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The M.D. Meets His Match

MARIE FERRARELLA

Marie Ferrarella

The M.D. Meets His Match

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE…ALASKA? One week back in her rustic hometown, and April Yearling remembered exactly why she'd fled to the lower forty-eight. The moment her ailing grandmother recovered, she planned to hightail it back to civilization–alone! Never mind that a certain sexy doctor had her yearning for everything she'd sworn she'd never need….Sought-after physician James Quintano hadn't come to the northern wilderness to put down roots, and he certainly wasn't here seeking female companionship. But what red-blooded man could resist the great outdoors, the promise of adventure–or an elusive, alluring hot-blooded beauty?

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“What did you do that for?” April demanded.

The lady packed a hell of a punch, Jimmy thought. He couldn’t remember the last time a slight kiss had turned into a full three-course affair. He found himself fighting the urge to do it all over again. “Have you ever felt like you just had to find out something?”

April struggled for her deepest-sounding voice, afraid that anything less would crack. “I generally go to the encyclopedia.”

His grin was ever so slightly lopsided. He toyed with a strand of her hair.

“They don’t have anything like this in the encyclopedia.”

No doubt about it, she thought. Educators and scholars probably hadn’t come up with a word to fit what had just happened here….

The M.D. Meets His Match
Marie Ferrarella

www.millsandboon.co.uk
To Aileen and Adrian Galang,
Happy wedding!
Happy life!
Love,
The Third Photographer

MARIE FERRARELLA

earned a master's degree in Shakespearean comedy and, perhaps as a result, her writing is distinguished by humor and natural dialogue. This RITA Award-winning author has one goal: to entertain, to make people laugh and feel good. She has written over 100 books for Silhouette, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide and have been translated into Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, Japanese and Korean.

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Chapter One

With a sigh, April Yearling moved the desk fan closer to her. It was stuffy in the archaic post office, but she couldn't turn the fan on high because it would send the tonnage of envelopes, leaflets and whatnot around her flying off in an unauthorized, frantic dance.

One week back in Hades and she remembered why she'd left.

She mopped her damp forehead with the back of her wrist and instantly regretted it. The area hidden beneath the haphazardly wrapped bandage on her wrist stung, reminding her that there was a consequence for moving too fast, even in a place like Hades.

Biting her lower lip, April continued to sort the mail. She glanced at her watch, swearing that time was altered here in the backstretch of Alaska, moving at a snail's pace that was completely unacceptable to normal human beings.

At least, it was unacceptable to her.

Gran had proudly pointed out that there were people who had moved here from the lower forty-nine. Why a place like Hades, numbering about five hundred on its town roster, would attract anyone to come and settle here was completely beyond April.

Glancing at the scribbled name, she tossed the envelope into its proper pigeonhole.

She moved the fan a tad closer and longed for air-conditioned rooms. It was unseasonably warm for the middle of spring. April couldn't remember a spring ever being so hot and muggy. But this old building wasn't wired for air-conditioning. She supposed she should be happy that it was even wired for electricity, otherwise she'd be relying on candles and the now dormant fireplace in the corner.

A fragment of a memory flashed through her mind. She and her brother and sister gathered around a fireplace, listening to the wind howl outside and the fire crackle as Gran read a ghost story. She remembered waiting to be frightened, but she never was.

Maybe that was her problem, April mused, flipping the last envelope into its cubbyhole. She was too fearless. Nothing frightened her. Except maybe the specter of falling in love.

Small chance of that ever happening, she told herself confidently. She was too smart.

Bending to retrieve more mail out of the sagging pouch Jeb Kellogg had just flown in and dropped off, April smiled. She was a city kid through and through. It had taken her exactly five minutes in Seattle, her first port of call after graduating high school, to discover that about herself, although she'd secretly thought it for years before her great escape.

There had been this exhilaration that had telegraphed itself through her the moment she'd stepped off the plane and looked around Seattle. She knew then that her soul belonged in a city—the bigger, the better.

April glanced at the next envelope and deposited it where it belonged. Her soul certainly belonged to something bigger than a town comprised of two rows of buildings that faced each other like participants in an old-fashioned square dance.

When she'd left, she'd been positive that nothing would ever bring her back here, here amid the snow and the scenery that went on forever without so much as a soul to disturb it, the loneliness so thick you couldn't cut through it. But of course, her family was here—Gran and Max and June—so there'd been short visits throughout the years. And then she'd received the letter from June saying that Gran, their tiny but invincible tower of strength who had never been ill a day in her life, was sick. Angina, the doctor, Shayne Kerrigan, had said. So she had come back.

It was as simple as that. She owed Gran everything. She and Max and June, they all did. Everything. If Gran hadn't taken them in when their mother had left them in every way but physically, becoming a vacant, broken shell of a woman, April wasn't sure what she would have done. As the oldest by eleven months, she would have had to do something and she had tried. Tried to care for

her brother and sister and her mother. But eleven had been a very young age to suddenly become an adult and she hadn't been quite able to manage it.

Until then, she had believed herself up to the challenge. She'd felt she'd grown up rather quickly even before her father had walked out on them and their mother had gone to pieces. Living in a rural town in Alaska was no picnic, no matter what the travel brochures said to the contrary about the frozen state. Alaska, she thought, tossing a fashion magazine onto Edith Plunkett's stack of mail, was an uncompromising mistress who demanded a great deal from everyone who inhabited her terrain.

And right now, she was stuck here. April thrust a postcard into Jean-Luc LeBlanc's pigeonhole. As much as she longed to leave, she felt too worried and too guilty to return to the life she'd placed on hold.

Postmistress. April shook her head. Never in a million years would she have ever seen herself in this position. Gran had even made her take the oath, hand on the Bible and everything. Gran had said it wasn't official otherwise, which meant she couldn't handle the mail when it came through. Gran had taken her position here, both with the government and with the community, very seriously. So April had taken the oath to placate Gran rather than just whisk her away the way she'd wanted to.

April sighed, picking up another envelope. She fervently wished that Max or June had had the time to take over for Gran. But career-wise, neither of them had her flexibility. Max was Hades's sheriff and June was the town's resident mechanic who had more than her share of work to keep up with. That meant she had been elected.

So far, election meant frustration.

It was beyond her why Gran had been so adamant that one of them take over for her here at the post office. It was either that, or have her continue. Gran absolutely refused to turn the job over to an outsider. The position had belonged to someone from Gran's family ever since the first piece of mail had come into Hades some hundred and ten years ago.

As far as April saw it, this was just another rut to leave behind, not something to aspire to.

Certainly not something to take pride in. But Gran took pride in it and Gran was the one who counted, she thought, resigning herself for the umpteenth time and trying desperately to be patient. Patience was not her strong suit. It never had been. She'd always had the sense that there was something else, something better, waiting for her just around the next corner. So she kept turning corners. And anticipating.

April paused to flex her shoulders and straighten her back. "Wanderlust," Gran had called it. She supposed in a way that gave her something in common with her father. The only thing in common. She would never hurt anyone, the way her father had, to get what she wanted. Wayne Yearling had had itchy feet. He'd tried to resist temptation for a while, or so he'd said, but then he'd finally given in and left. Her mother had thought for days that he would return, but April hadn't. Even at eleven, April had known better. She'd known that her father was gone for good.

She'd gotten one postcard from him a few months after he'd left Hades. The only communication she'd ever had from him. One postcard in over thirteen years. The picture had been of Manhattan with its steel-girder skyscrapers making love to the sky as they reached up to forever. She'd fallen in love with the city the second she'd seen the postcard. The inscription on the back had been the typical "Wish you were here" and she wished she was there. Wished it with all her heart.

Gran had slipped the postcard to her, telling her in a hushed voice to not let her mother see it because in her anger and grief, Rose Yearling would have immediately ripped it up. So April kept it like a secret treasure, not even letting Max or June know about it. She'd slipped the postcard beneath her pillow and dreamed dreams of New York City and other places that had never seen a dogsled.

It had taken April seven years to make her dream come true. Her mother was gone by then and there seemed little reason to remain in Alaska. Gran could take care of June, and Max was almost grown. So she had left Hades to make something of herself, to forge a career that suited her and the wanderlust she'd inherited.

She found her answer and her calling in freelance photography and proceeded to make a minor name for herself. That she never remained long in any one particular place was just a pleasant by-product of her career. She went where the stories were and considered herself a citizen of the world rather than as someone belonging to a tiny blip on the map.

Sighing, she ran a hand through the tangle of blond hair that refused to fall into neat waves the way June's always did. Her hair, Gran used to say, was every bit as rebellious as her soul. She supposed that it was. April had always rather liked the description. It made her view her hair as a badge of some kind rather than just a sea of golden corkscrew curls that repeatedly defied styling.

According to one of her acquaintances, she was in style now. Eventually, she mused with an absent smile, everything was.

Digging out another stack of envelopes from inside the mail pouch, the frown that returned to her lips deepened. It was too quiet for her.

Returning to Hades, she'd forgotten how quiet it could be here at times. How quiet and how dark. It was spring now so the endless winter darkness that assaulted the town was six months away, but even so, once the lights went out, there would be nothing but inkiness in the world right outside her window. Nothing like in the city where there were always streetlights and illumination coming in from all sides.

Here, dark was dark, like the bottom of the mine shafts that half the male population of Hades regarded as their prime source of livelihood.

Dark like a soul without love.

She stopped. Where had that come from? In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, she recalled Tennyson's line. Maybe a young man's, but not hers. Love would turn her into someone who was needy. Someone who could be hurt. Like her mother. She'd vowed that was never going to happen to her.

But there were times when she felt as if something was missing. Something…

She was just hot, April told herself. Hot, bored and a victim of cabin fever.

Setting down the stack of mail, she moved toward the open stairs in the rear of the post office. The living quarters were upstairs. She, Max and June had grown up there, living with Gran. Now only Gran still called it home, even though April had tried time and again, if not to lure her away, to at least buy her a small house of her own. Gran wouldn't hear of it.

"Don't want to get used to anything new at my age, except maybe a man," Gran had said with a wink. "You keep your money and buy a house for yourself."

And that was that. Telling Gran she didn't want a house of her own was out of the question. Gran wouldn't have believed her. She had her own preconceived notions of what people did or didn't want and there was no talking her out of them.

"Gran," April called up the stairs, "is there anything I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine, dear," her grandmother's voice assured her. "Just watching my story. I'll be down to help you as soon as it's over."

April shook her head as she hurried up the stairs to head off her grandmother. The woman had a patent on stubbornness. They'd waltzed around this argument every day since she'd arrived. The first day had been the most difficult, but April hadn't fooled herself into believing that she had won the war, just tiny skirmishes here and there.

"No, you won't," April informed her, entering a tiny living room filled to overflowing with knickknacks that had taken more than six decades to accumulate. April seriously doubted that Gran threw out anything, convinced that the moment she would, a need for the item, no matter how obscure, would arise. "If you remember, the reason I'm here, playing solitaire with all those envelopes, is so that you can rest—and sensibly see your way clear to going to the hospital in Anchorage for—"

Lying on the sofa, Ursula Hatcher waved a small hand in the air to push away the words she knew were coming. "Stuff and nonsense," she proclaimed. "Bunch of children playing doctor, poking

at me for no good reason." She raised her chin, tossing her gray-streaked faded red hair over her shoulder. "My heart's fine. It's just a little tired, but it has a right to be. It's been working nonstop for sixty-nine years without a vacation. You'd be tired, too, if you'd worked that hard," she insisted staunchly.

April reached over to adjust the black-and-yellow crocheted throw draped over her grandmother's legs. "That's just the point, Gran—" April began.

Ursula finished adjusting the throw herself, then cocked her head, listening. "Is that the doorbell downstairs?"

April pinned her with a look. Her grandmother was a great one for diversions when she didn't like the subject under discussion. "Whoever it is down there will keep, Gran. They can't be in any sort of a hurry if they're living in Hades."

"Think you know everything, don't you, child?" Ursula began digging her knuckles in on either side of the sofa, giving a masterful performance of a person struggling to get up. "It's a postmistress's duty to be there when someone walks into the post office. But that's all right, dear, you're busy. I'll go—"

April struggled to keep from laughing. Her grandmother was ruining her attempt at being stern with her. Very gently, she pushed the older woman back against the mound of pillows she'd personally fluffed up this morning.

"God, but you are good at dispensing guilt," she informed her grandmother. The older woman smiled in response. "Stay put, you hear me? I'll go down and see who it is."

"That's my girl." Settling back, Ursula beamed, satisfied. She watched her oldest granddaughter cross to the stairs, affection welling up within her. April was a good girl, if somewhat misguided. "April—"

One foot on the stairs, April stopped to turn around. "Yes?"

Feeling slightly awkward, Ursula lowered her eyes and picked at the yellow-and-white daisies crocheted within the throw. "Did I ever tell you how much I appreciate your coming back to mind the store?"

April's smile broadened. "Yes, Gran, you told me. And you know I'd do anything for you."

"I know—" She strained to listen for the sound of movement downstairs. "So go see who it is." She raised herself up slightly, so that her voice would follow April down the stairs. "And if you don't know where to find something—"

"You're right here to tell me," April called back, finishing a statement she had heard over and over again growing up. Unlike their far frailer mother, Gran had always promised to be there for them, to show them the way no matter what. And she had. April and her siblings had come to believe that Gran was going to go on forever. Being confronted with a different kind of scenario was difficult to come to terms with. "Yes, I know."

April looked around the small outpost as she reached the bottom of the stairs. As if she couldn't find absolutely everything there was to find in this room within a matter of seconds, she thought. If the post office were any smaller, her claustrophobia would have kicked in.

As it was, the room that housed all the incoming and outgoing mail for Hades could be referred to as small with just cause. She could turn the whole area upside down in a matter of mere minutes if she wanted to.

Gran's hearing was as good as ever, she thought. Someone had entered the post office while she'd been upstairs. The small bell attached to the door hardly made a sound worth listening for, but Gran was apparently still tuned in to it.

"May I help you?"

Shoving her hands into the back pockets of her faded jeans, April addressed the words to the back of a head she didn't immediately recognize. When the man turned around, she found she didn't

recognize his face, either. She had to admit that it felt a little unusual not knowing the man. Before she'd left Hades, there hadn't been a face she didn't know, at least on sight.

She would have remembered this face.

With the trained eye of a professional photographer, she studied him quickly from head to toe. He looked to be several years older than she was, but at the same time, he had a face that appeared as if it would remain perpetually youthful even in old age. He had the kind of eyes, blue and intense, that would twinkle well into his nineties.

They were twinkling now as they took slow, careful measure of her. She could almost feel them passing over her body.

She knew the type. Handsome, charming, and as trustworthy as a barrel of snakes after a nine month fast. She'd met more than a few of those in her travels. Men like that made an exhilarating date for an evening, but after that, their charm wore thin. As did any promises they might make in the heat of the moment. Just like her father.

She had no use for that type of man.

Still, she couldn't help wondering who this man was and what had brought him to such a sleepy little place as Hades. It wasn't as if Hades was exactly on anyone's beaten path and it definitely wasn't a place someone would happen on as they were passing through, at least not in this century. A hundred and fifty years ago, prospectors with dreams of getting rich quickly would ride into town, eyeing the hills that were directly behind it. But that hadn't happened for close to eighty years if she was to believe the stories Gran had told them.

For the first time since arriving in town yesterday, James Quintano, Jimmy to all his friends, found his appetite whetting. Not that he'd arrived in Hades to have his appetite even mildly aroused. He'd come because Alison was here and he'd promised to return to visit his sister and her husband ever since he'd boarded the plane right after her wedding. Hades wasn't a town a man would come to look for a fling or a pleasurable interlude. There was a different breed of people here. Decent people who worked hard and played even harder because those times were precious and rare.

It was also a town, he'd quickly realized, where a man had his work cut out for him if he wanted female companionship of any kind. Alison had told him the odds were something like seven to one against him. Not that he'd ever had a hard time finding willing women. He had a hard time not finding willing women. It had been that way for him ever since he'd found puberty a little after his eleventh birthday. He'd grown tall early, began shaving early, and discovered love early. The birds and the bees had had nothing on Mary-Sue Taylor.

Thoughts of Mary-Sue and her successors faded from his mind, as did the woman who was to have accompanied him on the Alaskan cruise before fate in the guise of an apparent family emergency had stepped in.

Habit had him glancing at the blonde's left hand. He found it encouragingly unadorned.

Finished with his appraisal, Jimmy smiled and answered her question. "I certainly hope so."

And then he saw her wrist. His initial scrutiny had missed that because she'd had her hands tucked into her back pockets, making her jeans strain against her torso and distracting him. Now he saw that there was a makeshift bandage wrapped around her left wrist. One that looked as if it was about to come undone with the very next movement she made.

He nodded at it, coming forward. "What happened to your wrist?"

She looked down at it grudgingly, the stranger's question bringing with it a fresh wave of pain. She'd been trying to put herself beyond that. It was an injury sustained this morning because, as always, she had been moving too fast. But fast was the only tempo she knew. Away from Hades, there was always so much to do that moving fast was a necessity to staying on top of things. Her mind elsewhere, she'd brushed too close to the skillet and been awarded a red badge of courage in the form of a wide, angry blister.

"Nothing. Just a case of a frying pan not moving out of my way," she said with a careless shrug.

As she reached for the pile of envelopes she'd abandoned earlier, the bandages began to loosen in earnest, coming completely undone.

"I can take a look at that for you," Jimmy volunteered, already reaching for her hand.

Instinct, both inbred and acquired, had her pulling her hand away. Suspicion creased the brow beneath her wayward bangs. "And just why would you want to do that?"

He didn't usually meet with resistance when he reached for a woman's hand. Jimmy's smile widened. "Well, for one thing, I'm a doctor."

Chapter Two

April looked suspiciously at the tall, darkly handsome man standing in front of her, still keeping her wrist very much to herself. Medical treatment in Hades came via Dr. Shayne Kerrigan and, recently, his nurse, Jean-Luc's wife, Alison. Shayne had been trying, unsuccessfully, to lure another doctor to Hades ever since his brother, the only other doctor within a hundred-mile radius, had left town to follow his heart's dream—a woman named Lilah who had a wandering soul. Shayne had begged, pleaded and cajoled would-be seasoned physicians and doctors fresh out of medical school to no avail. The idea that one would suddenly just pop up in the middle of town without fanfare and an abundance of rumors preceding him, rumors Gran was always the first to be privy to, was completely beyond belief.

Wariness infused by her wanderings in the city took hold. April eyed the tall, muscular man carefully.

"You mean, you want to play doctor, don't you?"

The stranger's smile widened, becoming even more unsettlingly seductive and convincing April that she'd hit the nail right on the head about him. This was no doctor, this was an opportunist at the very least.

"After all the money my brother invested in medical school, I'd better be able to do more than just 'play' doctor." He took another step toward her. "I'd damn well better be able to be one."

The suspicion didn't abate. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing about Hades that would lure a person to come visit it. Hades wasn't known for anything, had no natural wonders to offer in exchange for the hardship of seeking it out, and it was as far off the usual route as was humanly possible without falling off the edge of the earth.

Yes, the coal mines were still productive, and nicely so, but if the man's hands were any indication, the only kind of physical work he had probably ever engaged in was ridding women of their outer clothing. And quickly, too, no doubt.

April raised her chin, tucking her hand behind her back. "What's a doctor doing in Hades?"

"Visiting," he answered succinctly. Why was she so skittish? Jimmy wondered. It was just her wrist he was offering to examine, not the rest of her. Although that would undoubtedly be richly rewarding. "I won't charge you."

A glint of anger highlighted the suspicious light in her eyes. "For what?"

Had she lost the thread of the conversation? She didn't strike him as the simple type, but looks were deceiving, even mouthwatering ones such as hers. "For looking at your wrist."

She snorted, retreating behind the huge, scarred oak desk that had belonged to Gran's father. Mail was still scattered along its surface. She had work to tend to and this was wasting time.

"Good, and I won't charge you for looking at yours," she retorted.

Although, all things considered, April secretly allowed, the stranger's wrist would have been the very last thing she would think to look at. The rest of him was a good deal more interesting and arresting than his wrist. Apart from a handful of men, her brother included, the male population of Hades would not have stopped any hearts. This man certainly would.

Stop hearts and set pulses racing, and she had a feeling he knew it, too. He was about a foot taller than she was, with dark black hair and eyes the color of the waters off the cape in the spring. The way he held himself, with an easy, comfortable grace, reminded her of one of the Native Americans who'd come into the post office when she was a little girl. Gran had told her he'd once been a chief of a tribe that had since died out. To her, the man had seemed larger than life.

That was undoubtedly what this man was, too, larger than life. Except in his case, that description would involve his own view of himself.

Well, she had better things to do than to stroke his ego. Deliberately, she looked down at the mail on the desk.

As he watched the woman in front of him, Jimmy's grin widened a little more. She had spirit, no question about it. He liked that. There was nothing duller than a woman who just fell into his arms. Ever since he could remember, he'd always enjoyed a challenge. It kept him on his toes and made him feel alive.

He leaned an elbow on the desk, as comfortable as if he'd been coming here for years. "You know, you're the first unfriendly person I've met in Hades."

If he was trying to embarrass her, he was going to have to do a lot better than that, April thought. "Good," she sniffed, turning her back on him. "I never liked being part of the crowd."

That had been his first impression of her, Jimmy thought. Someone not part of a crowd. He leaned forward, watching the way her bottom strained against her jeans as she bent over the mail bag. He had a keen knack for being able to cleanly divorce himself from his professional side outside the hospital. And this lady certainly deserved his undivided attention.

"Oh, you might be in a crowd, but you'd never be taken for being part of it. You'd stand out no matter where you were."

April looked at him over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing. "Is that supposed to impress me?"

"No, that's not supposed to do anything," he told her with such unabashed honesty, she could almost believe him. "It's just an observation. So far, we've ascertained that you stand out in a crowd, you're unfriendly—" his eyes flickered to her wrist "—and you wrap bandages worse than a first year medical student."

She opened her mouth to tell him that he and his observations were free to leave the post office at any time, preferably now. But the words never had a chance to emerge as the man took charge of the moment as well as her wrist by taking the end of the bandage and deftly unwrapping it.

April caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep the startled yelp of pain from escaping her lips.

Pulling her hand out of his grasp would prove to be hurtful, so she left it where it was. Instead she glared at him. "Just what do you—"

The wound appeared to be first degree and didn't look infected. Still, he bet it smarted more than a little. "That's rather angry-looking."

That wasn't the only thing, she thought indignantly. Just who the hell did he think he was? "You want to see angry-looking, just raise your eyes a little, mister. Just what do you think—"

The door swung open behind them. "Jimmy, what's taking you so—" The woman entering the post office stopped abruptly as the sight registered. "Oh, I should have known." A dimple melded into her expression. "Can't let you out of my sight, can I?"

Startled, April looked up to see Alison LeBlanc crossing to them. The dark-haired woman she'd met briefly when she'd gone to see Dr. Kerrigan about her grandmother flashed a rueful smile at her.

Seeing them side by side, April was struck by the similarities between the two people in her grandmother's post office. Although Alison was a good deal shorter, their coloring and the way they held themselves was almost startlingly identical.

April looked from one to the other. "Are you two related?"

Her would-be healer laughed. "Only by the cruel whimsy of fate." With one hand still firmly holding April's, he wrapped his arm around Alison's slender shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "This is my baby sister." There was teasing affection in his eyes as he regarded Alison for a moment. "She's turned out rather nicely, all things considered."

Alison shot him a withering look that somehow still managed to give the impression of affection. "If you mean considering that you were my brother, you're dead-on. I turned out nicely thank-you-very-much despite you, not because of you."

A faint pang drifted through April. This, she thought, she was familiar with. Or at least she had been before she'd moved away. It was the kind of relationship she'd had with her own two siblings, especially with Max. There were times when she truly missed it, though she would admit that to no one because to do so would mean she was vulnerable. If there was one thing she refused to be in any manner conceivable, it was vulnerable. She knew what vulnerability did to a woman.

Alison looked at her apologetically. "I'm sorry, I hope Jimmy hasn't been bothering you. I just sent him out to get the office mail. I should have realized that once he got a good look at you, he'd forget what he came for and try to charm you the way he does every other woman he encounters."

Just as she thought. The man was all flash, no substance. April congratulated herself on her perception.

Rather than look annoyed at having his game plan revealed, the way April would have expected, Jimmy merely laughed.

"I wasn't trying to charm her, I was doing a consultation." To prove it, Jimmy raised the now bandageless wrist he was holding. "The lady seems to have injured herself."

Alison quickly examined the wound. "I've got some ointment for that at the clinic."

"Gran's got some in her medicine cabinet," April countered, indicating the upper floor with her eyes.

"Make sure you put it on," Alison advised. "What happened?"

"Nothing to merit all this fuss." Thoroughly embarrassed now, April tucked her wrist behind her back again. She changed the subject before Alison felt compelled to pursue the matter. "So I take it he's really your brother?"

"Until I can find someone to take him off my hands, yes. He's here visiting me."

Jimmy nodded to confirm his sister's statement, his eyes still on the tempting postmistress who wouldn't give him a tumble. "I wanted to see firsthand just what it is that keeps her here, other than Jean-Luc and that stubborn streak of hers that never lets her admit she's wrong even when she is."

Alison pursed her lips in a mock frown. "It's a family trait."

Jimmy was quick to agree. "Right, our sister Lily has it, too."

Beneath that devil-may-care attitude there wasn't a more stubborn member of the family than Jimmy, Alison thought. It was Jimmy who made a point of volunteering his time at homeless shelters, telling none of them. She would have never known if she hadn't accidentally seen him at a shelter herself. The only notoriety he wanted was that of a playboy, but he was far deeper than that. He had a heart that cared and which was every bit as important as his skilled surgeon's hands. But that was the part of him he wanted no one to know.

"Like you don't," Alison replied.

He made his appeal to April, not his sister. "I am the soul of reasonableness."

Alison merely sighed, shaking her head. She turned to April. "If you give me Shayne's mail, we'll be out of your hair," she promised.

It struck April as odd to have the doctor referred to so familiarly, but then she'd forgotten the townspeople's penchant. Everyone in Hades was on a first-name basis with everyone else.

"Right here." Reaching over the counter to the tallest stack, she pushed it toward Alison. "There might be more." April glanced at semifull sack on the floor. "I haven't finished sorting today's pouch yet."

"Because of the hand," Alison concluded.

April spared Alison's brother a look that said it all. "Because I was interrupted."

If there was a mild accusation in that statement, Alison seemed to ignore it. She merely smiled easily and glanced affectionately at her brother. There was no mistaking the pride in her eyes. "You'll find that Jimmy does that a lot."

That sounded ominously like a promise to her. Or at the very least, a premonition of things to come. "Why, is he staying on?"

The next question that came to her lips, if the response to the first was affirmative, was "Why?" but she told herself that it was none of her business. If Alison's brother actually was a doctor, having him here would certainly be a welcome relief to Shayne. If her visit to the clinic had been any indication of the way things normally went there, Hades's only physician was completely overworked.

"Just until my ship sails," Jimmy informed her blithely. "Cruise ship," he interjected when the quizzical look on April's face remained. "I'm just here for two weeks." It occurred to him that he hadn't even given her his name—or gotten hers. "James Quintano." Leaning over the counter, he put his hand out toward her.

April paused a moment before finally placing her hand in his. With Alison watching, she couldn't very well remain aloof, although it might do the man some good to see that there were women who didn't fall into his lap just because he was good-looking.

"April Yearling."

Jimmy withdrew his hand. She had a firm handshake. He got the feeling April wanted him to know that she wasn't some frail little thing despite her diminutive size. His eyes held hers for a moment.

Message received.

"Well, now that we're introduced, you'll have to come to my party."

"Party?" April looked at Alison questioningly.

"Luc thought it might be a good way to take care of the introduction en masse if we just invited everyone to the Salty," Alison explained, referring to the saloon that both her husband and his cousin, Ike, owned. The saloon, which Ike initially operated and eventually coaxed Luc to become partners in, had been the first venture of many. Now they owned the general store, Hades's only movie theater and the hotel, as well. The benevolent entrepreneurs were determined to build Hades up to entice the younger generation to remain once they reached eighteen. "It's tonight."

It wouldn't have mattered what day it was. April shook her head, reaching for another stack of mail inside the sack. "I'm not sure I can get away."

Jimmy squatted until his face was level with hers. "I'll take it as a personal insult if you don't show up."

Her eyes narrowed. He'd just made up her mind for her. "I'll keep that in mind."

There was a storm brewing here. Alison could read the signs well. Wrapping one hand around her older brother's arm, she began to lead him out of the building.

"We'll get out of your hair," Alison told her, giving Jimmy a hard tug.

Jimmy let himself be dragged off. "Until tonight," he called over his shoulder.

"Until hell freezes over," April muttered under her breath as she got back to her sorting.

"Of course you'll go," Ursula told her firmly when she'd mentioned the party later that day and her intentions of not attending. Kindly hazel eyes pinned April where she stood in the crowded living room. "And you'll have a good time, too."

Oh, no, she wouldn't, especially not if the so-called guest of honor was there. April began to move around the room, straightening things in a hopeless battle for order amid chaos.

"Gran, I came back to help out in the post office and to talk you into going to the hospital in Anchorage. I did not come back to attend any feeble little gatherings at the Salty Dog Saloon for some pompous, would-be playboy doctor."

She worried her, this one, Ursula thought. She'd been so hurt by first her father's abandonment and then her mother's withdrawal. There was no question in her mind that April had always been tough on the outside, but it was the inside that truly concerned her. Inside, Ursula was certain, was a hurt, frightened little girl who needed to be coaxed out and loved.

"No, that's just a bonus, I'm sure," Ursula told her cheerfully.

April set two Hummel figurines, a shepherd and his lady, equidistantly apart on a small shelf. "I'm not."

"April."

Her grandmother's suddenly weakened voice had April turning around to look at her. Ursula's hand slipped dramatically over her chest, her fingers spreading over her heart.

Ursula sighed deeply. "I'm an old woman, my heart can't take all this arguing and dissent."

April knew an act when she saw one and, happily, this was one. She moved closer to her grandmother. "You're a semiold woman who likes to manipulate."

Ursula let her hand drop, shaking her head in despair. "I should have raised you to be more respectful of your elders."

"You raised me fine." Bending, April brushed a quick kiss to the silky, weather-lined cheek. "You raised me to see through charades and con artists and golden-tongued men."

That hadn't been her doing. That had been in response to her father's actions. Ursula's heart ached, but for a reason that had nothing to do with medical conditions and terminology written in doctors' journals.

"Not every man is out to break your heart, April. What happened to your mother—"

Instantly, April's chin shot up. A warrior on constant guard. "Is never going to happen to me."

Ursula reached for her granddaughter's hand and held it in hers. "I'm glad, child, but that shouldn't have the price tag you're attaching to it." Her eyes searched April's face, looking for a sign, a chink that would let her break through. The girl was so adamant about not being hurt that she wasn't allowing anyone into her life. "It shouldn't prevent you from enjoying yourself. The years go very fast, April. Faster than any of us can imagine. I don't want you standing at the end of your life, whispering, 'If only I'd done things differently.' April, honey, I don't want you to have regrets."

Then they were agreed, April thought. "Neither do I."

But Ursula shook her head. "I meant about not living life."

Gently, April disengaged her hand from her grandmother's. The next moment she was straightening things again, unable to remain still. Unwilling to allow her choices to be examined this way. "I am living life, Gran. I'm out there every day, living."

But Ursula knew better. For all her sophistication, all her potential and promise, April was fleeing life. "You're out there every day, snapping pictures, capturing other people living. You can't do it by proxy. You've got to do it yourself. Sometimes you've got to put up with pinched toes to break in the best pair of shoes you'll ever own."

She might have jumped from a plane to photograph a sky-diving couple getting married, but there were some risks April refused to take. The one her grandmother was talking about was one of them.

"What if those shoes never break in right?"

Ursula could only smile, remembering her own short-lived first marriage. Jake hadn't left by choice. A fishing accident had taken him from her. But the heartache had been the same. "Wearing them for a little while's still better than never wearing them at all and going barefoot."

April put down the tiny glass figurines she'd started to line up in a row and turned to look at her grandmother. It was not in her to say no to the woman for long. "You're not going to give up until I go, are you?"

Knowing the victory was hers, Ursula smiled. "When have I ever given up?"

April laughed, sitting on the edge of the sofa, beside Ursula's throw-covered feet. "You have a point."

"I always do." Ursula threw off the cover and swung her legs to the floor.

April rose to her feet, staring. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I'm going, too," Ursula declared. "I've always enjoyed having a good time—and I always have a good time at the Salty."

April thought of the saloon. The men there could get pretty rowdy. And there'd be dancing, she would be willing to bet. She looked at her grandmother suspiciously. Could this whole thing have been a ruse? "What about that heart of yours not being able to take it?"

"That's only when it comes to arguing and dissent. It can take a good time just fine." Ursula winked. "I hear Yuri Bostovik's going to be there." April could have sworn she saw stars in her grandmother's eyes. "He's always been partial to me."

April's mouth dropped open. She'd never thought of her grandmother as having a life outside the post office. "Gran, you're sixty-nine—"

Ursula nodded as she shuffled off toward her bedroom. "And not getting any younger. My point exactly."

April paused, debating. Her immediate reaction was to bully her grandmother into staying in bed, but happiness counted for something in the scheme of things, especially when it came to well-being.

Wavering, she gave in. She supposed it wouldn't do all that much harm. "All right, we'll go for a little while and then I'll bring you home."

That wasn't the way it was going to be if she had anything to say about it, Ursula thought. She fixed her oldest grandchild with a look meant to establish the order of things between them. She still made the rules.

"I'll go for a little while and then Max'll bring me home. You're going to stay at the Salty."

"And do what?" April wanted to know. "I don't really like beer."

"So?" Ursula's small shoulders rose and fell. "Don't have beer. There're other things to drink at the Salty besides beer. And I'm sure you'll find something to occupy yourself with." Her knowing smile widened. "If you're lucky."

Because it was Gran, April surrendered. For the time being. "You're positively wicked, Gran."

"Only if Yuri gets lucky tonight, dear, only if Yuri gets lucky. Now go," she coaxed. "Get prettier."

April shook her head, watching her grandmother hurry off to do the same.

Chapter Three

Unlike the near-stagnant air, the ocean of noise within the Salty Dog Saloon that evening ebbed and flowed around April, allowing her to pick out a word here and there as she slowly made her way through the teeming crowd of eighty percent wall-to-wall men. She'd elected to come essentially wearing what she'd had on earlier: changing to a blouse, but staying in her worn jeans. She saw no reason to dress up. It wasn't that kind of a party. People in Hades held comfort in high regard.

April looked around. It wouldn't have really mattered what she'd worn. The odds were definitely in her favor, had she been inclined to play that sort of a game. But she wasn't. Looking over the crop of available men was the furthest thing from her mind, except in a remote, analytical sort of way.

She took stock of the scene, seeing it through the eyes of a photographer rather than as a former native who'd made good her escape.

It had been a long time since she'd actually seen so many men in one place at one time. A fragment of a memory nudged at her, blooming in her mind until she'd captured all of it. The last time she'd seen a gathering the likes of this had been here, right after her graduation from high school. She was the first in her family to finish the twelfth grade. Gran had insisted on throwing a party to celebrate the occasion and since the small living area above the post office barely housed the four of them, much less anyone else, Gran had prevailed on the owner of the Salty to hold it here. It hadn't belonged to Ike and Jean-Luc at the time, though they had worked here.

All April really remembered about the party was that she'd been consumed with the thought of finally being able to leave. Not the Salty or Hades, but the area. Alaska. All of it. It had been the only thing on her mind for years. Ever since that morning she'd woken up to find her father gone, she'd wanted to leave herself, to spread her wings and soar.

And she had soared. For six years. Flown to all the major cities in the country, to all the places she'd once dreamed of, sitting up late at night in her tiny alcove of a room, poring over the atlas her father had left behind. The out-of-date atlas with its worn, earmarked pages and its places that continued to exist even though they were no longer referred to by the names that were written down between the covers.

Looking at the people around her now, almost all of whom she recognized, April expected to feel like an outsider, like someone who had outgrown the place she was visiting. If nothing else, she'd seen more of the world and of life than most of the people here.

Even so, the feeling wasn't quite there. These people she'd been so quick to erase from her life didn't treat her as if she didn't belong. Instead, they behaved as if she had only momentarily stepped out, but was back now. It was an absurd thought because she wasn't back. She was just here temporarily and would be gone again very soon. The sooner, the better.

She saw Yuri Bostovik over in the corner, his gray hair comically parted in the middle and slicked back. The moment he saw her grandmother, he made a beeline for her. Even in this light, she could see Gran blushing—as if she hadn't spent the past hour planning on just how to greet the man. Gran had buried three husbands and still acted as if love was just around the corner for her. The woman was incredible.

April continued sidestepping people and nodding greetings, trying to reach the bar. What surprised her was that along with her detached, analytical feeling was a tiny prick of something she had trouble identifying.

Or maybe it was that she didn't want to identify it. Nostalgia had no place here, in Hades. Not for her. The very idea was ridiculous. Nostalgia came when you remembered something fondly. There was nothing to feel nostalgic about when it came to her past. She'd never liked it in Hades, had always found it lacking. Other than an attachment to Gran, Max and June, there was no reason for her to feel anything at all about this piece of tundra.

So what was this odd feeling that persisted in rambling around inside of her?

"Is this a private smug moment, or can anyone horn their way in?"

The question, whispered against her ear, nearly made her jump. The warm breath that had accompanied it lingered on her skin, throwing her concentration completely off.

Turning, she found that Alison's brother was at her elbow. Jimmy had a frosty mug of beer in each hand, holding them close to his chest to keep from spilling the contents.

She eyed the mugs before looking up at him. Even in the dim lighting from the chandeliers, his eyes were intensely blue. She felt a ripple of excitement wash over her. "Two-fisted drinker?"

Hunching in against her, he seemed to move in closer without physically taking a step. "No, actually this one's for you."

With a human wall suddenly at her back, there was nowhere for her to go. She stifled her impulse to get away. "Me?"

Jimmy nodded. "I spotted you when you walked in with your family. Me and every other male in the room who's breathing," he added with an easy smile that would have broken down a lesser woman's defenses. He held the mug in his right hand up to her. "Thought you might want something to drink."

She'd never really cared for beer, but April supposed it would be rude to refuse the drink so she accepted the mug. That he included himself in the group rather than go out of his way to single himself out for her benefit surprised her. But then, she'd learned that men were never easy to read.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"So—" he clinked the side of his mug against hers lightly "—what are you being so smug about?"

She raised her chin defensively. "I'm not being smug."

He felt a sudden, uncontrollable desire to nibble on that chin, but held himself in check. This lady required kid glove treatment. "Yes, you are," Jimmy quietly corrected. "There was a smug look in your eyes just now, when you were looking over the people in here." He studied her for a moment before taking a sip of his beer. "This your first time back at the Salty?"

It struck her that he sounded as if he were a Hades native. That was a laugh. A man like Dr. James Quintano couldn't stay in a place like this for more than a couple of weeks, if that long. She had a feeling Alison's brother would probably cut his vacation short rather than remain here for the duration. He seemed like the type who needed a regular dose of excitement in his life. Someone who needed a party every night. The only kind of excitement Hades had to offer usually involved natural disasters or fires.

"Yes," she finally answered because he still seemed to be waiting for a response.

Jimmy took another, longer sip of his beer, his eyes never leaving her. He liked watching the way her breasts rose and fell beneath her peasant blouse with each breath she took. "Luc said you've been away for seven years."

"Six years," she corrected, surprised that Jean-Luc had even noticed her absence. Alison's husband was so laid-back, she hadn't expected ordinary events to make any impression on him. Her departure had been without fanfare, as had her return. "But right now it feels more like six days," she muttered out loud, looking around.

"Homecomings have that effect," he agreed.

Someone bumped into April from behind and pushed her into him. An amber wave rose from her mug and Jimmy found himself being liberally christened with the beer he'd just handed her.

Amused, slightly embarrassed, she looked at the resulting mess. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Jimmy brushed a few golden droplets away from his shirt, but the rest were quickly being absorbed by the dark blue material, creating an irregular-shaped stain on his chest.

Grinning, he shrugged it off. "No harm done." He looked at the throng of people behind her. It appeared as if everyone in Hades and the surrounding area had somehow managed to pack themselves

into the saloon. “But I think we might want to step out of range.” With his hand against the small of her back, he steered April toward another section that was only slightly less crowded.

April glanced across her shoulder toward where she’d last seen her family, all the way over on the other side of the saloon. Max had disappeared, as had June. Only Gran was there with Yuri. Looking up, the older woman made eye contact with her and smiled, nodding.

She knew that look. It was approval. Gran had never been stingy with hers, but this time her approval had found the wrong mark. April shook her head vigorously before looking away.

Jimmy noted the exchange. He bent his head toward her to be heard. “Is that your grandmother?”

April wrapped her hands around the mug and, wrinkling her nose, took a sip before answering. Though she wasn’t sure why, she suddenly found herself in need of fortification herself and this would have to do. “Yes, that’s Gran.”

He could just barely pick up the affection in her voice. Seeing as how she was trying hard to appear removed, she had to care a great deal for the older woman. “Luc told me a lot about her. She sounds like a wonderful woman.”

“She is.” April turned her attention back to the man who seemed determined to remain with her. It was a lot less disconcerting to look at him than to feel his breath on her neck. “You seem to have gotten a great deal of information out of Jean-Luc. As I recall, before I left, if he strung three words together in a sentence every few weeks, we called him chatty.”

Jimmy laughed and despite the noise in the saloon, the sound wrapped itself around her like a warm scarf on a cold winter’s day. Maybe she’d absorbed more alcoholic fumes than she’d realized, April thought.

“He’s loosened up some, being married to my sister.” Jimmy was just repeating what Ike had told him. “But he’d have to if only in self-defense. Alison tends to be bossy if she’s given her head.”

Alison didn’t have the market cornered on that, April thought, glancing at Jimmy. She moved so that he was forced to drop his hand from her back. “Another family trait?”

Jimmy nodded, downing a little more beer. He set the empty mug on the closest surface. “My sister Lily’s the same way. Could be why she has trouble maintaining a relationship.”

“Meaning that men prefer women who agree with them and who they can walk on.”

The man tending bar slid another full mug his way. Catching it, Jimmy nodded his thanks and took a mouthful. “Didn’t say that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But you implied it.”

The look he gave her was innocent. He studied her in silence for a moment. Was she deliberately trying to instigate a fight between them? The thought amused him more than anything else.

“Can’t see how. I was just saying that bossing people around never makes for a good relationship no matter which party’s doing the bossing, male or female.” He took another long sip before continuing. “Never liked walking on people myself. I like a woman who can give as good as she gets.”

Their eyes locked and she had the distinct impression that he was putting her on notice. Though she tried to block it, a small, unidentifiable shiver ran down the length of her spine.

“Then you’ve come to the right place, Dr. Quintano. The women in Hades definitely aren’t pushovers,” April told him with a touch of pride. “They’ve learned to stand up for themselves.”

His eyes were touching her, making her uneasy. She became aware of the severe lack of air within the packed saloon. Jimmy’s smile was easy, slipping over his lips in slow motion and in direct reverse proportion to the rhythm assimilated by her pulse.

“Glad to hear that.”

Yeah, she’d just bet he was. April cleared her throat, then set her mug down on a cluttered table meant for two. “And you’re wrong.”

Jimmy cocked his head, his eyes on her mouth. “About?”

She shouldn't have had any of the beer. There had to have been something in it. Beer didn't affect her this way, making her head spin and her pulse race, certainly not a few sips.

"Homecomings," she told him stiffly. She realized that she wasn't exactly making sense. She was losing the thread of what she was saying herself. "At least about this being one."

"But this was your home," he pointed out, "and you've come back."

"Just to help out."

He gave another careless shrug. "You've come back. The details don't matter."

Now there she had him. It was her turn to smile confidentially. "Oh, but they do," she corrected with a liberal dose of passion. "Details always matter. They're what makes one thing different from another."

His grin merely served to irk her. "You like to argue, don't you?"

Her chin went up defensively again, and again, he found it tempting. Jimmy seriously toyed with the idea of stealing a kiss, but knew it would just get him slapped royally. He could wait.

"No, I don't like to argue," she contradicted. "I like things to be perfectly clear and up front. No lies, no deceptions, no illusions."

Her words struck a chord. He regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment. "Sounds like someone did a number on your optimism."

She didn't like being analyzed, especially not by a stranger who had no idea what he was talking about. "My optimism is just fine, thank you."

"Good." He placed his mug next to hers on the table. The glass came precariously close to falling before Jimmy steadied it. "Then you won't mind dancing with me."

Maybe she hadn't heard right. "What does one thing have to do with another?"

He wrapped his fingers around her hand. "Your optimism will make you optimistic about my dancing ability."

The next thing she knew, as the protest formed on her lips, she found herself enfolded in his arms. If she strained her ears, she could just about make out that there was a song playing on the classic jukebox that Ike had painstakingly restored. But what that song was, or even the tempo that was presumably playing, was anyone's guess.

Alison's brother, April noticed, took it to be a slow song. With his hand lightly pressed against her spine, he brought her body closer to his. Closer than she felt comfortable about.

"You're in my space," she hissed against his ear.

He could feel her stiffening. He did his best to lighten the moment and smiled down into her face. "I'm afraid there is no space here, but as soon as there is, I'll be sure to let you have it." The smile widened just a little. "I find this rather cozy myself."

His smile was infiltrating her space even more acutely than his body. She looked around for someone to cut in, but apparently no one else was paying attention to the music. "I'm sure you do."

Curving her hand beneath his, he rested it against his chest. "So what do you do when you're not sorting envelopes?"

She could feel his heart beating beneath her fingertips. Why that made her warm, she couldn't say. Probably had to do with the growing lack of air. "You mean here?"

His eyes held hers. She had hypnotically beautiful eyes, he thought. "Anywhere."

It was definitely too warm in here, she thought. "I'm a photojournalist."

Something independent. He should have realized that. She needed something where she could make her own terms, her own hours. "I'm impressed."

The sway of his hips against hers was far too distracting for her to concentrate on the conversation. "I didn't say it to impress you."

"I know." He liked the way she felt in his arms when she relaxed. Soft, delicate. In direct contradiction to the look in her eyes. "You don't like to impress anyone, do you?"

She tried to shrug and wound up brushing her shoulder against someone's back. "There's no need, as long as I'm happy."

Jimmy was careful to not move their dancing out of the realm of tantalizing and into arousing. He had a feeling she would break away if he did. But having her here, swaying against him this way, was certainly doing a number on him. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Happy."

She could feel her heart constricting slightly and her nerve endings stretching taut. "This conversation's getting way too personal."

He felt her try to pull back, but he held her fast. "How else am I going to get to know you?"

April's eyes narrowed. "Why should you get to know me?"

"Why not?"

Games, he was playing word games. Well, he'd met his match, she thought. She knew how to give as good as she got. "Because in two weeks you'll be gone and with any luck, so will I."

That fit right into his plan. He certainly wasn't looking for anything permanent. If you looked for something permanent, you wound up being disappointed in the end when it broke apart. And in one way or another, it always broke apart. "Yes, but until then, there's all this time just hanging around. We might as well pass it pleasurably."

And she knew just what he meant by that. "Maybe we have a different definition of pleasure."

The dimple in his cheek deepened. "We can explore that, too."

She didn't know whether to be amused or annoyed. What she was, was incredibly warm, bordering on hot. If she didn't get some air soon, she was going to pass out. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Haven't the foggiest how to do that," he admitted readily. "Besides, my brother taught me that anything worth having is worth working for." And that included time with a beautiful lady, he added silently. "If it comes too easily, you might just let it slip through your fingers without realizing it."

The scales began to tip toward amusement. "And your brother's a philosopher."

Kevin would have gotten a charge out of that, Jimmy thought. "A cabdriver. Actually, he owns a fleet of cabs. A small fleet, but the company's his nonetheless." His mouth curved fondly as he managed to turn her around in the tiny space. He liked her surprised expression when she faced him again. "I wouldn't want him knowing I said it, but Kevin's the smartest man I know. The kindest, too." Jimmy glanced over toward where he'd last seen Alison. She was still there, talking to several people from the looks of it. She was standing next to Luc, her arm tucked through his. She looked happy, he thought. It was about time. "He misses Alison." He looked back at April. "Kevin raised her after our parents died. You might say he raised all of us."

"All?" How many of them were there? And were they all glib, like him? Alison didn't seem to be, but it was too soon to tell. She'd only exchanged a few sentences with her.

"My two sisters and me. I never realized how much he gave up to do that." Jimmy grew serious for a moment, looking back. "Kevin could have had a regular life of his own, dated, gotten married, the usual. Instead he stayed home, put all of us through school, made sure we toed the line and became decent people."

April caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "So how disappointed in you is he?"

It took him a second before he realized she was joking. There'd been a kernel of truth in that. "Not anymore. My wild days are behind me."

Wild, that wasn't quite the word she would have used to refer to him, but it was close enough. "That's not the way Alison made it sound."

Enjoying the company of an ever changing parade of women was harmless compared to the rebellious teenager he'd once been. "I meant as in giving Kevin grief."

Her eyes held his. "So now it's just women you give grief to?"

She was deliberately trying to bait him. Getting a kick out of it, Jimmy grinned. “I don’t think they’d refer to it as grief. And whatever happens between a lady and me is by mutual consent. I make a point of never staying where I’m not wanted.”

April realized she was flirting, but since it was just for tonight, she could see no harm in it. She supposed her ego could use the temporary high. “And just what kind of signals have to go off before you realize you’re not wanted?”

“That’s easy,” he told her. “The lady says go and means it.”

Right, and if she believed that, there was an ice bridge he wanted to sell her. “So if I said go, you would?”

He grinned. “You’re forgetting the key part—‘and means it,’” he repeated.

He had a loophole. She figured as much. “And that’s up to you to decide, isn’t it?”

He laughed. “You’re getting the hang of it now.”

The record ceased play, taking the music with it. He was loathe to give her up just yet. He had a feeling that if he continued dancing, she’d follow. For the moment she didn’t look as if she realized that the jukebox had stopped playing. But her cheeks were flushed and while he’d like to think he had something to do with that, it was probably the close quarters they were in. “Would you like to get some air?”

They weren’t that far from the door. Without seeming to move, they’d somehow managed to dance their way to the saloon entrance.

“Actually, that doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” She nodded toward the doorway. “I’ll just step out for a minute.”

When he followed her, she raised a quizzical brow. “Can’t let a lady go out alone at night.”

Part of the reason she wanted to step outside was to get away from him and that rock-hard body of his. “You can if the lady insists.”

With that, she slipped outside and closed the door behind her.

Chapter Four

The temperature change registered immediately as the night air briskly embraced April, cooling her skin. The temporary heat of the afternoon had gone as if it had never existed, a cold snap settling in. She'd forgotten how cold it could be in Hades despite the calendar.

Running her hands up and down her arms, April looked up at the sky. The stars were out in full regalia, framing a moon that was full and bright. Less than a handful of streetlights dotted the area, their illumination paling in comparison to the moon's.

The last time she'd stood here like this, there hadn't been anything but darkness. This was progress, she supposed. As everything else in Hades, it came slowly.

When she felt a hand gently settle on her shoulder, April jumped and swung around. Her breathing steadied slightly as her eyes looked up at Jimmy's face, still flush from the warmth within the saloon.

The man obviously couldn't take no for an answer.

Her eyes asked him what he was doing out here after she'd said she wanted to be left alone.

"Like she means it," he repeated, echoing his sentiment from only moments earlier.

It took her a second to remember. And then she frowned. "I meant it. What, I didn't sound convincing enough to you?"

In deference to the chill, he buttoned the top two buttons of his workshirt. "Not to my ears." Amusement glinted in his eyes. "Must have been all that noise inside," he told her innocently. He saw that wasn't going down so well. "Where I come from, it's not polite to tell the guest of honor to get lost."

She laughed to herself, thinking of the crowd inside the Salty. "I hate to break it to you, but you're more of the excuse of honor than the guest of honor."

He shrugged, unfazed. "As long as it involves honor, I'm all right with it."

"Oh, and honor means a lot to you, does it?"

The grin abated just a little, his manner growing ever so slightly serious. "It has its place in my life."

Suddenly his serious mood was gone. Jimmy hunched his shoulders against the wind, wondering if he'd seem like a hopeless tenderfoot if he opted to go inside for the jacket he'd left slung over the back of his chair. April seemed to be faring well in just a simple blouse. A simple blouse that was hugging curves guaranteed to make a man's mouth water. The button just at her chest level strained against its hole every time she took a breath. He tried to not stare. His fingers itched to help coax the separation.

Shoving his hands into his pockets only partially for warmth, he looked up at the moon. "So, what does a person do around Hades for excitement?"

"Leave."

He looked at her. "Seriously."

April inclined her head. "Seriously."

Jimmy couldn't tell if she was deadpanning or not. "My sister seems pretty content."

April had made her own judgment about nurse Alison LeBlanc and found herself liking the woman, although they had little in common. "Your sister belongs to that amazing fraternal club of people who give of themselves and feel that they actually have a calling in life to tend to the sick and the needy."

Alison had always been a caretaker, even though she was the youngest. And there was no denying that her heart was in the right place. But Jimmy had a little bit of trouble with April's assessment of the townspeople. He nodded toward the closed door behind them. "That didn't strike me as a needy bunch in there."

April's mouth twitched. "You should see them around closing time." And then the would-be smile faded. "Actually, I meant 'needy' as in needing. My sister June decided to remain in Hades after she graduated. She could have had her pick of careers, but she opened up a car repair shop of all things. Said the place needed one and since she'd always been so handy when it came to fixing things, it was a good match." Her frown indicated what she thought of that idea. "When he was growing up, my brother Max dreamed about joining the FBI. Now he's content to be the only law around here." She shook her head, his decision mystifying her. "Not that there's any crime in Hades in the conventional sense of the word."

Her wording intrigued him. "What's unconventional crime?"

"When Victor, one of the Inuits, kept springing Simon Gallagher's traps so he couldn't catch any beaver." She couldn't help feeling that her brother was wasting his life here, but it was his to waste she supposed. "Max certainly can't keep busy handing out speeding tickets and the last murder here was—" She stopped to think and realized that if there had been a murder in Hades, she certainly had no knowledge of it. "I don't know when."

Jimmy smiled at the scenario she was unconsciously painting for him. He and his family hailed from Seattle where crime was an everyday event. He could think of several people who would more than welcome life in Hades.

He looked at her. "Sounds like a nice place, actually."

"Bland," April corrected firmly. "It sounds bland."

There was nothing bland about facing the hardships he was sure this place afforded. That took courage and fortitude. But he saw no point in getting into a discussion over it with her. So he humored her instead. "And you crave excitement."

She looked out over the terrain, asleep except for the party in the building behind them. There wasn't much to see and what there was of it was dark. Even the theater was closed. Since everyone in town was at the Salty, there had been no reason to keep the theater open tonight. She could remember all those years, aching to get as far away from Hades as possible.

"What I crave," she told him, "is something with a pulse."

The grin on his lips was warm, inviting as he held up his hand for her to examine. "I have a pulse."

A smile began to bud on her lips. April could only shake her head. He'd gotten her again. "I have to learn to pick my words more carefully around you."

He moved a little closer to her as the wind rose. "Does that mean you'll be around me?"

He was too close, but to back away would imply that she was afraid, or wary, and that wasn't the sort of image she cared to project. So she stood her ground and ignored the feelings taking place inside of her. "There you go again."

He liked the way her eyes snapped, and the way she smelled when the wind shifted, bringing the scent of her perfume to him. Ever since he could remember, he'd always paid attention to women. All women. The pretty ones he paid a little more attention to.

Inspired by the subtle nuances he was picking up, Jimmy decided to make another pitch. "You can't be postmistressing all the time. I mean, a place like this can't get that much mail—seeing as how there aren't that many people here. You have to have some free hours, what do you do then?"

Stepping to the side, she moved away from him. "Take care of my grandmother."

A high-pitched laugh reached them from within, escaping through the fraction of an inch where the window sash failed to meet the sill. They turned and April could see her grandmother was standing right next to the window. From all appearances, she was vamping the socks off the gray-bearded man she was with. Jimmy, eyeing Yuri Bostovik, noticed that he looked almost besotted with April's grandmother.

Nothing he liked better than to see seniors enjoying their lives. Jimmy grinned and looked at April. “Looks to me like your grandmother is taking care of herself.” More than a touch of admiration mingled with his amusement.

The way April saw it, Gran was doing the exact opposite. She should have been at home, resting, not out at the saloon. The woman had angina, for heaven’s sake. But there had been no talking her out of coming. Gran had been insistent. Until this moment, despite Gran’s blatant allusions to Yuri, April had thought it was to insure her coming here. Now she wasn’t so sure.

She watched the older couple move and meld into the crowd. April shook her head. “Gran’s headstrong. She absolutely refuses to let me take her to Anchorage—to the hospital there.”

The woman looked healthy enough, even glowing, but Jimmy knew how deceptive appearances could be.

“Can’t Shayne treat her? Alison says he’s the best.” He remembered feigning jealousy when Alison had told him that, but they’d both known he’d been kidding. He hadn’t an envious bone in his body. And he knew that while Alison was kind, she wasn’t recklessly lavish with her praise. She called them as she saw them.

“I’m sure he is for the common everyday things, but it’s her heart—”

“What about her heart?”

Because they’d been preying on her mind ever since she’d received June’s letter, the words were out before she realized that she was sharing them. “She has angina and Shayne suggested an angiogram to see if there’s any sort of blockage. Her EKG looks good, but an electrocardiogram is almost useless in determining the actual condition of a heart—and she’d been having these pains.”

Jimmy wondered how much was true and how much had been fabricated by Ursula Hatcher for April’s benefit. From what Alison had told him, he had a hunch the crafty-looking woman on the other side of the pane had exaggerated her condition to get something she wanted—her granddaughter in the area. “What kind of tests have been done?”

Interest mingled in with her suspicion. “What kind of a doctor are you?”

“A good one, I’d like to think.” He regarded Ursula’s profile with interest before turning back to one that interested him more at the moment. “I can take a look at her for you if you’d like.”

“I don’t need her looked at, I need her scanned.”

Jimmy laughed. “You make her sound like some sort of digitalized cartoon character.”

“No, she’s a person,” April said softly as she watched her grandmother shamelessly flirt. “A very precious person.”

Jimmy watched as moonbeams tangled themselves in April’s hair. Urges whispered softly through him. It was hard keeping his mind on the conversation. “She’d have to be, to get you to come back to a place you hate so much.”

April didn’t like having things presumed about her, or having words put in her mouth. “I never said I hated Hades.”

Was she serious? He looked at her expression, clearly challenging him, and realized that she was. Very serious. “In every way but to actually use the word,” he contradicted.

She opened her mouth to put him in his place then closed it again, deciding the argument wasn’t worth the effort. Not when he was right. It was just that she didn’t like having someone read her so well, not a stranger at any rate.

Shrugging, she looked away. “It’s just that I find it stifling here, confining.”

“Oh, I don’t know. When something’s unformed like Hades, there’s a world of possibilities in that vastness. You can do anything, be anything. It’s like a huge empty canvas you can paint on.”

He’d said he was visiting, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe he was checking things out. “You sound like somebody who’s fixing to make a monumental move.”

Not hardly, he thought. He had everything set up for him at the hospital back in Seattle. That had taken some doing. Besides, Kevin was having enough trouble with Alison being so far away. His

older brother would seriously flip out if two members of his family were more than an hour away by regular route. Jimmy supposed, after sacrificing so much for them, Kevin felt he deserved to be part of their lives once those lives took shape.

Jimmy shrugged casually. “No, just somebody who’s always got his eye out for possibilities.”

“I would have thought that someone like you would have restricted his possibilities to women.”

“There’s that field, too.” His grin was wide and it tugged at her, pulling her in against her will. “But not restricted, never restricted.”

When he looked into her eyes like that, she found she had trouble thinking. Good thing she’d stepped out for some air when she had. She’d definitely been in danger of light-headedness. “So, where do you practice—medicine, I mean.”

“I don’t have to practice,” he told her, his voice low, moving slowly around her, hypnotizing her. “I have it down pat—medicine, I mean.”

April shivered, trying to snap out of the trance she felt herself falling into.

“Cold?”

It was as good an excuse as any. “Yes. Spring here is only a little warmer than winter at times.”

Too late she realized it was the wrong thing to say because he slipped his arm around her shoulders, then shielded her against the wind with his body. “Maybe we’d better get you inside.”

She’d gotten good at rejecting men who came on to her. She could do a put-down with just a well-aimed glance. There was no doubt in her mind that James Quintano was definitely coming on to her. She could feel it in every bone in her body. But when she turned her head toward him, no words came, no well-honed, belittling glance found its way into her eyes. Instead, she felt a definite pull toward this man she didn’t know.

“Maybe,” she agreed, her voice hardly above a whisper.

Reaching around her, he put out his hand to push open the door. And wound up wrapping that same hand around her other side instead. Pulling her to him.

He’d meant to be on his best behavior, he really had. But when she looked at him like that, with the moonlight caressing her face and moonbeams getting lost in that tangle of hair that invited his fingers to touch it, he felt something stronger than his good intentions stir within his gut.

Before he quite knew what he was doing, natural born instincts had him cupping her cheek and tilting her face up to his. Had him touching his mouth to hers to break the spell because nothing could taste as good as her lips looked.

He was wrong.

They could.

Maybe it was because he’d been at loose ends ever since Melinda had canceled out on him, begging off from the cruise because of some personal emergency at home that now eluded his brain.

The real emergency, he’d had no doubt at the time, was that she’d had marriage on her mind and he’d had nothing more serious than a pleasant interlude on his. It wasn’t that he had anything against marriage in general, just nothing for it in particular when it came to himself. He reasoned that he saw enough dying at the hospital, he didn’t need to be part of something that, no matter what, had a finite lifespan. His parents had driven that lesson home long before he’d ever put on his first pair of scrubs.

But that belief in no way made him monastic. For him, relationships lasted as long as they were mutually beneficial, comforting and light. While he was involved, he could be counted on for emotional support, a kind word and to be summoned in the middle of the night in case of a breakdown —as long as he wasn’t on call. Even after a relationship had run its course, he usually remained on good terms with the woman. But he’d made it a rule never to meet the woman’s family or to discuss anything more romantically serious than pending plans for the weekend. He didn’t believe in committing himself to anything longer than that.

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