

She blinked, glanced at the menu, then back at him. "You're not even going to look at the other options?" she

asked. “The fettucine is really good as well. And Dorian makes a mean spaghetti sauce.”

“The sauce will be on the lasagna, right?”

“Yes, but...”

He waved his hand slightly through the air. “I love lasagna.” He reached across the table and took her hand again, needing to touch her. But before he could wrap his fingers around hers, she slipped her hand under the table. Slater didn’t understand what was going on because ten minutes ago, she’d wanted his touch just as much as he wanted to touch her.

A moment later, another teenager, this one with a bad case of acne but with a great smile, stepped up to their table. “Hi Ms. Rebecca,” he greeted her, then turned and nodded to Slater. He gave the kid a sharp nod, but Becca’s retreat had pissed him off. “We’ll have two orders of lasagna.”

The kid nodded, writing down the order. Slater wondered why he had to stand there while he wrote it down. It wasn’t a difficult order. Couldn’t he walk away?

“And what would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have water,” Becca replied.

“Same,” Slater snapped, lifting an eyebrow to the kid. He was male, he should have understood! But no! The kid remained by their table. “I’ll bring out a basket of bread in just a moment. Would you like some grated cheese with that?”

Grated cheese? For their bread? What the hell? Slater glared at the kid, silently ordering the boy to leave!

“I’d love grated cheese for the dipping oil,” Becca replied with another one of those polite smiles. “Thanks for asking, Toby.”

The boy blushed, his head bobbing up and down slightly. “I know that’s the way you prefer it, Ms. Rebecca.”

After another longing glance, Toby dashed away, his shoulders hunched as he made his way back to the kitchen.

“Stop glaring at him, Slater,” she soothed.

“Give me your hand and I’ll stop,” he replied, trying to keep his tone conversational, but knew that it came out more as a growl.

“I can’t.”

He leaned back, glaring at her as he crossed his arms, leaning his elbows on the table. “You mean, you won’t.”

Becca adjusted the linen napkin over her lap, glancing around as if she were now self-conscious. “Okay, I won’t. Too many people here know me. I don’t want everyone to be gossiping about us tomorrow.”

He almost laughed. She thought that the town gossips wouldn’t hear about their date? Hell, he’d already noticed several people with their phones out. A couple of them had even surreptitiously taken pictures of them!

With a teasing gleam in his eye, he asked, “Are you ashamed of me?”

Becca’s sexy lips parted in surprise and she leaned forward, horrified. “No! Absolutely not!”

“Then why are you suddenly trying to pretend that we’re not on a date?”

That sexy mouth opened and closed and his mind reverted to thoughts of kissing those lips. Okay, in truth, he’d never stopped thinking about kissing her. That mouth was amazingly kissable.

“We’re...” she stopped, not sure what to say.

“We’re *on a date*,” he replied with emphasis, irritated that she would try to deny their current status.

“Yes, but...”

“It’s a date, Becca! At the end of dinner, I’m going to take you home and kiss you goodnight!”

The blush staining her cheeks after his statement was enough for him. For now. Satisfied, he nodded his head.

“Did you grow up here in Minnow?”

He wasn’t sure if he liked the relief in her eyes at the change of subject, but she answered his question.

“Yes. I was born here.” She laughed. “Well, I was born in the hospital in the next town over. We aren’t big enough for our own hospital. But yes, I’ve lived here my whole life.”

“What’s it like living here?”

They talked about the differences between small town life in Minnow and living in a big city like Philadelphia.

“I go into the city once a year and spend a long weekend attending the ballet and the shows,” she told him.

“You don’t get Broadway shows here in Minnow?”

She laughed. “We have the local high school plays. And the high school has a band that performs at various functions throughout the year.”

His mouth twisted into a grimace. “Not the same quality, I’m guessing.”

“No. Not really.” She laughed softly. “I shouldn’t be so negative. The kids try very hard and there are some excellent participants within both groups.”

“And some not so excellent ones?” he offered.

She grinned, but didn’t respond. “Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up? Any siblings?”

A warm loaf of bread arrived with a plate of olive oil and cracked pepper. Toby pulled a cheese grater out and a hunk of parmesan cheese and proceeded to top off the olive oil. “That’s good. Thanks Toby,” she said, adding a smile.

The boy moved away and Slater glared at the kid. He probably wasn't a bad kid, but he was male and he blushed whenever Becca spoke to him. Slater's territorial instincts had reared their ugly head and he didn't like any man, no matter the age, looking at his woman.

"Hi there!" a feminine voice called out.

Slater had been about to say something when he looked up to find a skinny blond woman approaching their table. He groaned, irritated by yet another interruption. He glanced at Becca and noticed the polite smile had disappeared. In its place was a completely blank expression as Becca watched the blond woman approach.

"I'm Dorothy McKay!" the woman gushed when she finally reached their table, extending her hand.

Slater shook the woman's hand. He even stood up in an effort to be polite. "Slater DeBrasio," he replied.

"It is such a pleasure to meet you! You're one of those FBI agents that freed our town from the jerks who terrorized everyone for so long!"

She emphasized "pleasure" and "so" for some reason. Maybe it was just the woman's natural ebullience, but he doubted it. She seemed like one of those fake women who used to bully the other kids in high school.

In fact, the woman shifted, either consciously or unconsciously, so that she was almost blocking Becca where she sat. Slater looked over at Becca while Dorothy went on and on about what a hero he and his team were and how pleased everyone in town was to have them here. She was saying something else, but Slater was still watching Becca. His woman was looking down at the table, her fingers fiddling with the linen napkin and Slater knew exactly what she was enduring.

He lifted a hand, stopping Dorothy in mid-sentence. "I don't mean to be rude, but Becca and I are on a date right now."

The woman's mouth fell open and she shifted ever so slightly, as if she were just now realizing that Becca was there. "I'm so sorry Becca! I didn't see you! How are you?"

"And just to set the record straight, it was Becca who is the hero. She's the one that gave us the evidence we needed to arrest the racketeering ring."

Dorothy's surprise was about as fake as her boobs, he thought. "Well, aren't you the little woman!" she gushed, even reaching out to lightly brush her fingers over Becca's shoulder. Then Dorothy turned back, once again blocking Becca and Slater had had enough.

Before he could say anything else, Dorothy went on. "But I guess that is just a perfect example of how small town gossip can be wrong, isn't it?" she continued, directing her attention to Slater once more.

"Dorothy, I'm sorry, but you're interrupting our meal." Slater said the words, adding a harder tone in order to break through the woman's monologue about whatever she thought was so important.

"Oh!" she blurted, her head swiveling from his uncompromising expression to Becca's, then back again. "Oh, you said you were on a date, but I didn't think..!" she laughed and looked at Becca again. "Well, that's cute!" She clasped her hands together. "Okay, well, I'll just see you tomorrow." She reached out to touch him, letting her fingers linger on the sleeve of his sweater as she turned to address Becca. "I know you rarely have a date, so I'm so sorry that this one time I interrupted you." She bent down and whispered "Good luck!" then walked away.

Slater watched her as he resumed his seat, then looked at Becca. She looked hurt and he reached out to grab another chunk of the bread. "What a bitch," he muttered.

That brought Becca's eyes back up. She was startled and glanced over her shoulder at the woman in question.

When she brought her eyes back to Slater's, she leaned forward asking, "You don't think she's beautiful?"

"Hell no!" he replied, settling his napkin over his lap. "She's rude and obnoxious, has no sense of social cues and thinks she's something that she's definitely not!"

Becca fiddled with the napkin a bit more, then lifted her eyes back up. "She's married to the local doctor. She sort of rules everything in town. Dorothy is a professional busybody."

Slater snorted in disgust. "She sounds annoying," he replied, relieved when she took a chunk of bread as well, dipping it right in the center where all of the cheese was piled up.

He knocked her hands out of the way, grabbing the chunk of cheese she was trying to get. But Becca wasn't one to sit back and take his obnoxious behavior. She smacked his hands right back, pushing his fingers out of the way. "Don't you dare!" Becca laughed, plucking the cheese off of his bread and plopping it onto hers, then popping it into her mouth before he could stop her.

He laughed softly, shaking his head as he munched on his own bread. "You know you're going to pay for that, right?"

She looked at his shoulders, then brought her eyes back up. "I'm not afraid of you."

He chuckled. "Yes you are. But that's okay. I'll teach you not to be."

Their lasagna arrived and they dug into the cheese covered food. The whole time, they continued to chat about their pasts, their favorite foods, their hobbies and anything else that occurred to them. When the meal ended and Toby took away their plates, Becca actually considered ordering dessert just so that she could spend more time with Slater.

Twisting her napkin in her fingers, she bowed her head slightly as she said, "Thank you for tonight." She sighed

and looked around before looking directly into his eyes. “It was one of the nicest dates I’ve ever been on.”

He looked directly into her eyes as he tossed some money down on the bill. “It isn’t over, Becca,” he promised.

Her eyes widened. “It isn’t?”

“Nope! We still have that kiss I promised.”

Her eyes now dropped and he could feel her gaze on his mouth. All of the relaxation he’d been feeling over their meal dissipated as she looked at him. Her eyes were like a silken caress.

“We need to get out of here,” he growled, reaching over and taking her hand, gently tugging her out of her chair. He put a hand to the small of her back as they wove their way through the other diners. Several people called out greetings to Becca, but she didn’t even notice. She headed straight for the door and he followed, just as eager to be alone with her!

Becca stepped out of the restaurant, her whole body trembling. Or maybe she was merely vibrating with anticipation? Slater was going to kiss her. She kept repeating that in her mind as she made a beeline for his SUV. She wanted to get into the truck before...before what? What was going to happen inside the truck that couldn’t happen outside of the vehicle?

Oh, lots of things, she thought and rushed over. She heard the beeping sound, indicating that he’d unlocked the SUV with his key fob. By that point, she was almost running, anticipation thrumming through her.

Just as her fingers touched the handle of the passenger side door, she also felt his fingers on her upper arms. He spun her around, pressing her against the side of the vehicle. “Are you running away from me?” he demanded, not touching her anywhere as he braced his hands on the vehicle on either side of her head.

“Running away?” she repeated, not sure what he was asking her. It didn’t make any sense!

“Don’t be afraid of me. If you don’t want me to kiss you, I...”

She reached up with both hands, her fingers grabbing onto his shoulders as she tugged him down. As soon as he was within reach, Becca kissed him. It wasn’t the most romantic kiss since she felt his surprise. But that lasted only a moment before he was a full participant in the kiss. Her lips pressed against his, then softened, gliding her mouth across his as she showed him that she wasn’t afraid of him. She was! Of course she was! In reality, Becca was terrified of this man. Not because of a kiss though. No, she was terrified of how devastated she would be as soon as he and his team were finished with their tasks here in town. When he left, he would take her heart with him.

But until that moment, she would savor Slater DeBrasio. She would enjoy every moment with him and learn anything she could from him. Right now, she wanted to learn how he kissed, how he held her while kissing her.

She heard him groan, then felt his hands on her waist, lifting her higher, pressing her back against the SUV. Then his knee was there, right between her legs, pressing her wider, exposing her to his body. Becca gave in to his silent demands, needing him, wanting him to go faster. She shifted against him, moaning when she felt his denim covered erection against the thin material of her panties. A sharp stab of need bolted through her, and she tightened her arms and legs around him.

A burst of laughter somewhere startled both of them and they froze, their breathing ragged as they stared into each other’s eyes.

“They can’t see us,” he told her.

Becca didn’t care. All she cared about was the group going away so she could continue kissing Slater, continue

feeling his hard body pressing against hers. She was so close, she could almost taste her release.

Unfortunately, he must have been a bit less gone because he merely grinned, shaking his head. “Not here,” he told her, then kissed her lightly before his strong hands cupped her butt, lifting her higher. But instead of continuing, he deposited her into the passenger seat, then slammed the door closed. He literally ran around the back of the SUV and pulled himself into the driver’s seat before starting the engine.

She could see the heat in his eyes, the determination. But he was still careful, still cautious as he backed out of the parking space. Thankfully, Minnow was a small town and it didn’t take long until he was pulling into her short driveway.

Becca had hoped her body would calm down before they arrived. She’d hoped that she might’ve gotten a few more brain cells to function.

That was not the case. Slater turned off the engine, then turned to look at her, one of his strong, long arms draped across the back of her seat. His fingers teased the tendrils of her hair, causing her body to shiver in reaction.

“I want to come inside, Becca,” he stated very clearly.

There was no mistaking his intent. If they went inside, they were going to have sex.

“Yes!” she whispered, her lips numb, her body tingling as if she might light on fire if she didn’t find some sort of relief.

He was out of the SUV and pulling her door open before she realized what was happening. He extended his hand, offering to help her down from the vehicle. She took his hand, her fingers trembling so badly, that the strength in his was a welcome reassurance.

He stood right behind her as she fumbled with the key to her front door. She almost dropped them when he brushed her hair aside and started kissing and nibbling on her neck. Thankfully, the lock released and Becca was able to push the

door open. But she didn't step inside. Instead, she turned around and lifted her arms up, anticipating his kiss.

They were ravenous after that. Every breath was a gasp as clothes fell off. She thought that they might be inside her house, but Becca wasn't sure, nor did she take the time to find out. She'd figure out pointless details later. Right now, she needed Slater naked!

"Becca!" he groaned, then lifted her up into his arms. She felt the cold wall behind her and his hot, hard chest against her breasts. Her naked breasts! How had he done that? She didn't care! She was too busy pulling his sweater and tee-shirt up and over his head, needing to feel his chest.

Then the material was gone and her fingers could roam and touch, explore and tantalize! Her fingers moved down over his chest, smoothing through the hair there, brushing against those fascinating male nipples and even lower, all the while, she couldn't stop kissing him.

"Where's your bedroom?" he growled, nipping at her neck, her earlobe.

"Dunno," she sighed, then gasped when she shifted against him again. "Somewhere!"

He might have groaned, or the sound could have come from her. Becca wasn't sure as she slid her fingers lower, fumbling with the snap on his jeans.

She heard a few muttered curses, then he pushed her hands out of the way. He had to set her down to do that and Becca was stunned that he'd been holding her in his arms this whole time.

Something ripped, but Slater's mouth nipped at her neck at the same time, his tongue sliding over a tendon and she moaned, drowning out any other thoughts or sounds.

Then he was there, his erection pressing against her and she gasped, her hands tightening on his shoulders. Looking into his eyes, she could barely breathe as she waited for him to fill her, to finally feel him completing her!

“Yes!” she whispered as he lowered her down, her thighs shaking as she tightened them around his waist. The wall was still against her back and she used that for leverage, tilting her hips so she could accept more of him. She wasn’t aware of her fingernails biting into the bare skin of his shoulders, but she was desperately aware of his large hands holding her hips as he pressed deeper and deeper, sliding out again, then pressing into her until he was filling her perfectly!

For a moment, they froze, their breaths mingling as they savored that moment. But Becca couldn’t remain still, not when it felt too good like this. When she shifted, he moaned, then he took over the movements, thrusting into her. This wasn’t a soft and sweet mating. It was primal. It was fast and furious and...and she shuddered, her body trembling as she climaxed in his arms. She closed her eyes, her arms tightening around him. And he continued for several more moments, thrusting into her, increasing the intensity of her release until he finally came with her, his own orgasm potentially just as powerful as her own.

All she could do was cling to him, holding onto his shoulders as their bodies slowly recovered from that moment.

“You have to put me down,” she whispered, her lungs still trying to fill with air, but she also knew that he couldn’t remain holding her like this. Surely his arms were about to give out soon.

“Do I?” Slater asked, breathing in the sweet scent of her as he lowered his head to kiss her neck. “You feel incredible.”

She laughed and the sound was light and happy. He felt the same way, he thought as he hugged her closer. A moment later, he released her, letting her legs fall to the ground, but he held her still, ensuring that she was steady while they both came back to the reality of what had just happened.

“Wow!” she whispered. “That was...” she paused, looking around at the clothes strewn around them. His sweater was a tangled mess on top of hers, and her skirt...she wasn't sure where her skirt was.

He was still wearing his jeans and he paused only long enough to shove them down his legs, toeing off his shoes in the process.

“Hold that thought,” he said and stripped off the remainder of his clothing. Then he lifted her into his arms, laughing with delight at her squeak, then walking down the hallway. “If you're not going to tell me where your bedroom is, then I'm going to use my superior tracking capabilities to find it myself.” He kicked open one door and found a closet. The next door was a small bedroom but there were boxes on top of the bed. Slater grunted, and continued down the hallway. At the end, he found a larger room with a chenille comforter spread out on the bed. “Ah, this one looks promising,” he said and pushed through.

Becca was kissing his shoulder, soft little nibbles that felt damn good!

He set her down on the bed, then backed up, giving her a kiss. “I'll be right back,” he promised, then turned and headed into the bathroom. It took him only moments to clean up, then he was coming back out. “You think that's going to stop me from ravishing you again?” he asked, amused that she'd pulled the cover over her.

She laughed, swatting the chenille against her legs as if she were tightening the cover's hold on her. “I'm warm.”

He whipped the cover away and settled himself next to her. “I'll keep you warm enough,” he vowed, then proceeded to make love to her again. And again! All night, he couldn't stop himself from touching her and as soon as he touched her, he'd have to make love to her again. She was like a drug that he couldn't seem to get enough of.

Chapter 4

Becca smiled as she pushed herself harder, racing up the hill back towards the center of town. She was out running later than usual, but she had still managed to get out before the town filled up with the tourists here for the weekend. She'd left a note for Slater beside him on the bed, letting him know that she was going out for a run. But would he still be there when she got back? Or would he be gone?

Preparing for the worst, she forced her mind to concentrate on the music from the headphones in her ears, the blood pumping in her veins. Last night had been...amazing! Incredible! She'd had sex before, but nothing like what she'd experienced in Slater's arms last night. In fact, she couldn't even put her past experiences in the same category as what she'd enjoyed with Slater. It should have a different word. It should have its own language!

Heart pounding, this time from the incline up the hill, and she rounded a corner. Just five more minutes and she'd be back in town and ready for a cup of coffee and a hot shower. Would he still be there? Or would he have left? Would he see the note? Or would he have been in such a hurry to get out of there that he missed it?

She'd never know until she got back to her house. Putting an extra oomph to her run, she sprinted up rest of the hill. If he wasn't there, then she'd shower and head over to the diner for pancakes to cheer herself up. If he was still there, then she'd make pancakes. And maybe take him back to bed! It was Saturday and she couldn't think of anything that absolutely had to get done today. A perfect day to spend in bed with a gorgeous man that made her body come alive!

Slater came out of the diner, carefully balancing two take out boxes filled with pancakes and two cups of steaming hot coffee. He whistled as he pulled his keys out of his

pocket, hoping to get back to Becca's place before she came back from her run. He wished she'd woken him up so they could have gone for a run together.

Turning, he was just about to unlock the door to his SUV when he spotted a car speeding too fast down the street. It was still pretty quiet along the streets, too early for most of the town's residents to be out and about. The diner was on a side street so there was even less traffic.

He thought about calling in the speeding car to the police station, but whoever was driving had already turned the corner. That's when he spotted Becca. She was sprinting up the hill, head down as she pushed herself to finish her run. She didn't see the car coming towards her, but he did. He also saw the car speed up and adjust so that it was heading right towards her!

Dumping the boxes and coffee, he sprinted towards Becca, grabbing her by the waist a fraction of a second before the car sped past. The car was so close, it took Slater a moment to assess all of his body parts to make sure that the car really had missed him.

"What in the world?" Becca moaned, pushing at his shoulders as she tried to sit up.

He shifted, rolling onto his side as he looked down at her. "Are you okay?" he demanded, his hands sliding over her arms and legs, testing everything to make sure that she wasn't hurt. "That car just tried to run you down!"

"Huh?" She wiggled away from him. "Slater, I'm all gross and sweaty!"

"I don't care about that!" he growled, grabbing her by the arms and looking into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" she assured him, putting a hand to his cheek in an effort to prove to him that she was unharmed. "It was just a careless driver. We get them every year. It's the excitement of being on vacation and...well, it's crazy, I know."

“Becca, whoever was driving that car was trying to run you down! It was intentional!” he roared, furious that anyone would dare to try and harm her!

“That’s ridiculous,” she scoffed, brushing a hand over his shirt. “But thank you. They might not have been aiming for me, but they certainly would have hit me if you hadn’t gotten me out of the way.” She leaned forward, kissing him briefly. “You’re my hero, Slater!”

Slater growled, standing up, then bending down to help her to her feet. He didn’t release her hands though. “Becca, I watched the car coming around the corner.” He squeezed her fingers now. “That car sped up and turned, aiming directly towards you.”

She stared up at him for a long moment, the fear in her eyes evident. But a moment later, she shook her head, scoffing at his claim. “That’s silly. Why would anyone want to try and run me down?”

He sighed as he pulled her into his arms. “I don’t know, love, but I’m going to find out.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist. “You’re still here!”

He pulled away slightly, keeping his arms around her waist. “Where did you think I’d be?”

She shrugged, her grin expanding. “I don’t know. I wasn’t sure if you’d have things you needed to do today.”

He chuckled. “Other than saving your pretty behind?” He threw an arm over her shoulder. “Not a thing.” He kissed the top of her head. “Let’s head over to the police station. This time, you’re going to file a report and I’m a witness.”

Chapter 5

“This is silly!” Becca insisted yet again. And again, Slater ignored her, tugging her into the building where he and his team were working. They were here today, trying to clean things up so they could move on. So when he showed her into the conference room where everyone was working on reports and boxing up evidence, she was more than wary of her presence in such a hushed atmosphere.

“Someone tried to kill Becca again today,” he announced.

That brought everyone’s heads up, their eyes blinking as they focused on Becca and Slater as he pulled a chair out and held it for her.

“You’re sure?”

Slater nodded. “I was coming out of the diner with our breakfast. I watched as the car sped up while coming around the corner, adjusted their aim, heading right towards her.”

All eyes turned towards Becca who was showered and in a pair of jeans and a denim shirt. “I think he’s making too much of this,” she told the group of three men and Josephine. “I think it was just a tourist that didn’t know where they were going and...”

“We just took down a racketeering ring, with your help.” Slater turned towards the others. “I know what I saw. Plus, there was someone in the woods a few days ago and they took a shot at her, missed. This is the second attempt on her life.”

Lex and Bart leaned forward, their eyes intense as they contemplated this news. Maddox spoke what they were all thinking. “Slater is right, we just took down a major crime syndicate with your help, Becca. And now there have been two attempts?” He shook his head. “That’s too much of a coincidence.”

Lex spoke up next. “We don’t like coincidences.”

The others nodded while Josephine started typing on her computer. “I’m looking for any traffic cameras,” she announced.

Becca laughed. “Good luck with that. We don’t have any.”

Josephine’s lips thinned, but she didn’t stop typing. “I’ll check for security cameras then. I’m sure someone has a camera in town. Even if I can’t find a…” she stopped, her eyes widening and her lips went slack for a moment.

“What have you found?” Slater demanded.

Josephine lifted a finger up in the air, silently telling everyone to pause for a moment, then she looked over the top of her computer monitor. “Was it a tan sedan with tinted windows?”

Slater’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. Why?”

“Because there’s a new report coming over the police scanner about a car fire. A tan sedan with tinted windows.”

A long silence followed that news, then everyone turned to look at Becca. “Who would want to kill you, honey?” Slater asked, taking her hand.

Becca had no idea. She wasn’t the type of person people wanted to kill! “I’m boring!” she replied. “I’m the person in the background who gets things done. I’m not interesting. I don’t rock the boat.” She looked over at Slater, her eyes pleading now. “I don’t even know where the boat is!”

Maddox chuckled and Lex actually let his lips curl up into a semblance of a smile. Slater took her hand and held her fingers in his, offering his strength.

Over the next two hours, the six of them brainstormed on ideas on who might want to hurt Becca. Unfortunately, there was very little to go on. In the end, Maddox ended the conversation saying, “Slater, you’re in charge of keeping Becca safe. I want you to stick with her and observe all of her

interactions with the various townspeople. Let us know if someone acts odd, or even if you get a bad vibe.” He turned his attention to Becca. “You’re going to need to take this seriously. I appreciate that you perceive your role here in town to be one of a behind the scenes kind of issue, but someone disagrees. Until we find out who and why, you’re going to have to be careful.”

Lex nodded. “The fact that they’ve made two attempts on your life already…”

“And in broad daylight,” Bart added.

“This means that the person is desperate. They’re going to try again.”

Josephine tapped her pen against the table. “I’m going to start looking into the financials of some of the prominent townspeople. I’ll be discreet and go through the back channels. Nothing official.”

Maddox agreed. “That’s good. Always start with the money.”

“It’s one of the more motivating factors,” Slater explained when he felt Becca’s fingers tremble. “We’re going to find out who is doing this, honey. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

Becca looked into Slater’s eyes, her heart twisting with misery. Everything had seemed so wonderful this morning. The sun was shining, she’d just discovered what sex was all about and she was hoping to learn more.

“Right.” She sighed, her shoulders curling inward. “I’ll just…what? Go about my day like I would normally?”

“That’s about it,” Slater replied. “The only difference is that I’ll be beside you every step of the way.”

She looked at him sadly. “You don’t have to do that. I can…”

“That’s non-negotiable, love.” He looked at her carefully. “But if you don’t want me, then Lex can do it.”

Her eyes widened. She looked between the two men, not sure what to say. So she went with honesty. “I just don’t want to be a burden.”

He chuckled. “Believe me, Becca, spending time with you will not be a burden.”

“You don’t mind, then?”

The others chuckled, but they all turned away, closing up their laptops and getting ready to leave. It was their way of giving the two of them a small bit of privacy. A few minutes later, Becca and Slater were alone in the conference room.

“Seriously Slater, I don’t need...”

“I do,” he told her, his deep voice hard and uncompromising.

She stared at him, not sure what he was actually saying. There seemed to be a different meaning than the words he spoke. “What does that mean?” she asked, her voice soft.

Slater knew that she was terrified. She’d had a traumatic morning and not a whole lot of sleep. He couldn’t do anything about the lack of sleep, but he was damned sure going to do something about keeping her safe!

The first step was to not overwhelm her right now. So instead of telling her that he wanted to be her everything, that he didn’t want her to be invisible and working in the background of her own life, he wanted her front and center... instead of telling her that, he squeezed her fingers. “How about if we just take this one moment at a time? We’ll figure everything out, together.”

Her lashes lowered and Slater wondered if he’d read her wrong. Had he said the wrong thing?

But she looked up at him, those big brown eyes hiding something. She nodded. “That sounds like a good plan,” she told him and stood up.

Every instinct inside of him warned him that he’d said the wrong thing, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what he could say or do to make it better. He didn’t want to scare Becca away with the depths of his feelings for her. So instead of asking her to spend the rest of her life with him, he took her hand and tried to figure out how to spend today with her in ways that didn’t cause her to run for the hills. Again.

“How about if we go to the grocery store and get something for dinner tonight? We can just relax and cook together and talk. Maybe something will come to you.”

“What might come to me?” she asked, following him out of the building.

“I don’t know. Something someone said that seemed a bit off. Maybe someone came to your office and asked you for information that didn’t make sense at the time, but you dismissed it. Anything out of the ordinary. Maybe a strange conversation that you overheard.” He unlocked the doors to the SUV and held open the passenger door for her. “Anything at all. It might be benign in your mind, but someone else might think it’s very important. That’s the kind of thing we’re going to look out for.”

Becca nodded, sighing as she watched him walk around to the driver’s seat. She hated being a burden. And there was no way Slater could convince her that she wasn’t.

“What would you be doing today if you didn’t have to babysit me?” she asked when he pulled himself into the driver’s seat.

He froze for a brief moment, his finger poised over the engine button. He swiveled his head, looking directly at her with those intense, green eyes. “I would have spent it in bed with you. I would have showed you about ten different

variations on what we'd done last night." He pressed the button and put the SUV into reverse, his hand moving to the back of her seat. "I probably would have eaten breakfast lunch and dinner off of your body, then made you so crazy, you wouldn't ever think about getting out of bed and leaving me to go for a run again."

With those words hanging in the air between them, he backed out of the parking space, completely unaware of how breathless she felt at the moment.

"Wow!" she whispered. Nice plan!

"Yeah, that's what I thought when I woke up this morning. But then I reached out for you and found a note."

She watched his fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was just...so happy about...well, last night."

He glanced at her, then brought his eyes back to the road. "You were so happy about everything we did last night that you decided to get out of the house as soon as possible?"

Stunned, Becca wondered if he was angry about her absence this morning. Surely she was mistaken!

He pulled into the parking lot of the local grocery store. It was Saturday, so the store was busier than normal. She released her seatbelt and came around to the back, but when he stood next to her, she grabbed his hand, stopping his momentum. He stopped and turned, looking down at her. Becca stared up at him, squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry," she told him in a low but sincere voice. "I'll admit, I wasn't just... well, happy this morning. I was also a bit freaked out." She blinked, surprised that she'd admitted the truth to him, especially when she hadn't realized the truth herself until she'd said the words. "I should have been there when you woke up. If the roles were reversed, I would have been really hurt if you weren't there."

He stared at her for a long moment, then he pulled her into his arms, giving her a sweet, tender kiss right there in the

grocery store parking lot!

“That was really hard for you, wasn’t it?” he asked, his voice rough but gentle. His hand was wrapped around her neck, his thumb softly caressing her cheek.

“Yes.” She cringed, then said, “Painful.”

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. Becca took a moment to savor his chest as she pressed herself against him. Goodness, he smelled incredible!

“You’re learning,” he replied, then pulled back. “Come on. Let’s get enough food so we don’t need to go out again until Monday morning.”

She laughed, feeling light and carefree suddenly. Walking beside Slater was a strange, but good, experience. Usually, she shopped late on Wednesdays when there were fewer people in the store. She’d learned that she could get the tedious chore of grocery shopping accomplished more easily when there were less people around. Going to the store on a Saturday when most of the other townspeople were also getting their groceries for the week was a very odd sensation. She felt on display, especially while walking next to a man who was well over six feet tall, not to mention an alpha male, warrior type. He was eye candy in the most basic sense of the word. All of the ladies shopping today paused to look at him, some with longing and others with jealousy. Every man looked over at Slater, then pulled in their stomachs while straightening their spines. Again, jealousy was rampant, but for a different reason.

It wasn’t just the busyness that was different when shopping with Slater. He was a horrible tease! He picked up a cucumber, hefted it in his hand, then looked over at Becca with a naughty gleam in his eyes. “Should we get backup?” he whispered into her ear.

While she was blushing, furtively glancing around to ensure that no one else overheard his comment, he sauntered over to the cart and tossed the cucumber in. Then he moved to

the melons, his hands shifting over the round fruit. He pressed and...was the man fondling the cantaloupe?

She was just about to dismiss the possibility, but then he looked over at her, his eyes dropping to her breasts. Then he shook his head and left the melons as if they weren't good enough.

Again, she couldn't stop the heat from entering her cheeks while she moved over to the lettuce, trying desperately to pretend that he wasn't with her.

"Agent DeBrasio!" a shrill, feminine voice called out. "Fancy seeing you here on a Saturday morning!"

Becca groaned as Dorothy sashayed over to stand next to Slater. Too close! The woman smiled up at him and Becca contemplated throwing a tomato at the woman. Her fingers started to tighten on the fruit, but she pulled back, afraid she might actually smash the tomato instead of throwing it.

"Hello Dorothy," Slater called out, then turned, seeming to look for Becca. She moved further off, determined to avoid a confrontation.

"Don't tell me that you're here buying food for yourself! A big, gorgeous man like you needs a woman to cook for you. Why don't you come over to my place tonight and I'll cook you up a meal that will tempt your palate in ways you've never dreamed of!"

Becca snorted, shaking her head as she tossed a bag of carrots into the cart. She started to walk away, intending to head for the dairy section. But Slater's arm whipped out, pulling her against his side. His arms wrapped around her waist, shifting her so that her back against his chest as he said, "Thanks for the offer, Dorothy, but Becca and I have plans tonight."

Dorothy's smile faltered as she looked down at Becca. The woman's expression turned to horror, almost as if the woman couldn't believe that Slater would choose Becca over her! "Well, that's...um...you two have a great night!"

“Thanks, Dorothy. You too!”

Unfortunately, Dorothy wasn't finished. As she started to move away, she leaned forward, completely ignoring Becca as she whispered, “Call me when you need a real woman!” and then she walked away, her hips swaying in the skintight white jeans.

Becca snorted with disgust and tried to pull away. But Slater's arms kept her close and she twisted around, trying to glare up at him. “Let me go,” she hissed.

“Not a chance,” he growled right back, low in her ear. “That woman is scary!”

Becca was so shocked by his words, she couldn't stop the laughter from bursting out of her. “Right!”

“Seriously,” he replied. “She's one of those she-wolves. I bet she gets all hairy and howls at the moon when it's full.”

He was incorrigible, but Becca's anger completely disappeared with his outrageous comments. “The cheese is that way,” she told him, pointing down the aisle.

Slater still took a moment to peer down the aisle, looking as if he was trying to ensure that Dorothy wasn't anywhere near the dairy section.

Finally, he nodded. “Coast is clear. Let's do it. But no stopping. No lingering. We get in. We get out. We are on a mission and...”

“Becca!”

This time, it was a male voice and they both turned to find a man in his fifties carrying one of those red baskets for customers who only need a few items.

“Mayor Wilson,” Becca exclaimed, pulling out of Slater's arms. “What are you doing here this morning?”

The mayor laughed. “I could say the same thing about you. I thought you did your grocery shopping on

Wednesdays.”

Becca tried to hide her surprise. She hadn’t realized that her boss paid any attention to her weekly routines. “I normally do, but this week, things have been a bit off kilter for my schedule.”

Slater chose that moment to throw his arm around her shoulders. “Good afternoon, Mayor Wilson,” he greeted, extending his hand to the shorter, more rotund man.

The mayor was obviously stunned by Slater’s greeting and it took him a moment to respond. But the politician rallied quickly, shaking Slater’s hand and pasting an eager smile on his blandly handsome features. “Agent DeBrasio. I didn’t know that you and your team were still in town. How much longer will you be around?”

“As long as it takes to clean things up,” Slater replied, his voice oddly firm and unfriendly.

Becca looked up at him, wondering if this was what Slater was like when he was on duty officially. Oh, she knew that he said he was watching her while they tried to find someone who had tried to run her down. But she was fairly sure that the police would find the...nope. The car was burned up. That was definitely odd.

“I heard that there was a bit of a ruckus earlier this morning. You’re okay, right?” the mayor asked. “We wouldn’t want our favorite deputy to get hurt!” he said, adding a laugh as if Becca avoiding a murderous driver was funny.

“How did you hear about that?” Slater demanded, his attention on high alert now.

Becca turned, surprised by Slater’s question as well as the way his hands were fisted on his hips and his feet braced wide apart. It was an alpha-male stance, if ever she’d seen one!

“He’s the mayor, Slater,” she explained carefully, then smiled at the mayor as if trying to calm the situation. “The police chief probably called him as soon as we left the station

after filing the report.” She turned back to the mayor. “It was nothing,” she said to the man. “Slater got me out of the way, so no one was hurt.”

“It wasn’t ‘nothing’, Becca,” Slater countered, still glaring at the mayor. “It was attempted murder.”

There was a long, awkward silence after that statement. Becca shifted on her feet, not sure what to say after that kind of a pronouncement. The mayor had the same problem, his mouth opening and closing with an odd, fish-like action.

Thankfully, the mayor recovered quickly, pulling himself up straighter as he looked at both Becca and Slater. “Well!” he harumphed. “I’m sure that...” he looked up at Slater again, winging his hand through the air as if trying to encompass all of Becca. “She’s perfectly safe here in Minnow. We don’t have crimes like that in our town.”

Slater’s eyebrow lifted, demonstrating his disbelief. “Other than the two attempts on Becca’s life, you mean?”

The mayor’s jaw went slack. “Well, yes. Other than...uh...” The man shifted the red basket on his arm, glancing about as if looking for an escape. He looked at Becca, then nervously up at Slater. “Well, it seems as if you have adequate protection.” He ran a hand over the back of his neck. “I’ll see you on Monday, Becca,” he replied, then hurried down the aisle, his head bowed. He paused for a brief moment, looking over his shoulder to glance back at them. When he realized that Slater was still glaring at him, he hurriedly turned back around and rushed down the aisle. However, Slater noticed that he was pulling his cell phone out, typing out a frantic message to someone.

Slater pulled out his own phone and pressed a number.

“What’s up?”

“Jo, I need you to pull up the phone tap on Thomas Wilson.”

“The mayor?” she asked. He could already hear her fingers tapping away at her computer.

“The very same. I don’t know what’s going on, but we just had a very suspicious conversation with the man. Also, can you check in with the police station and find out who called the mayor about Becca’s statement?”

“Interesting that he already knew about that,” Jo replied, the sounds of her keyboard still in the background. “Yep! I’m on it.”

“Thanks,” and he ended the call.

“Mayor Wilson didn’t have anything to do with the car accident this morning!” Becca hissed. She poked him in the stomach when he didn’t loosen his hold around her while he dialed another number.

“What?” Lex asked.

“The mayor.”

There was a pause, then Lex said, “Thomas Wilson. Got him. Grocery store with you?”

“Probably not for long.”

They ended the call, neither bothering with the pleasantries that Slater had used with Josephine. They definitely treated the female member of their team differently. Then again, Becca suspected that they treated each member of the team differently, depending on the person’s personality.

“What’s Lex going to do?”

Slater stuffed his phone back onto a pocket and looked around. “He’s going to watch the guy. Find out who he talks to next, where he goes. Jo is going to find out who he just called and look into his communications. If they don’t come up with any issues, we leave him to his happy world and keep looking for other suspects.”

Becca thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “Good enough.” She pulled out of his arms saying, “But you

won't find anything on Mayor Wilson. He's a good man. He has four kids, two of whom are in college already, both going to excellent schools. The third one is going to graduate high school this year and has already been accepted to the University of Pennsylvania."

"Good to know," Slater replied, moving closer to her as he pulled his phone out, typing a message to someone.

"What was that message about?"

He grunted, then pushed the grocery cart behind her as she grabbed a container of milk. "It was to Jo, letting her know that the mayor has two kids in college so she should look into his financials." He grabbed a bag of shredded cheese and admired Becca's derriere as she contemplated the various yogurt flavors. "She's probably already on it, but it made me feel better to send the message."

Becca looked at him over her shoulder, a smile on her features, then she turned back and selected cherry, raspberry, blueberry, and strawberry yogurt flavors. "Good to know." She dumped her preferences in the cart. "What kind of yogurt do you prefer?"

He snorted. "That's girly food," he replied, then tossed two lemon flavors into the cart and pushed it down the aisle. Becca laughed and couldn't resist hugging him. She'd thought to give him just a brief hug, but he had other ideas and pulled her in closer, kissing the top of her head.

She smiled as she walked beside him, ignoring the admiring glances from the other females in the store. For the moment, Slater was hers. She wasn't going to worry about the future. She'd be heartbroken when he left, but for now, she was reveling in the man's surprisingly affectionate nature.

Lex spotted the mayor coming out of the grocery store only moments after Slater's call. He logged the time in his notebook, then followed the man at a distance.

Thankfully, the town was small enough that it was easy to follow anyone but busy enough that one or two cars didn't stand out. It was an easy tail from the grocery store to the park right down the street. Lex parked a fair distance away and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

The man paced back and forth, obviously nervous as he spoke into his cell phone. Lex wished that he had a parabolic listening device, but he was confident that Josephine would be recording the phone call.

The guy stuffed his phone into his pocket, but he didn't leave the park. There were several families playing on the town's public playground and Lex glanced at them, merely noting their proximity in case something dangerous occurred. Two families and six kids were hanging out on the playground. A few of the older kids were on the swing set, more kids climbing around on the equipment and one woman stood at the bottom of a slide, trying to encourage a little boy or girl to go down the slide. The woman had awesome legs, but he pulled his eyes back to the mayor. Back to the job.

Shifting in his seat, he sighed, knowing from experience that it could be a long wait before something new happened.

He was wrong! Barely five minutes later, a blond woman in tight, white jeans and high heels traipsed over to the man. There was an argument, but before it could get out of hand, another man ran over to the couple. Lex immediately started taking a video of the argument with his phone, pressing the button that would automatically send the video feed to Josephine's phone. She'd then shoot it out to the other team members so everyone was seeing the same thing.

The woman gesticulated with her arms frantically and seemed to be trying to calm everyone down. The mayor kept putting his hands over his ears as if trying to not hear what was being said. The third member seemed to be the one in charge. He spoke and the other two stopped arguing. He said

something, then all three of them nodded, looked around and walked away in different directions.

Lex heard a buzz and pulled out the earbuds from his pocket, placing one in his ear. “You getting all of this?” Lex asked.

Immediately, he heard both Maddox and Bart respond in the affirmative.

“I’ll take the woman,” Maddox announced.

“I’m on the other guy,” Bart came back.

Lex pulled away from the curb. “I’m still on the mayor.”

Lex spotted Maddox and Bart, but only because he knew what to look for. Otherwise, they would have been invisible.

“I was close enough towards the end to hear the conversation,” Bart announced. “They’re agreeing to finish the job and get rid of her.”

Maddox sighed. “That will be enough for a warrant. Josephine?”

“I’m on it,” she replied immediately. “I’ll go outside of the town of Minnow for the warrant, like we did for the phone tapping warrants, just in case they have someone in the courts.”

“Good idea,” Maddox replied immediately.

Chapter 6

Slater glanced at his cell phone, quickly reading the messages as he carried the groceries into Becca's cute house.

"Are you sure I can't help you?" she called out.

"Inside, woman!" he grumbled, then surreptitiously glanced down the street as he hefted all of the bags inside.

Becca merely rolled her eyes, huffed a bit, but she backed up into the foyer of her house. That was probably only because Slater was there, pressing her back with his body and the bags of groceries. He didn't care why, as long as she wasn't in the line of fire.

"I just got word from the team, Becca. Dorothy, the mayor, and some other man we haven't identified yet are trying to 'get rid of' someone," he explained to Becca as he carried the bags into her happy looking kitchen. She'd repainted all of the kitchen cabinets so they were a bright, fresh white. She'd added stools that she'd refinished and painted a very pale pink. The whole effect was pretty and light and very feminine!

Becca froze, turning around to stare up at him. "They are..."

He stopped unloading the groceries and pulled her into his arms. "They aren't going to accomplish their goal, honey," he assured her. "We're going to stop them."

Her eyes turned confused with a tinge of hurt. "But... why?"

"We don't know, but I suspect that Jo will have answers by the end of the day. She's going through their financials to find out if there are any suspicious bank deposits."

Becca pulled back slightly, keeping her arms around his waist as he looked up at him. "She's that good?"

He nodded. “Yeah. She really is.”

Becca sighed and laid her head against his chest, feeling warm and secure. “Thank you!”

Slater tightened his arms around her. “I won’t let anything happen to you, Becca. I *can’t* let anything happen to you!”

She closed her eyes, a tear slipping out from beneath her lashes.

He heard her sniff and pulled back, looking down at her. “Hey, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Becca shrugged, pulling out of his arms and straightening the blue sweater she’d pulled on earlier today. “No one has ever taken care of me like this,” she told him. She lifted teary eyes up to his. “I think I’m falling in...” she stopped, horrified of what she’d been about to say.

His eyes turned hungry. “Say it, Becca,” he urged softly, his hands coming up to frame her face.

She hugged the milk jug to her stomach, shaking her head. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Say it anyway.”

She backed up a step and his hands fell away. She lowers her head, her shoulders curving inward slightly. “I don’t want to scare you away, Slater.”

After a moment of silence, Becca said, “I know that we barely know each other, Slater, but...you make me feel...different.”

“And you love me,” he asserted firmly.

Becca started up at him with those big, blue eyes and his stomach tightened while he waited for her response. “Yes,” she finally said.

He let out a deep breath. “Damn, Becca, you take my breath away,” he announced, then pulled her into his arms, depositing the milk on the counter before kissing her until she

was breathless. “I loved you from the first moment I saw you.” He laughed, then shook his head. “No, that’s not true. You irritated the hell out of me because you were so unlike all of the women I’d dated in the past.” He recognized the look of alarm in her eyes. “You were different and special,” he continued, not letting her pull away. In fact, he backed her up against the kitchen wall. “You make me laugh. I want to touch you every moment we’re together!”

She looked wary, but he recognized the yearning in those wary eyes of hers. “That’s just sex, Slater,” she whispered, but there was hope in her voice now.

“No, it’s not just sex. For men, sex is the manifestation of their feelings. And I’ve never felt anything like what we enjoyed last night. You said that I make you come alive?” She nodded and he groaned. “You make me feel on fire! Not just for sex, love. But for everything. I want all of your smiles, all of your sighs. I love just feeling you against me. I love talking to you, teasing you, making you laugh at inappropriate moments.” She laughed, but the tears were coming faster now. “I love you, Becca James. I love you more than I’d thought it possible to love a woman!”

“Slater!” she gasped, throwing herself into his arms.

He laughed and lifted her up, carrying her into the bedroom. The groceries were forgotten as he made love to her until neither of them could breathe. And afterwards, he pulled her into his arms and sighed with contentment.

Chapter 7

“Okay, here’s the plan,” Maddox called out and everyone turned to face him, the room quieting down. “We have a pretty good idea of who is behind the recent attempts on Becca’s life, and we’re pretty sure that we know why. But we don’t have enough for a warrant to search their houses. Nor do we think they would have anything stored at their homes that would be admissible in court.” He looked around the room. “So we’re going to set a trap.”

Immediately, a new surge of energy could be felt.

Slater stared at Becca. “I know you don’t think that anyone in town is guilty, so let’s find out, okay?”

Becca’s lips pursed for a moment, but eventually, she nodded.

Maddox nodded. “Okay, so now that we’re all on board, here’s the plan.

Becca watched with growing horror as someone, she couldn’t tell if it was male or female, shoved the window to her bedroom open. First there was a black-clad leg, then an arm. Then a whole body shimmied through her window.

She gasped out loud when the dark figure pulled something out of a hidden pocket. “A needle?” she blurted out. “They want to poison me?”

Thankfully, Slater and his team of super-agents had anticipated something like this happening. As a result, Becca wasn’t in her bed, or even in her house. She was sitting at the temporary headquarters for the FBI team, several miles away.

Josephine nudged Becca with the bowl of popcorn. “This is the good part,” she said, popping buttery, cheesy, salty popcorn into her mouth. “Just watch. You’re gonna love this.”

Becca grabbed a handful of the popcorn, but she forgot to lift it to her mouth. The scene unfolding in her bedroom was too fascinating. Watching everything on her large monitor through a live video feed that Slater and Lex had set up earlier in the afternoon was a bit like watching a movie. As soon as Maddox had read the text messages between Thomas Wilson, Dorothy McKay, and the good doctor McKay, Dorothy's husband, Slater had gotten Becca out of her house and to the safety of their conference room.

They'd set up the cameras and motion detectors, then hidden themselves away, waiting for the attack.

The syringe glinted off the moonlight streaming in through the windows, making the whole scene appear much more sinister. Becca shivered, then stuffed the popcorn into her mouth.

Before she realized what could happen next, four big men surrounded the figure, ordering him or her down on her knees.

"And...that's it!" Jo replied, leaning back in her chair. "The rest is just cleanup."

"But who was it?"

"That, my friend," Jo laughed as she pointed to the screen, "is the local doctor! And I suspect the stuff in that syringe is a drug that was meant to stop your heart. Since Minnow doesn't have a coroner, he would have done the autopsy on you. He could have simply ignored the toxicology report and said that you had a problem with your ticker, or some other ridiculous reason for your death."

Becca wasn't sure if she was angry or horrified. "That jerk!"

Another woman burst into the room carrying three beers. "What did I miss?" Ashley demanded, handing out the beers and taking the third seat. She stared at the screen for a moment, then groaned. "I missed everything!"

Jo patted Ashley's shoulder. "Sorry about that. I would have called to you, but..." she shrugged.

"It was fascinating!" Becca gushed. "I can't believe it was over so easily."

Ashley wiggled her fingers towards Jo. "Do a replay. I want to see my man at work."

Jo obliged, rewinding the recording to the point where the figure slipped in through the window. Several moments later, the intruder was on his knees, the black balaclava off in order to reveal his face.

"What will happen to the mayor and Dorothy?" Becca asked. "Will they be picked up?"

"I love that man!" Ashley sighed.

Jo and Becca both pulled their eyes back to the live image on the screen in time to see Maddox winking at the cameras. The other two women burst out laughing, not shocked that he knew his wife was gushing over him.

"Isn't he amazing?" Ashley asked, taking a long sip of her beer. "The others are great too, but Maddox...! He's...!" She didn't end that sentence, just let it linger in the air.

"Bart too," Jo commented, a dreamy look in her eyes as well.

Becca smiled, but kept her eyes on the video. That's when she noticed Slater's face step into view, his eyebrows lifted as if he were waiting for her. Suddenly, Becca realized that the men could hear their conversation!

"You're hot too, honey!" she burst out, then cringed as the other two ladies started laughing when Slater nodded his approval. In the background, Lex snorted his disgust as he trudged through the three other men, all of them heavily armed and covered in bullet proof vests as well as a slew of other equipment that could be weapons or something else. They had no idea.

"So, what happens next?"

Ashley and Josephine were smiling in her direction. “You mean, besides setting a wedding date?”

Becca choked on her beer, her gaze slashing towards the monitor. Lex was the only one still in view and he paused, looking up at the camera expectantly.

“Oh!” Becca said in her usual pithy way. “We aren’t...that’s not...!”

All of a sudden, Slater’s angry gaze stepped into the camera, blocking out Lex who immediately burst out laughing.

“Soon!” Ashley and Jo both called out. Then the ladies laughed, clinking their beer bottles together. “We’re so romantic, aren’t we?”

Becca’s mouth was hanging open as her eyes moved from the two ladies to the monitor. Slater nodded his agreement, then disappeared again.

Maddox and Bart each grabbed one arm on either side of the doctor, then hauled the guy to his feet. He was already handcuffed but hadn’t spoken a word. After the guys hauled the man out of the room, there was nothing else to see. Becca’s bedroom, so full of activity moments before, was silent now. Slater had even closed the window to keep out the chilly night air.

That’s when she noticed the silence in the room. Turning, she looked over at Jo and Ashley. “What?”

“When’s the date?” Jo asked.

Ashley nodded. “You really need to have a date in mind. I’d suggest getting out your calendar and figuring out what works for your schedule.”

Jo agreed. “Otherwise, you’ll find yourself on a flight to Vegas tomorrow morning.”

Both women nodded as they took another long sip of their beer. “If I hadn’t demanded that my grandparents attend

my wedding,” Jo explained, “Bart would have tossed me over his shoulder and carried me to the plane,” Jo explained.

Ashley laughed. “Maddox was on his computer about to purchase plane tickets to Vegas when I caught him. I told him that there was no chance that we were getting married in Vegas.” She shook her head with exasperation. “He still tried to convince me, but I was adamant. I wanted a church wedding and forced him to wait.”

“You did?” Becca gasped, glancing at the still empty screen. “How long did you make him wait?”

“I got one month,” Ashley announced.

Jo lifted her hand in the air. “Three weeks.”

Becca’s jaw dropped open. “Three weeks! How in the world did you plan a wedding in that short period of time?”

Jo wiggled her fingers in the air. “We’ve got you covered, girlfriend!”

Becca laughed, delighted with these two women. She felt as if they were friends already. Her whole life, she’d only had acquaintances. Over the past few weeks, she slowly came to realize that she’d lived too long in Minnow and hadn’t ever truly liked it. She’d lived here simply because her parents and grandparents had lived here and had instilled in her a sense of obligation to the town.

Now, with Slater in her life, it felt as if she could truly breathe and the thought of other opportunities, jobs outside of Minnow, where she was just the shadow that fixed everyone’s world, started to interest her.

Jo passed the popcorn around, then reached into her tote bag and pulled out a box of chocolate. “Now for the party to really start!” she announced. “Should we watch *Gilmore Girls* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?”

Ashley and Becca looked at each other, a smile forming on their faces as they turned back to Jo. “*Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer,” they said together.

Ashley high fived Becca and they settled in for a good laugh.

An hour later, the doors to the conference room burst open and four heavily armed men stepped into the space. What had previously been a quiet night of fun shows, chocolate, popcorn, and beer now became a testosterone filled area where the men stole the women’s beers while they stripped off their gear and stored it away in secure cases.

As soon as Slater was free of his equipment, he stalked over to her and lifted her up into his arms, carrying her out of the room. In a smaller space that contained a desk clean of everything other than a keyboard and monitor, he set her down and pressed his hips between her knees. “When?” he demanded.

Becca was already two beers into the evening and she leaned back, admiring Slater’s dark hair and handsome features. “You have very blue eyes.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “Are you drunk?”

She shrugged, leaning back in what she hoped was a seductive pose. “Tipsy. And maybe a wee bit drunk.”

“How many beers have you consumed?”

She lifted the bottle in her hand, surveying the liquid. “Almost two.”

He chuckled and took the bottle, downing the rest of the beer. “You’re such a lightweight,” he growled. “I don’t care if you’re tipsy or drunk. When?”

“When what?” she asked, tilting her head as she smiled happily up at him. “Chocolate makes me very happy, but I shouldn’t eat it because I’ll get fat.”

“I’m buying you a load of chocolate. I don’t care if you gain weight. You’re my woman and I’ll love you no matter what. Now set a date, my love.”

“A date for what?”

“For the wedding. If you don’t have a date, then we’re...”

“April twentieth,” she announced, then laughed when he grimaced. “You wanted to take me off to Vegas?”

“Yeah. That was my plan.”

She nodded. “The ladies warned me about that.” She sighed and touched his shoulder. “What happened with Dorothy and Thomas?”

“We picked them up. All three of them are being transported to a holding facility in Philadelphia. We don’t trust the local police to hold them here.” He lowered his head, nuzzling her neck. “Are you sure you don’t want to fly out to Vegas? We could be married by the weekend.”

“No! Not Vegas. I want Jo and Ashley to be at our wedding. April twentieth.” She sighed, sliding her fingers into his hair. “What’s going to happen to the three of them?”

“They’ll be charged with attempted murder. We’ll interview them tomorrow. We’re letting them sweat it out for the rest of tonight.” He lifted his head but remained close. “We suspect that they’ll all turn on each other. These aren’t hardened criminals. They were active members of DeFila’s racketeering scheme. Over time, they got greedy, enjoying the easy cash. They tried to kill you because you stopped their operation.”

“Yes, but DeFila is already in jail! They could have just hunkered down and no one would have known that they were involved!”

He shook his head. “I think they were going to start up their own scheme. You were too observant the last time, so you had to be eliminated if they were to start a new racketeering organization themselves.” He shrugged. “They will start talking, turning not just on each other, but they’ll also give us additional witnesses against DeFila and his goons in return for a lighter sentence.”

She had to agree with him there. She doubted Dorothy would do well in prison. Doctor McKay would probably be assigned to the prison medical center, but he'd still be a babe in the woods among the hardened prisoners. He'd say anything to get out of a prison sentence. And Thomas? He was a total wuss! She'd worked for him for two years now and the man was a pushover. He'd definitely talk.

“Any idea why they got involved in that mess in the first place?”

He nodded. “According to the information Josephine was able to dig up, the mayor needed the money for his kids' college tuition. Apparently, he's also a big gambler and hit the casinos on a regular basis. But he's not very good at it. So when the racketeering gang moved in, the three of them made a deal to help move things along if they each got a cut of the proceeds.”

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “That makes sense. It seemed as if the thugs moved into the town pretty easily. There was very little resistance from the townspeople. That's one of the reasons I was able to get the information about the process so easily.”

“Also, you're brilliant,” he countered, then nuzzled her neck.

She smiled, tilting her head back slightly, giving him extra room. “Okay, so Thomas needed the money because he's an idiot and gambled his money away. What about the doctor and his wife? They always had money. Why would they go along with the scheme?”

“Greed. There's a big malpractice lawsuit pending against the good doctor. Additionally, his malpractice insurance premium wasn't paid on time and now the guy is facing a huge expense. So he needed money pretty badly.” He paused, shrugging his shoulders dismissively. “His wife just wanted the extra cash. Dorothy is a big spender.”

“So they all wanted to kill me because..?”

“Because you stopped their flow of easy money by bringing down the scheme. Plus, they were worried that you might have evidence against them as well.”

She blinked, the beer still making her mind a bit fuzzy. “Well, that’s all nice and tidy.” She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “No! It isn’t! They tried to kill me! Three times!” She was really becoming angry now. “That’s just...rude!”

Slater stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing before he lifted her into his arms. “Damn, I love you, honey!”

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him back. “Promise me that you won’t make a deal with them. I want them locked up in prison!”

“No deals. Got it.”

“Good.” She nodded for emphasis.

“Now about Vegas,” he started off.

Epilogue

“You look beautiful!” Ashley gasped, standing behind Becca in the long mirror.

Josephine nodded her agreement and Emmaline, Josephine’s amazing grandmother, handed Becca a bouquet of flowers. “She’s right. You look amazing!”

Becca twitched the long layers of her wedding gown, still amazed at how fast this wedding had come together. With Jo’s talent with computers, she found all of the vendors. Then the three of them went around and just selected what they wanted. The caterers were fast and efficient. The florist was more than eager to fill the relatively small order and the chapel in Minnow just happened to be available on the weekend they’d selected. The only issue was the wedding dress, but even that seemed pretty easy. The three of them had driven into Philadelphia and Becca had tried on about a dozen different dresses until she found the one that she wanted.

Now, she stood in a floating dress with a beaded, sweetheart top and flowers in her hair. No veil. She was tired of not seeing the world clearly.

“Let’s do this!” Becca smiled.

Fifteen minutes later, Becca stepped into the chapel, the music swelling to a crescendo as she walked towards the man she loved more than anything in the world. He stared back at her, love shining in his eyes and she knew that their love would last forever.

“I love you!” she whispered when he took her hand.

“I love you too,” he replied, squeezing her fingers lightly in response.

And that was all she needed to hear.

A message from Elizabeth:

I hope that you enjoyed Slater's story! As always, your feedback is wonderful! If you wouldn't mind, could you 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 to read an excerpt from Lex – the final novella in the FBI Protector's series!

Excerpt from “Lex”

Release Date: April 28, 2023

Click [HERE](#) to get Lex’s story!

Brantlee stared at her computer, her mind unable to focus on the many tasks she needed to finalize today. Quarterly taxes for the county were due in three days. She needed to review the pension plan balances and ensure that none of the retirement accounts for the county employees had been dipped into. She needed to review the bookkeepers’ entries for invoice payments that had been entered yesterday. That and about a thousand other tasks were waiting for her to tackle.

And yet, all she could do was stare at her computer and think about *him*. About Agent Lex Murdock. She hadn’t expected him to be so tall. Or big! The man’s shoulders were...shocking.

A shiver of awareness fluttered through her, then the expected fear.

Sighing, she pushed a wisp of hair back behind her ears, then turned, blinking in an effort to focus on her job. Glancing at the time, she calculated that she’d wasted about twenty minutes today dreaming about the gruff, taciturn agent.

“Stop it,” she muttered, then lifted her hands to the keyboard. “You have too much work to do to be dreaming about a stranger’s hands.”

“What stranger?” a deep voice asked.

Jerking, Brantlee’s eyes swiveled from the computer monitor to the doorway where...oh, dear heaven! The man she’d been thinking about for the past several hours was here!

He was standing in her doorway and there was barely an inch of space above his head. Yes, he was that tall! And broad! Those shoulders, those amazing, football-styled shoulders, took up most of the space between the sides of the doorway.

Pulling on every ounce of professionalism she could muster, she folded her hands politely on her desk and forced her lips to curl into a professional smile. “What are you doing here, Agent Murdock? Do you need more information?”

He shook his head, lifting the envelope she’d given him less than an hour before in his hand. She’d kept that envelope in her tote bag for the past three days, trying to work up the courage to hand it over.

She wasn’t worried about handing over evidence. The warrant that Becca, the acting mayor since their elected mayor was rotting in a prison cell now, had handed over to Brantlee last week made providing the invoices that she’d been collecting a non-issue. She’d had the evidence for months, not sure what to do with it, afraid of going to the police for fear that the police might be a part of whatever had been happening in the town. It seemed that, the more she dug into the issue, the more evidence she found. Brantlee kept uncovering more odd invoices, things ordered by people within the county government that shouldn’t have been ordering anything at all.

Lex smiled at her, trying to reassure her that his presence was benign. She seemed very nervous.

“I need to go through these with you,” he told her. It was a lie. He could have gone through the entire envelope and brought back only the invoices that needed clarification. He didn’t completely understand why he was here. It was just... he needed to be here. With her.

For the investigation, he told himself.

“I didn’t explain something clearly enough in my notes?” she asked, turning so that she faced him directly.

He shook his head. “No, it’s more about the chain of evidence,” he replied. Good one, he thought. That sounded very official. “Do you have time?”

“Of course!” she replied and pushed away from the desk. She gestured to the chair in front of her desk. “Have a seat. We’ll go through whatever items don’t make sense and I’ll get you more information.”

“Thanks,” he said and lowered himself into the tiny chair. It looked as if it might break in half with his weight, but, thankfully, he was able to relax back into it. “I just need to go through these and talk with you about them, understand how you discovered each one.”

She laced her fingers together. “Absolutely. Whatever I can do to help, I’ll make the time.”

“That’s very generous of you, but if an emergency comes up, we can take a break and come back to this,” he assured her, gesturing to the invoices again.

“That’s fine,” she said with a tentative smile. “Tell me what you need to know.”

He pulled out the first one. “How about if you explain this one to me.”

Brantlee looked down at the invoice and smiled, unaware of how her body wiggled with eagerness to tell her story. “That one is part of a whole batch of invoices that came from the same address.” She pulled out the stack and flipped through the ones on the top and pulled out five of them. “Here, these all came from the same place. Does anything look strange to you?”

He peered down at the invoices, examining each of them. “They don’t have the same address. What makes you say that they all came from the same place?”

She lifted a finger, flipping over the top page. “Here,” she said, pointing to the address on the envelope. “These addresses all are in the same city, but they don’t match the address on the invoice. That was my first clue. Then I started

to dig a bit deeper. I then realized that the address line was similar. When I looked into the actual street names to get more information on the company, I realized that the street didn't exist. The invoices all came from a bogus address."

Lex nodded his head, fascinated with the woman. "How did you discover that?"

"Google maps!" she replied with a laugh. "I didn't know this until a few weeks ago, but there are companies that now cater to what's called the nomadic lifestyle within the United States."

His dark eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I didn't know there were nomads," he replied.

"I didn't either!" she exclaimed, laughing at his confused expression. "However, there are people who sell their house, quit their nine to five jobs and buy a recreational vehicle. They take their RVs on the road and explore the states. Unfortunately, for health insurance and tax purposes, they need a permanent address, which makes living and traveling in a recreational vehicle a problem. That's why someone came up with the idea of providing a 'permanent' address to anyone who wants to pay for one while they travel. It's really just a place for the invoicing companies to send their bills to clients, but the address companies will go a step further and will forward your mail to any place within the US!" She clapped her hands. "Isn't that amazing? I mean, who thinks of these ideas!"

He chuckled, nodding his agreement. "I guess if you need to travel everywhere, then yeah, it makes sense."

"Exactly! And there are states where it's easier to do than others. People in the RV world choose states where the income taxes are low or there aren't any property taxes. It's brilliant. It's like a win-win for everyone!"

"If you say so," he replied, shaking his head. "So these invoices all came from one of those nomadic companies?"

“Yep!” she replied, leaning back in her chair. “I was able to track down these specific invoices,” she laid her hand down on the five invoices, “to manufactured addresses. Then I started to dig through invoices that came through my office for the same items and I was able to ascertain that these invoices in particular were fake, but someone in the accounting department paid them as if they were legit.”

“That’s actually...” he stared down at the piece of paper with small notes attached to them. “Brilliant.”

For the next two hours, he pulled out each of the invoices and she explained how she’d determined that it was part of the embezzlement scheme, along with the name of the person attached to the expenditure.

Finally, Lex nodded his head, amazed at the woman’s brilliance. “That’s great. You’ve narrowed everything down to four people outside of the mayor’s office.”

“Yep.” She grinned and, not for the first time, he wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms to kiss her. Her bottom lip was fuller than the top, causing images of him nibbling on that lip to pop into his head.

Those thoughts were completely unprofessional, he reminded himself and tried hard to concentrate on the evidence she was explaining.

Unfortunately, they came to the last one and he couldn’t think of any other questions. Brantlee was thorough and confident in her facts. Plus, she’d tied everything together, connected the dots right back to the four people that she suspected were embezzling.

“Thank you for all of this,” he told her, wishing he could come up with some other reason to talk to her. “If I have more questions, can I call you?”

“Absolutely,” she replied, and he noticed her cheeks stain with pink. He liked that. Plus, it gave him hope that she might be interested in him too.

“Well, thanks then.” He stood up, wishing he could... say something...anything! Any reason to prolong this time with her. But he’d already taken up too much of her time and she probably had a lot of work to do. “I know how to reach you then,” he told her, extending his hand. “Thank you. This is really excellent work, Brantlee.”

She took his hand, her small fingers too delicate for his touch. He looked down at their clasped hands and a protective instinct roared back to life.

But she pulled her hand away quickly. When he looked into her eyes, there was attraction and...fear? Was he reading her correctly?

He stepped closer and she automatically stepped back. He froze, still watching her, but with narrowed eyes now. “Someone hurt you,” he growled, recognizing the signs.

She was startled by his instant understanding, her eyes widening even more. But she pressed her lips together. “You’re a gorgeous, amazing...” her eyes traveled down over his shoulders and chest, then she pulled her gaze away. “I have to go!”

With that, she disappeared down the hallway.

Lex watched her go, his jaw tightening as he thought back to everything he knew about Brantlee. Which, granted, was very little.

Perhaps it was time to do a bit of researching into their newest witness. That definitely wouldn’t be much of a hardship.

Click [HERE](#) to get Lex’s story!