

H.

Leslie Kelly



She's No Angel

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rising star of romance."
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If only he'd taken another route to Trouble, Pennsylvania. Then he'd never have rescued a tire-iron-toting, drop-dead-gorgeous woman whose crazy aunts had stolen her shoes and keys and left her more than a little pissed off. There was no way he was ready to get involved with someone like Jennifer, let alone the decades-old murder case swirling around her nutty family! But writer Jennifer Feeney was one provocative package. And her latest bestseller had stirred up a whole lot of trouble. Which meant that, between rescuing her again and again, Mike had fallen for her, big-time. Just the way he'd promised himself he wouldn't. Now it looks as if her family's past is going to catch up with both of them, and it's time for Mike to choose—solve the case—or get the girl.

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To Bruce. Just Bruce.

I'm so glad you like that I'm no angel.

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PROLOGUE

OF ALL THE PLEASURES in the life of Mortimer Potts, he'd have to call being the patriarch of a small Pennsylvania town among the finest. In the single year that he'd been living in Trouble, having purchased the bulk of it to save it from bankruptcy, he'd watched the place emerge from its cloak of depression the way a pretty flower might pop out amid a field of weeds and scrub. Not fully in bloom yet, it merely offered a hint at the color curled within its tightly wound petals. Observing it blossom had become his favorite pastime.

But the town wasn't his greatest pleasure. It couldn't compare, say, to spending time with his family—his grandsons and new granddaughter-in-law. Or having an eighty-one-year-old body that could perform all its necessary functions without benefit of odious amounts of fiber or Viagra. At least, most of the time. There had been that one occasion with the Feeney sisters when he'd discovered what the hoopla over that little blue pill was all about. It was a wonder his heart had survived the unexpected adventure. Still, watching the town emerge from its sleep was infinitely better than needing the obituaries to see who he'd outlived.

"I heard that sigh," a disapproving voice said, the clipped British accent unaltered by decades of life in the U.S. "You're thinking of those wretched sisters again, aren't you? Either that or the time we rescued the harem in forty-six."

Mortimer smiled in reminiscence. "A noble adventure."

Roderick, his manservant—and best friend—sniffed, the same supercilious sound of disapproval he'd made since the day they'd met. "I doubt the sheikh would have been so quick with his golden reward if he knew how many of his wives thanked you personally."

Ahh, yes. He did enjoy being thanked.

His fond memories quickly faded, Roderick's words suddenly making him feel very old. Gone were his journeys to other continents, where he and his majordomo had been freewheeling adventurers. Or even, in his later years, where they'd been freewheeling parents, the two of them raising Mortimer's grandsons.

Having lived life as a citizen of the world, he'd seen no reason to bring the boys up any other way. So while other youngsters their age studied faraway places by reading about them in textbooks in stuffy schoolrooms, his grandsons were visiting those spots. South America. Africa. From sampans in Shanghai to digs of ruins in Greece, Mortimer and Roderick had taught the boys not merely how to think, but how to live.

Now, however, there were no more adventures. No more trips to other continents. If he were foolish enough to get on a horse today, he'd be more likely to break a hip than to win a race across the desert.

"Is everything prepared for Michael's arrival?"

Roderick nodded. "Right down to his favorite dish." His brow scrunching in disgust, he added, "Chili. How very—"

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Mortimer replied, his tone dry. "Pedestrian?" It was one of Roderick's favorite words.

"I was going to say uninspiring."

"No, you weren't."

"You can't read my mind, Mortimer."

Chuckling, Mortimer said, "I know you well enough to know how it must have pained you to shop for canned kidney beans."

Rod laid one hand on Mortimer's broad, oak desk and leaned over, as if exhausted. "You've no idea. It is impossible to purchase fresh chili peppers, or even cumin, in this town. I had to settle for a

few of those dried-up, yellow envelopes full of mystery spice.” He sounded as disgruntled as if he’d been forced to substitute Chicken of the Sea for beluga.

“How very pedestrian,” Mortimer murmured, purposely gazing at his paper, though he saw Roderick puff up like a porcupine out of the corner of his eye.

What a funny, prickly man. And the truest friend anyone could ever ask for. They’d been together since the Second World War, crossing the globe in search of adventure. Mortimer’s family money and high spirits had led the way while Roderick’s common sense had kept them out of trouble. Well, it hadn’t kept them out of trouble, but it certainly had extricated them from a few...tricky...situations.

Even when the occasional marriage had divided them, they’d remained close, and Rod had been the first person a widowed Mortimer had called when he’d experienced the second great loss of his life—the death of his daughter. As always, the stoic Englishman had come to his side, stepping forward with Mortimer to parent three orphaned little boys, who’d lost their father less than a year before in the first Gulf War.

“The point is,” Rod said, as usual changing the subject when he was losing an argument, “Michael has developed horrifyingly middle-class tastes.”

Mortimer smiled, lifting his drink to his lips, eyeing the amber-colored whiskey and suddenly wishing he’d helped himself to one of the beers he’d put on ice for his grandson. “Yes, he has, but considering he is a New York City police officer, I’d say that’s probably appropriate.”

“A police officer.” Roddy couldn’t have sounded more disdainful if Michael had decided to become one of those male go-go dancers. “If he had to go into law enforcement, couldn’t he at least have gone into the MI5?”

Grunting, Mortimer lowered his drink, still wanting that beer. “Aside from the fact that he’s an American, not a Brit, and would therefore have been more likely to choose the CIA, my grandson could never be a spy. He’s far too noble.”

Roderick’s eyebrows rose until they almost blended in with his gray hair. “The boy’s the toughest fighter I’ve ever seen.”

Well, yes, he was that. The youngest of Mortimer’s three grandsons had reacted differently to the loss of his parents than his brothers had. Morgan, the oldest, had become an adventurer, much like his grandfather. Max, before settling down with his new wife last year, had been a playboy, with women dogging his every step.

Michael, though...He’d grown hard. Tough. Self-protective. And the boy did have a bit of a temper. Mortimer suppressed a chuckle, remembering the time he’d bailed his teenage grandson out of jail. He’d been arrested for brawling with three boys who’d made the mistake of harassing a young lady Michael liked. A born protector, that one. “He needs a good woman, that’s all.”

“Surely you’ve learned your lesson about matchmaking.” Roderick managed to sound both scandalized and interested by the idea. “Hasn’t the woeful expression on the face of your secretary been enough to cure you of such impulses?”

Hmm...true. His latest effort had backfired. When Allie, his assistant, had left here an hour ago, she’d seemed very blue over her botched summer romance. “Perhaps Allie and Michael...”

“No. He’d chew her up and pick his teeth with her bones.”

Roderick was probably right.

“Michael needs someone much tougher.” Slowly pouring himself a drink and sitting in the leather chair opposite Mortimer’s, Roderick pursed his mouth in concentration. “Someone smart. Independent. A woman who won’t let him dominate her. Who will stand up for herself. Someone...”

“Tricky.”

“I was going to say strong. Self-confident.”

“Yes, yes,” Mortimer said, waving an airy hand, “but sly. One who’ll humor Michael’s need to protect her, never letting on that she doesn’t really need protecting. You do know how much he likes taking care of people.”

“Taking care of women,” Roderick said with a sigh.

Yes, Michael did do a lot of that, especially since he’d become a police officer. But something had happened to the boy a few years ago, involving two women. His grandson had gone from a smiling good guy with a mildly quick temper to a brooding good guy with a lightning-fast one.

A good man in a fight. While Maxwell was the grandson Mortimer would have loved to have with him when he’d entertained a half-dozen ladies of the evening in a dingy, shadowy Bangkok bar, Michael was the one he’d have loved to have at his back in the alley behind that bar later that night. When the ladies’ protectors had tried to relieve him of his belongings.

They hadn’t succeeded. But they had left Mortimer with an interesting, half moon-shaped scar on his shoulder. One of many.

As for Morgan... He’d have liked to have had him along when he’d been forced to claw his way out of an ancient tomb in Oman, where he’d been walled up for smiling at the wrong sultan’s wife.

“I suppose I cannot talk you out of this?”

Mortimer stared at his friend. “Were you trying to?”

The other man flushed slightly, then shrugged, giving up all pretense. “No. I don’t like to see him so hardened.... He needs to find something more for his life.”

“So we’re agreed.” Like Roderick, Mortimer wanted to see that smile return to Michael’s face. No, he would never become a prankster like his brother Max. But there was no reason for Michael to go through life with his guard always up. “He needs someone who will make him stop taking himself so seriously.”

“But he won’t go into that willingly,” Roderick said. “We’ll have to make him think things are very serious indeed.”

Lifting his glass again, Mortimer tried not to laugh. “Are you saying we’re partners in this sly, matchmaking venture?”

Shaking his head so hard a strand of graying hair fell over one eye, Roddy stood. “That is your purview.” He headed to the door, but before leaving, looked over his shoulder. “Though I suppose I can be counted upon to...supervise.”

Mortimer hid his triumphant smile.

Roderick continued, “Now, where do you think we’ll find this completely contradictory strong/weak, intelligent/dim, exciting/calming, tough/loving woman?”

When put that way, it did sound impossible. Then the image of a face swam into Mortimer’s mind. He was surprised he hadn’t thought of it sooner, since he’d been quite enjoying reading the young lady’s sarcastic advice-to-the-lovelorn book this morning. She was feisty and brash, yet pretty and soft. Just the ticket for Michael, who needed to play protector but could never be with a woman who’d let him ride rough-shod over her. “You know, it so happens I recently met a young lady who would be perfect.”

Roderick waited expectantly.

“Her name,” Mortimer said, drawing out the suspense, sure of his friend’s reaction, “is Feeney.”

He wasn’t disappointed. Roderick began to sputter, then turn bright red. “No. Not those two...”

“Their niece. A lovely young woman.”

“Is she a murderer, too?”

Mortimer knew what Roderick was referring to. There had certainly been gossip about the Feeney sisters, Ida Mae and Ivy. He wasn’t sure it was true, however. “That’s never been proven.”

Roderick marched back into the room, picked up his half-empty tumbler and tossed the remnants of his whiskey back in two gulps. Finishing, he breathed deeply and said, “You’re willing

to risk Michael's well-being by involving him with a Feeney woman. I say, Mortimer, have you quite gone off your nut?"

Perhaps. Some people certainly thought he had, at many times in his life. Including, most recently, when he'd purchased this weary town and taken up residence in a ram-shackle old mansion. "Who better to liven up Michael's life than a woman he can never be sure of? Is she good...is she bad? Is she trustworthy...or dangerous?" He smiled and chuckled, liking the idea more and more. "Oh, yes, I think young Miss Feeney could be the answer to our prayers."

"Do people pray for devil-women?"

With a frown, Mortimer snapped back, "She's a nice girl."

"Must not take after her relatives." Obviously seeing Mortimer was not to be swayed, Roderick let out a long-suffering sigh. "I do hope you know what you're doing. Do you truly want to find yourself tied to the Feeney sisters?" As if he knew the moment he'd said the words that he'd given Mortimer a risqué opening to reminisce about his adventures with Ida Mae and Ivy, Roderick immediately threw his hand up, palm out. "Don't answer that. There are some things I just don't want to know."

Still chuckling as Roddy left the room, Mortimer settled back in his chair. Sipping his whiskey. Thinking of Borneo. Of his wives. Of Carla, his daughter. He also thought of three little tearstained faces watching him from across a flower-laden casket and remembered the vow he'd made on that day, to see to it that his grandsons lived very happy lives.

Maxwell certainly was. His happiness with his new wife rang clearly in his voice every time he called from California, so there was one taken care of. While Mortimer had not set out to "set up" his middle grandson, judging by how things had worked out, finding the right woman had been the key to Max's happiness. So perhaps it would be the same for the other two. But since neither seemed interested in following their brother down the path of wedded bliss, they might need a nudge.

His oldest grandson Morgan was currently in China, photographing the great terra-cotta army near Mount Lishan for National Geographic magazine. Oh, what Mortimer wouldn't give to be with him; though, of course, his knees could barely manage the stairs of his house these days.

Anyway, with Morgan out of the country, beyond Mortimer's reach, there was only one single grandson near enough to work on. That was the youngest. The one who probably most needed a soothing, loving relationship in his life to counter the violence he dealt with on a daily basis.

Yes, it was most definitely time for Michael to fall in love. And if he needed a little assistance in that direction?

Well, Mortimer Potts was more than happy to oblige.

CHAPTER ONE

Every man dreams of having a supportive little woman standing behind him. He just doesn't realize that eventually she's going to be holding a cast-iron skillet aimed directly at his skull.

—Why Arsenic Is Better Than Divorce by Jennifer Feeney

THE SIGHT OF A TALL BRUNETTE with a great ass trudging down the side of the road would have been enough to make Mike Taylor slow down for a better look, even if the woman hadn't been barefoot. And swinging a tire iron. And, judging by her tight shoulders and clenched fists, mad as hell.

But she was all of those. Which made her more interesting.

He quickly ran through the possible explanations. "No broken-down car," he muttered as he pulled his foot off the gas pedal of his Jeep, slowing to a crawl a few yards behind her. "No houses around." Since leaving the highway, he hadn't seen a single building or gas station. Just a few road signs counting down the miles to hell...make that Trouble, PA.

So maybe she'd been mugged and had fought off her attacker. Or maybe she'd been the attacker and was still clinging to her weapon. His eyes shifted to the tire iron, looking for any telltale signs that it had been used to beat someone recently. Dripping blood, hair, any of that stuff. He saw nothing.

The woman trudged on, impervious to the dig of gravel into her feet as she stuck to the shoulder of the two-lane road. Her soft, filmy dress swirled around her thighs, the afternoon breeze kicking it up a bit higher with each step. High enough to let him know her backside wasn't her only terrific feature. The woman had some legs to go along with her obviously leather-skinned feet.

He suddenly suspected she was talking out loud. Something was making it impossible for her to hear the six cylinders pistoning a few yards behind her. Judging by the bounce of her brown hair across her shoulders, he suspected her one-sided conversation was a heated one.

"Interesting." He wondered why he wasn't tense, as he'd normally be if he spied a person armed with a dangerous object.

Not that this woman emanated danger. Everything about her screamed frustration, not rage. Which he would have understood if he'd seen a disabled car, a broken cell phone nearby and a pair of woman's shoes...what, stuck in the mud? Carried off by an animal? "Uh-uh." Didn't add up.

She was becoming more and more intriguing by the moment.

He hadn't expected to stumble across anything intriguing this weekend. Not here, anyway, in the lousy little town his grandfather had been holed up in for the past year. His whole reason for coming here to visit was to try to convince Mortimer to bail out of Trouble. But pissed-off brunettes swinging tire irons did intrigue him, and would have even if he wasn't a cop.

He had no choice but to stop. No, he wasn't exactly in his jurisdiction. And, since transferring to NYC Police's cold case and apprehension squad a few months ago, rarely had cause to interact with current victims of crime. Or, considering the tire iron and her visible anger, potential suspects.

When he interacted with the living at all in his more recent cases, he generally spoke to former neighbors or family members. Or even descendents, given the age of some of the case files. Frankly, he didn't mind that as much as he thought he would when he'd been ordered to accept the transfer a few months ago. At that point, being forced "for his own good" to leave the twentieth-precinct vice squad had had him ready to tell the city to take their badge and shove it. It had felt like a kick in the gut.

An undercover investigation into a high-end club drug ring run by a slime named Ricky Stahl had ended in a number of indictments...and a few embarrassed public officials with druggie kids they'd rather nobody knew about. It had also meant a transfer for Mike. His bosses claimed the area had gotten too hot for him. Mike thought the transfer was more likely payback from embarrassed politicians.

Whatever the true motivation, he'd been shoved straight into 1PP, aka headquarters. He now spent most of his days pouring through musty, yellowed logs and evidence files that smelled as if they belonged in some grandmother's basement. When not there, he was on the streets, tracking down hesitant witnesses with failing eyesight and dim memories. Every one of whom wanted to serve him coffee cake while they relived the worst experience of their lives...the murder of a loved one.

Somehow, though, despite his initial insistence to anyone who would listen that he was being wasted, he'd grudgingly found himself getting interested in what he was doing. Maybe it wasn't that surprising. He'd read his grandfather's ancient Ellery Queen and Mickey Spillane mysteries by the gross as a kid. Solving puzzles, sifting through clues, he'd gotten a real charge out of that stuff once. Who knew he'd get a charge out of doing it for real as an adult?

It challenged him, exercised his brain in a way that posing as a buyer or a john certainly never had. His first successful cold-case closing—solving the 1998 murder of a shopkeeper who'd been gunned down in his own storage room—had given him more satisfaction than he'd ever experienced in Vice. Not just because of how grateful the family had been, but because he'd felt triumphant at having solved an unsolvable mystery.

He'd been a cold-case junkie ever since. Fascinated by the past, putting together one piece at a time of each intricate puzzle. So maybe that was why he couldn't drive past the stranger...because she was a puzzle. Alone on the road five miles from town. Furious. Armed. And hot.

"Yeah. Time to stop," he muttered, not knowing whether the puzzle or the hot interested him more.

Behind him, on the back seat, the closest thing Mike had to a commitment—a scruffy dog—lifted his head off his paw and yawned audibly. "We're not there yet, go back to sleep," Mike said, not even watching to see if the animal obeyed. He knew he would. Lie down was the only command the lazy mutt ever heard.

Tapping his horn in warning, Mike pulled onto the shoulder behind the brunette. She swung around immediately, but, thankfully, the tire iron stayed down by her side.

Remaining where she was, she watched warily as he stepped out. He shaded his eyes from the late afternoon sun setting over the town of Trouble ahead, squinting through his dark glasses to make out the woman's features. He still couldn't determine much, beyond the suspicion that her shape from the front was as good as it had been from behind. Maybe better, judging by the plunging neckline of her halter dress.

Damn, the woman had more curves than a Spirograph.

She'd stopped right beyond a battered road sign, which read Trouble Ahead. Somehow, he already knew the sign was right.

"Afternoon," he said with a nod.

The woman wasn't dressed for changing a tire. Or walking barefoot down a country road, for that matter. No, she looked more like one of the rich princesses who strolled down Park Avenue shopping for glittery purses with their tiny Chihuahuas.

"Having trouble?" he asked as he approached her, the sun continuing to interfere with his vision. "Do you need help?"

"Do you happen to have a gun handy?" was her shocking reply.

Actually, he did. Not that he was going to reveal that to someone eager to arm herself. "Sorry. Not today."

He slowed his steps. Though he still didn't sense she was dangerous to him, she felt bloodlust toward someone else. Maybe the person who'd stranded her out here sans car and shoes.

"Then I don't need your help," she said, her words jagged, choppy, as if now that she'd stopped walking she could finally suck in a few breaths of air. The harsh way she punctuated each word underscored his first impression—she was mad as hell.

And, he suspected, even more hot from the front than she'd been from behind. That dress was cut lower than he'd thought, and the filmy fabric outlined some generous hips. "Are you lost?"

She frowned. "Do I look lost?"

"No. You look stranded."

"Score one for the big guy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have another five miles to walk into town."

As he moved to within two feet of her, the woman's own form blocked most of the sun until just a few rays spiked out from behind her head, like a huge halo. The effect was dazzling—blinding—but he still pushed his sunglasses up onto his head.

No one had ever accused him of being sentimental or sappy. But the way the light caught her hair, reflecting on individual strands of brown, gold and red and turning it into a veil of color, he couldn't help staring.

When he forced himself to focus on the stranger's face, he suddenly had to suck in a quick, surprised breath of his own. Because that face was good. Very good, with the high cheekbones and hollowed-out cheeks that women begged plastic surgeons for.

She also had a small, straight nose and dark eyes that were a swirling mix of blue and stormy gray. They were framed by heavily lashed lids. The strong jaw, and a slight jut to her chin said she was determined. Despite being tightly clenched, her mouth was obviously designed with sin in mind. Her naturally full lips would never need that crap women used to make themselves look like injected-to-death movie stars.

She wasn't too young—probably right around his age, or maybe even older. There was a maturity in the strength of her profile, in the confident way she carried herself.

He liked what he saw. A lot. This was the first time in ages that he'd liked the looks of a woman so much he'd actually begun to wonder whether he owned any unexpired condoms.

And she was staring at him with pure malice.

"Bad day, huh?"

"You could say that."

"So, uh, why do you need a gun?"

"To shoot someone," she snapped, looking at him as if he were stupid. "Two someones, actually."

He quickly scanned the woman's features, looking for her true intent. He'd met a lot of criminals in his seven years on the force, and he knew angry, frustrated threats from legitimate ones. This one, judging by the resigned irritation in her tone—rather than rage—was all bark and no bite. At least, he hoped. But he still thought about his service weapon, and wondered if he was going to have to use it to stop her from following through on her threats.

Wouldn't be the first time he'd stepped between a murderous woman and her intended target. Just the thought of that incident made the scar in his right shoulder ache...and the one around his heart grow a little harder.

"Dumb question." Glancing at the object in her hand, he tried again. "Why are you carrying a tire iron?"

She frowned, appearing puzzled by the ridiculousness of the query. Tilting her head to the side until her long hair brushed her arm, she explained, "Because I don't have a gun, of course."

Well, color him stupid for not knowing that. "Is there someone in particular you plan to kill or would anybody do?"

"Don't worry. You're quite safe," she said, that jaw still tense but some of the stiffness easing out of her shoulders. "However, two little old ladies from hell better have gone into the witness protection program before I get back into town."

"Killing little old ladies." He tsked and shook his head, growing even less alarmed. But he didn't let his guard down completely. "That's not very polite."

“You don’t know these particular old ladies.”

Something that felt like a smile began to tug at his mouth. “I know it’s against the law to kill them.”

He quickly squashed the smile. Mike wasn’t used to smiling.... He didn’t have a lot to be happy about on the job, and his personal life was almost nonexistent. Having lived for his work for the past few years, he hadn’t developed more than a nodding relationship with anyone outside the force. With his brothers living busy lives, he seldom got together with them these days. He hadn’t laid eyes on Max or Morgan since Max’s wedding in December. And now that his grandfather, Mortimer, had taken up residence in a shoddy town that looked like the setting of a Stephen King story, he never saw him, either. Other than the drooly dog in his Jeep, he was about as unencumbered, serious and solitary as a twenty-seven-year-old New Yorker could be.

“Believe me, it’d be justifiable homicide.”

“You a lawyer?” He tensed, as any cop did at the thought of a defense attorney...almost always an enemy in the courtroom.

“No. I just play one on TV.”

At first he thought she meant she was an actress—because she could be. Not only because she was so attractive, but because she had definite character. Then she rolled her eyes and huffed out an annoyed breath that he hadn’t immediately caught her sarcasm. “I watch Law and Order, the original and all ninety of its spin-offs, okay? Now, unless you have a spare pair of women’s size eight Nikes in your car, I really need to say goodbye.”

As if assessing the chances, her eyes dropped to his feet, and for the first time, Mike realized, she really looked at him. She was finally seeing him. She’d been too ticked off, too frustrated to even spare him a real glance until now.

Now she glanced. Oh, she definitely glanced.

Her unusual eyes darkened to almost charcoal-gray and her lips parted as she drew in a few more deep breaths. He could see the way her pulse fluttered in her neck as she cast a leisurely stare from his boot-clad feet, up his faded jeans, his Yankees T-shirt, then his face. She stopped there, a flick of her tongue to moisten her lips indicating she’d seen the guy women spent a lot of time coming on to until they realized he was interested in nothing more than the few hours he could kill with them.

“Sorry, no spare footwear,” he finally said. He waited for a flirtatious comment, a come-on, a request for a lift.

He got none of those. Just a shrug, a sigh and a frown. Without warning, she swung around and started striding away, saying over her shoulder, “Okay. Have a nice—”

“Wait,” he said, jogging to catch up to her. He put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. But the moment his hand landed on her warm skin he realized his mistake. Looking at her had affected him. Touching her nearly stopped his heart.

Her skin was smooth. Silky. Warm and supple under the sun’s strong summer rays. And though she probably should have smacked his hand away, given that he was a complete stranger, she didn’t. She simply watched him, her eyes leaning more toward blue now, slowly shifting colors like one of those old-fashioned mood rings girls had been so crazy about when he was a kid.

“Yes?” she asked, her voice sounding thick, more throaty than it had before, which was when he knew what mood her blue eyes indicated: Awareness. Interest. Heat.

Definite heat. It was instantaneous. It was mutual. And it was also entirely unexpected considering the woman was a complete stranger...a stranger in need.

Finally, after a long, thick moment, Mike pulled his hand away, noting the whiteness his touch had left against her sunpinkened skin. Her pale, creamy complexion wouldn’t do well for much longer in this heat. He cleared his throat, wondering why his mouth had gone so dry. “Can I give you a ride somewhere?”

She hesitated, as if still affected by his touch, before replying, “Thanks, but I’m not that desperate. I don’t get into cars with total strangers.”

Smart. He didn’t blame her at all, especially considering some of the stuff he’d seen on the job. Still, he didn’t want the woman to keep stubbornly walking down the road until her feet blistered and her soft skin turned apple-red. “Do you want to use my cell phone to call for help?”

She paused, pursing her lips as she thought about it. Then, with a sigh, admitted, “There’s nobody to call. AAA wouldn’t come out unless my car was actually here. And the only family I have in town are the ones who stranded me.”

“The old ladies.”

“My aunts.” Still frowning, she added, “I don’t think I’d want the police to come help me out considering I am planning to kill those two when I get back to town.”

That startled a one-syllable laugh out of him, which he immediately halted. He also made a mental note not to tell her he was a cop. “Don’t you know anybody else in Trouble?”

“Nobody I could call, except maybe just an elderly friend of my aunts’, who we ran into at the store yesterday. I can’t even remember his whole name. It’s Ports, Potter...something like that.”

“Potts. Mortimer Potts.”

“You know him?” she asked, sounding surprised—and hopeful.

“I’m on my way to his house.”

A relieved smile finally appeared on her pretty face. “Are you, by any chance, one of his grandsons?”

“Yeah.” He put out his hand. “Mike Taylor.”

She reached out and put her hand in his, and again he couldn’t help noticing how damned soft the woman was. As if she regularly bathed in some milky lotion that made her skin constantly feel like silk.

“I’m Jennifer Feeney. Jen. Your grandfather mentioned you were coming into town today. He seems like a...nice old man.”

Mike noted the hesitation. No doubt, Mortimer was a nice old man. But that obviously hadn’t been the first word that had come to the woman’s mind. No. People usually described Mortimer as many things other than nice—eccentric, wild, dashing.

Nutty.

Not that Mike or his brothers much cared what other people thought of their grandfather. They knew him; they’d lived with him, traveling around the world on one adventure after another. There wasn’t a single thing any of his grandsons wouldn’t do for the man. Including taking down anyone who ever hurt him.

Though now eighty-one years old, Mortimer was remarkably healthy, except for some arthritis that had limited his physical activities. Anyone who saw him would think he was a sturdy seventy-year-old, with his shoulder-length white hair, tall and lanky frame, and blazing blue eyes. Of course, if he was in one of his moods, and happened to be wearing a 1940s military uniform, an Arabic thobe or chaps and a holster, they might go right back to that nutty part.

“You’re the one who lives in New York?”

He nodded.

“Me, too. I’m just visiting.”

“Small world.” Only, not. Because New York was one big city and he was constantly amazed when traveling by how many people he ran into from there. “So does this mean we’re not strangers, and you’ll let me give you a ride into town?”

She hesitated, then glanced down at her bare feet. She didn’t have much choice—if she stayed on the gravel shoulder, her feet would be torn to shreds. If she moved to the hot blacktop, they’d be fried.

Turning her head to look over her shoulder at the long road winding toward Trouble, she finally nodded. “Okay.” Then she narrowed her eyes and stared at him, hard. “But be warned, I’m keeping the tire iron. I can defend myself.”

The fierce expression was such a contradiction to the soft, silky rest of her that Mike had that unfamiliar impulse to smile again. Instead, he merely murmured, “Consider me warned.”

JENNIFER FEENEY HAD NEVER liked the town of Trouble. Not since the first time she’d laid eyes on it as a little girl. Her parents had brought her here twenty years ago, to visit her father’s reclusive sisters. She’d heard stories about the town of Trouble, and her elderly aunts Ida Mae and Ivy, since she was small. They had come to visit once or twice, but nothing had prepared Jen to visit them in Trouble.

Even as a child, she’d felt the strangeness of the place. From the wary watchfulness of the residents to the tangled bramble where parks had once stood, the town laid out an Un-welcome mat that urged visitors to leave. It was hard to imagine her cheerful, teddy bear of a father had grown up here.

Worst of all had been the two shadowy buildings where the aunts resided. The old Victorian homes hovered over the north end of town, side by side, two dark birds of prey on vigilant watch for fresh meat. Though she’d only been eight during that visit, Jen had already had a good imagination. When she’d seen the two houses, with their sagging facades, shuttered windows and worn siding, she’d immediately thought of them as the sisters.

Ida Mae’s house was dour and forbidding, what was left of its paint the color of a stormy sky, angry and wet. Its jagged railings and the spiky bars over the windows had given it the appearance of a prison. The black front door seemed like an open mouth waiting to swallow anyone who ventured onto the crumbling porch. Unadorned, ghostly against the clouds, the place had perfectly matched its owner, the dark and stern Ida Mae.

Ivy’s was even worse.

It had apparently once been a gentle yellow, but any cheery gentility had long been eradicated. Tangled vines crawled like garden snakes up toward the roof. Cracks in the water-stained walls revealed odd shapes that had looked too much like spiders and monsters to her eight-year-old eyes. And the whole foundation had appeared slightly sunken on the right, as if the house were a stroke victim whose face hadn’t quite recovered.

Where Ida Mae’s house was merely dark and unwelcoming, Ivy’s was a freakish combination of lightness and rabid death. Garish and frightening. Much like the old lady herself.

Of the two of them, Ivy had scared her the most, because she was so terribly unpredictable. At times a charming hostess, then a raging shrew, she was the one Jen should have tried to avoid. But she’d also been the most interesting, so often talking to herself, or to invisible, long-dead friends.

The one-sided conversations and stories the woman told had fascinated Jen. She’d often sat unnoticed, listening, until Ivy snapped out of one of her trances long enough to shoo her away. Sometimes with a threat to sell her to the child catcher who, in Jen’s dreams, looked just like Ivy. Rail-thin, bony and menacing.

She supposed she ought to thank the aunts for one thing: they’d made finding out she was adopted a bit more bearable. She’d taken the news from her parents shortly after her twentieth birthday with surprising good grace. Surprising to them, she supposed. Considering she’d long wished she didn’t share the blood of the aunts, the news hadn’t been all that unwelcome.

Over the years, though she and her parents had lived in Connecticut—not too far away—the visits to Trouble had been few. Until a little over a year ago when her father, after having a massive heart attack, had elicited a promise from her to take over the care of his elderly sisters. She’d promised, of course. She would have promised him anything at that point.

Her father had, thankfully, survived and he and her mother had retired to North Carolina last fall. But because he’d been so weakened by the experience, Jen had insisted on keeping her promise.

She loved him too much to allow him to deal with the old witches on a regular basis. That was exactly the kind of stress his doctor said could end up killing him.

Taking over the aunts' mangled finances, she'd made sure their electricity remained on and their account at the grocery store was paid. Ida Mae and Ivy supposedly had money, each having been widowed by wealthy men—Ivy under suspicious circumstances.

But they were miserly and kept whatever they had well hidden. So it was a good thing Jen's first two satirical advice books had exploded in popularity: she was supporting the pair.

She sensed her father wouldn't be happy about that, but she didn't want to bother him with it. Besides, what else did she have to spend her money on? It wasn't as if she had a husband and kids. And though she liked nice clothes, she couldn't see paying a fortune for them. She hadn't wanted to give up the same rent-controlled apartment she'd been living in since she'd gotten her start as the "Single in the City" advice columnist at *Her Life* magazine fresh out of grad school. So her living expenses hadn't gone up after her unexpected success.

And, the aunts lived in Trouble, Pennsylvania, which wasn't exactly on the top-ten list of towns with a high cost of living. She wasn't sure it would even hit the bottom ten, since it was a town only by the loosest definition of the word.

Still, she was paying the bills, which was why she'd come on this most recent trip. The aunts were both in their seventies, Ivy so frail she looked as if a falling leaf could knock her down. Jen wanted them to move out of their dangerous, death-trap old houses and into an assisted-living facility where they could torment professionals, rather than each other.

Preferably one far away from New York City.

The minute she'd mentioned the possibility, however, they'd made their position clear. They'd tricked her out of her shoes, out of her car, and stranded her in the middle of nowhere.

"Guess they didn't like the idea," she mumbled as she followed the dark, sexy stranger who'd come to her rescue.

"What?" asked the dark, sexy stranger in question as he came to an abrupt halt in front of her.

She almost walked right into him. Except she somehow didn't, mainly by sticking her hand out so it landed hard on his back, sending him stumbling a step forward. "Sorry."

"At least you didn't knock into me with the hand holding the deadly weapon," he said as he turned around to face her.

Though from some men the comment would have sounded teasing, he sounded very serious. As if he'd wondered if he'd been exposing himself to danger by walking in front of her...As if she might have cracked him over the head and stolen his car.

"I'm really not dangerous, you don't have to be nervous about giving me a ride," she said, trying to ease his worries.

Finally, a twinkle appeared in those dark, dreamy brown eyes of his, which indicated the man might actually know how to express good humor beyond that half cough, half laugh he'd let out earlier. "I'm so relieved."

"I was mumbling about my aunts," she said, wondering why she suddenly felt flustered.

"Talking to yourself, then?"

Again that twinkle appeared, and she wondered if he was laughing at her. But before she could decide, he swung around and started walking again, leaving her flustered. It was an unaccustomed feeling. And an unwelcome one.

Then she gave herself a break.... How could she not be feeling a little flustered when, for the first time in months, she'd met a very hot guy who didn't want to throw her in front of a train because of the books she'd written?

A hot guy. Oh, yes, indeed.

Her aunts had consumed her thoughts, but nothing could stop the genuine, feminine response to a man like this one for long. Walking behind him, she couldn't help noticing the way the man filled out his jeans. Perfectly.

A great male tush was probably the only thing that could distract her from the dark emotions she'd been having about her aunts, and she enjoyed the view during the last few steps to his Jeep. He was, quite simply, magnificent, from the tips of his jet-black hair to the bottoms of his feet.

She didn't see a lot of sexy, rugged males these days, not since she'd left her columnist job at *Her Life* to focus on her books. The last two new men she'd met had moved into her apartment building in recent weeks. One, old Mr. Jones, looked like Frankenstein's sidekick, Igor, and had already been over to borrow everything from the phone book to toilet paper.

Fortunately for anyone he might call, he hadn't seemed to need them both at the same time.

But at least he wasn't downright slimy. Unlike Frank, the new super hired by her landlord. At their first meeting, he'd made some pretty revolting come-on suggestions involving his tool belt, some chocolate syrup and a tube of lubricating jelly.

When he'd found out she was a published writer, Frank had started scheming. Claiming his grandfather had been somebody famous once, he swore he had tons of stories he could tell her. She, he proposed, could write the stories and they'd split the money fifty-fifty, getting rich together.

Uh...like she hadn't heard that before.

But things hadn't gotten really bad with Frank until he'd recognized her from the picture on the back of her latest book. All pickup attempts had ceased as he'd proceeded to blast her for making his last girlfriend dump him. It seemed the woman had grown a spine. Or some good taste. Or just a distaste for chocolate syrup and lubricating jelly.

Despite having a romantic track record that made Bridget Jones's look stellar, Jen didn't long to be standard bearer for hard-ass women. But if her books helped one woman decide to ditch a pot-bellied, greasy-haired guy with onion breath and jeans that hugged the crack of his butt, she figured her job had been well done.

Of course, she'd had to live with leaky pipes, stuck windows and a broken ice maker for the past few months. Not to mention hate mail and, recently, some disturbing phone calls that had forced her to have her phone number changed. Twice.

Despite what some men thought, Jen's sarcastic books were meant more as black-comedy satires than advice-for-women pieces. Erma Bombeck with snark. Dave Barry with cattiness. That was what the reviewers said, anyway. Even with a master's in psychology, she'd never set herself up as some kind of marriage counselor. The books were the result of letters she'd received from readers of *Her Life*, battle stories from friends and coworkers.

And her own experiences with men she'd dated, including four straight Manhattan losers interested only in money until 6:00 p.m. and only in sex until 6:00 a.m.

Women's romantic misery was, after all, a universal, timeless theme. She'd even included some of her crazy old relatives' tales. Aunt Ivy was a font of information regarding the battle of the sexes... and if some of the stories were true, she'd been a lethal weapon during that battle for many years.

But some men just had no sense of humor and didn't get the joke. Probably, despite that tiny twinkle, like this one. The one whose jeans rode his hard body perfectly, hugging lean hips and enfolding some strong male thighs in their faded blue fabric. Those flinty brownish-black eyes might have shown a tiny hint of humor, but his short, barked laugh really hadn't. It had sounded creaky, as if it didn't get much use.

Nope, not much of a sense of humor here. Just as well. A jolly disposition wouldn't go with that rock-hard jaw, wide, tightly controlled mouth and his thick, dark hair cut short and spiky. He looked like the type who should be dressed in army fatigues, holding an AK-47, blowing up buildings on a big screen at a movie theater. Tough enough to be dangerous...Sexy enough to be the next box-office action hero.

With about as much personality as a two-dimensional character. He was so sure of her he didn't even wait to see if she was coming. Nor was he courteous enough to offer her any help. Her feet could be bloody stumps for all he knew.

This guy obviously hadn't learned charm from his very eccentric grandfather, who'd been so gentlemanly he'd make a young Cary Grant seem like a bum. And to hear her aunts talk, he was just about as sexy, too.

Don't go there, a voice in her head screamed as she remembered some of the innuendo the women had dropped after their meeting with Mr. Potts. She did not want to know what went on in the Feeney sisters' bedrooms, especially since seeing the Kama Sutra sheets in Ida Mae's washing machine.

Jen didn't know which bothered her more—the idea of Ida Mae and Ivy sharing a man. Or the thought that her seventy-something-year-old relatives were getting it—wildly—while she hadn't had even the most basic, boring, twist-push-thrust missionary sex in so long her diaphragm probably no longer fit.

"Buckle up," her reluctant rescuer said as she got in the Jeep, casting a quick glance at the mixed-breed dog sprawled on the back seat. The animal barely lifted his head in greeting.

Man's best friend was just as polite as the man in this case.

"Don't worry, he's friendly."

Right. Just like his owner.

"The worst he might do is drool on you."

Her pretty new Saks sundress was already windblown, grass-stained, and dinged with the gravel and road dirt her car's tires had flung at her as she'd tried to chase down her aunts. A little dog drool probably wouldn't hurt much.

"What's his name?" she asked, mainly to fill the vehicle with conversation as they started to drive toward town.

"Mutt."

"Mutt," she repeated. "That's all?"

The driver shrugged. "I tried other names. It's the only one he even remotely answered to. So it stuck."

Wonderful. A guy so cryptic and self-contained he couldn't even be bothered to name his dog. Good thing he wasn't in the running for Mr. Personality. And good thing she wasn't in the running for a man. Uh-uh, no way.

It wasn't that she didn't like men—despite her books, she did like them. She especially liked having sex with them. Not that she'd had any recently—like, since her first book had been published and her then-lover had read it. He'd been out the door before she'd done her first book signing. Which had also been one of her last book signings considering the number of men who'd shown up to yell at her for ruining their formerly docile girlfriends and wives. Or shown up to make her see the error of her ways by using smarmy charm to try to pick her up. Ick.

That had been two years ago, and since then, the former Single in the City girl hadn't had as much as a date. But she sure had made friends with the UPS delivery woman who regularly brought the plain brown wrapped packages Jen ordered from sites like havesexalone.com.

Not that it mattered. Her life was too full to deal with any more complications...male ones in particular. Especially moody, six-foot-two piles of hotness like the one sitting beside her. Whether sex with another person was involved or not.

She just couldn't afford any distractions, not today when she was involved in World War III. Because they might have won the first skirmish by leaving her out here in the middle of nowhere and stealing her car. But when she found Ida Mae and Ivy, the war was really going to begin.

CHAPTER TWO

Widows get to wear black...which is so much more slimming than divorcée red.

—Why Arsenic Is Better Than Divorce by Jennifer Feeney

THOUGH HER SISTER WAS ENTIRELY convinced they'd taken care of their "little problem," Ivy Feeney Cantone Helmsley—now just Feeney again—was still hiding.

Ida Mae might think they'd put a stop to the schemes of that girl, but Ivy wasn't so sure. Despite not being a true Feeney—not one by blood, anyhow—the girl had shown some surprising resilience and spunk over the years. Ivy should know...she'd tried to break the child more than once. But the stubborn chit had kept coming around.

So Ivy wasn't taking any chances. Which was why she was skulking, alone, in her basement. This was her regular hiding place, her security zone. She felt safe here, with Daddy clutched in her arms. Well, half of him, anyway.

"Force us out of our house," she whispered, keeping her voice nearly inaudible. "She thinks she can make us leave our home? Well, she'll have to find us first, won't she, Daddy?"

That wouldn't be easy. The one place the girl had always been frightened of was this cellar. Ivy couldn't see why. Personally, she found the dankness of the musty, cavernous room completely comforting.

She supposed the girl's fear could have something to do with the fact that she'd been locked down here for a few hours when she was ten or eleven. Ivy didn't regret shutting her in. The little sneak had needed a lesson, and no real harm had been done, even if Jennifer's father, Ivan, had read Ivy the riot act over it.

Funny...the girl had later stepped forward, telling her father she might have twisted the lock on her own, by mistake. Ivy had almost liked her that day, as much as she could like any nosy intruder. That was saying a lot since Ivy didn't like many females, her sister included most times. Plus, her young niece had always been much too pretty for Ivy's liking.

Ivy was the pretty one in the family. She always had been.

But she didn't like the girl today—or trust her. Which was why she remained hidden.

Here in the dark, oblivious to the dampness of the rough stone walls, Ivy was free to look at her treasures without fear of interruption. Not from the girl, not from the girl's parents, not even from Ida Mae.

If Ida Mae suspected what was hidden beneath the stairs, she might force her way down them. Which was why Ivy never let on that this was where she kept her most prized possessions. Let Ida Mae think they'd all been burned up in the fire that had killed Ivy's husband and destroyed their home up in New York City back in sixty-six. Ida Mae didn't have to know all her secrets.

To this day, Ivy remained frightened over just how close Ida Mae had come to finding out the most important one. Over a year ago, her sister had stumbled upon Ivy's most precious container. When Ida Mae had seen Mama's old knitting box in Ivy's room, she'd demanded to know how Ivy could still possess it when it should have long since ceased to exist.

Ivy had had to protect the box and the secrets it contained, fighting Ida Mae with all her strength in order to do it. Then, though it had nearly killed her, she'd sent the knitting box away, far from Ida Mae's prying eyes. Because her sister, too, knew the secret of the box, and she would easily find that which Ivy had for so many years concealed. And might try to force Ivy to destroy it, to protect that secret.

How ironic that she'd given her greatest treasure to the safekeeping of the very girl she now wanted to murder. Jennifer.

Ivy had actually entrusted the case and its precious cargo to Jennifer last year when her niece had been working on one of her books. The combination of her desire to hide the case from Ida Mae

and her own vanity—since Ivy had been thrilled to think of her story immortalized in print—had made her entrust the container to Jennifer's young hands.

Right now, she was angry enough with the girl that she wished she'd never given it to her. "No, no, not safe," she reminded herself.

She didn't fear Ida Mae. Ivy had felt a strange presence lately, as if someone had been in her house, touching her things. She'd been hearing whispers of people who couldn't be there, seeing odd shadows on the floor. Finding things moved or missing. Getting calls from hateful-sounding strangers. So though she didn't like to admit it, her most important possession was still safer with Jennifer.

Unless, of course, she and Ida Mae decided to kill the girl, in which case Ivy would still get her box back, since she, alone, knew where Jen had it hidden in her apartment.

"There's still the rest," she whispered, sitting in her usual spot and gazing across the basement as she so often did.

Every day, while her sister was next door taking her nap, Ivy would visit her past in the cellar. She'd lovingly open the sealed plastic bins and unwrap her treasures, one at a time. Like her photo albums. Her autographed LP's from her favorite stars like Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens.

What an almighty crime that they'd all three gone down in a blaze of glory at the same moment. If any of them had been clients of her first husband's, she'd have suspected him of tampering with the small plane they'd been traveling in. Such things weren't, as she knew, beyond producer Leo Cantone, whose soul had been darker than Ritchie Valens's thick, black hair.

Ivy thrust off the thoughts of Leo, whom she'd once loved, then grown to hate, and stroked the urn holding her father's ashes. Well, half his ashes. Since the dust-up over Ida Mae's hiding him in a sugar canister last summer, filling his real urn with ashes from her charcoal grill, Ivy had insisted they split him rather than passing him back and forth. She liked to think her half included Daddy's big, strong arms and hearty belly laugh, but not his black, cheating heart, which had been the reason Mama'd probably killed him.

The women in her family could never abide cheaters. Or abusers. But especially not cheaters.

"My lovely things," she whispered. Ivy longed to creep over there and open them, to lose herself in the images of her youth. Like the framed, autographed photo of her standing on a stage, flanked by Frankie Avalon and Bill Haley after one of Alan Freed's rock-and-roll revues at the Paramount. Or the newspaper clipping showing a laughing, soaking-wet Ivy in a slinky gown rising out of a fountain after a party at the Ritz. A snapshot of her doing the twist with Leo at the Peppermint Lounge, him only as tall as her forehead, though seeming bigger because of his money and his presence.

But she couldn't risk it, couldn't make any noise at all in case the girl returned and heard.

She made do by mentally going over all her other treasures, also contained in the bins. Like the fork Ricky Nelson had used when they'd dined with him in Chicago. And the silk scarf she'd stolen from Cass Elliott's dressing room. All lovingly preserved in plastic, kept in waterproof containers, and hidden beneath stacks of old newspaper and dusty sheets.

None, though, were as good as the knitting case, which held a secret within a secret. A hidden pocket that even the girl didn't know about held the most treasured remnants of him.

Eddie James.

Ivy had to close her eyes for a moment, letting only a few of the memories—good and bad—creep into her head. Much more and she'd go crazy, she surely would.

Some would say she already had...on that day, the last time she'd seen Eddie. Or Leo. It had been a violent, bloody day on which she'd also lost her beautiful home to fire. Lost everything, everyone...maybe even her mind.

"Enough now," she whispered, still clutching the urn, immediately clearing her thoughts of her old life, of which Daddy would never have approved.

Shifting on her rickety lawn chair, she sighed, wishing she'd thought to bring a nice, quiet magazine down with her. One of those ones with pictures of today's movie stars, all bawds and cads, but entertaining just the same.

She also wished she'd brought one of her fancy hats. The damp air was no good for her thinning hair. "Drat Ida Mae and her thick hair," she muttered sourly, before clapping a hand over her mouth. She'd forgotten to whisper, so she kept her hand there, listening intently for any sign of life from above.

Silence. Thank goodness.

She'd wait another hour or two, then creep upstairs and see what she could see, not sure which she hoped for more: the girl to be gone, or Ida Mae to be wrong about something for once.

Ida Mae had felt sure her plan would work, instead of Ivy's. As usual, she had bullied Ivy into going along. So they'd thrown the girl's clothes in her suitcases and dumped them outside next to her fancy car. The keys were in the ignition and the message couldn't be clearer. So maybe she had returned to town, seen the car, gotten in it and driven away, having received the answer to her ridiculous suggestion that they move from this place.

Or maybe she hadn't—maybe Ida Mae had been wrong, and the girl was right now preparing to drag them from their homes.

Ivy stroked the urn harder, pursing her lips, wishing her sister had just gone along with one of her ideas for a change. It certainly would have been more assured of success.

After all, the girl couldn't be plotting against them if they'd waited for her to get back, tied her up, thrown her in the trunk of her car, then pushed it off a cliff.

"YOU KNOW, YOU REALLY don't have to keep clutching that thing. It's not like I can leap over and attack you while I'm trying to drive. Especially not on these windy roads."

Mike watched out of the corner of his eye as his reluctant passenger jerked to attention. Her fingers immediately clenched, then released, relaxing against the iron bar she'd been holding tightly since the moment he'd met her.

The iron bar she'd thought he was afraid of a while ago.

It almost made him laugh, her thinking she could frighten him. All hundred and twenty pounds of her, with her slim arms and slender shoulders. Mike really had nearly chuckled about it back there when she'd sought to assure him she wasn't dangerous...to him, at least. As if he'd really had something to worry about.

He couldn't remember the last time a woman had made him laugh. And wasn't sure he liked the idea that this quirky, ballsy one had already nicked a tiny chink in the armor he generally kept in place around himself with everyone but his family.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I'm not usually this bloodthirsty."

Her self-deprecation and weariness reaffirmed that she was frustrated...not deadly. Not that he didn't think a woman could be—he knew better. But he'd already ruled out a genuine danger factor with this one. If she had a gun, he might have been worried. But a tire iron? He could have that out of her hand almost as fast as he could slap a pair of cuffs on her wrist.

"I guess I'm just still steaming and irritated."

"At the old ladies?"

"They stranded me out there. Tricked me out of my own car and took off."

"How'd they get you out of your shoes?"

"Long story."

"You don't want to tell because you're embarrassed that you were outwitted by a couple of old ladies, admit it," he said, knowing, somehow, that it was true.

She didn't try to deny it. Instead she laughed, a thick, throaty chuckle that came from somewhere deep inside her. Add it to the list of things he already liked about the stranger. A list growing longer

by the second. Which was really out of left field since on the rare occasions Mike had gone out with a woman lately, she'd always been more quiet...soft-spoken and sweet.

Unchallenging, his brothers would say. And Mike wouldn't argue it. He had enough strife in his day job; he didn't want it after hours. Particularly not after his last serious relationship, which had blown up in his face. Violently. With him on the receiving end of a bullet meant for his girlfriend, courtesy of her own psycho friend who'd been coming on to him for months and had decided she wanted Mike for herself.

Crazy shit that. Especially when his girlfriend had then dumped him, determined to be loyal to her "friend in need" and certain he'd led the woman on.

"Okay. I admit it, I'm humiliated."

She leaned down to drop the iron bar to the floor, and as she did so, that thick, amazing hair of hers swung across and brushed the bare skin of his arm. He immediately tensed, every sense he owned heightened by that soft touch and the sweet fragrance of her shampoo. Not to mention the even sweeter fragrance of her body, so close to his.

His hands curled tighter on the wheel, as if by their own will, and he suddenly had a mental image of sinking his fingers into those soft curls. He liked dark hair. Liked seeing it sprawled across his chest. Liked wrapping his hands in it while looking up at a woman riding him into sexual oblivion.

Not that he'd been ridden lately. His last sexual encounter had happened sometime before he'd started working cold cases. Hell, if he was honest with himself, it had probably been sometime before the last election. Dealing with women was his brother Max's strong point. Mike wasn't the charming one; he didn't have the time or the patience to play the games most females liked to play before they'd unzip their skirts.

"Oh, boy," she said, interrupting his mental pictures of what she'd look like wearing nothing but her long brown curls.

"What?"

The woman winced, then lifted one foot up over her knee, causing that flimsy, nothing-of-a-dress to slide dangerously high on her thighs. Mike shifted in his seat, the intensity building inside him again at the sight of all that creamy skin.

Just a pair of legs, he reminded himself, tightening his jaw against his own reactions. That was all they were.

But good legs. Definitely good.

Though the summer breeze had pressed the dress against her body in delightful ways earlier, he hadn't realized how incredible her legs were. Nor had he pictured the lacy pink edge of fabric at the top of them that said she was wearing those sexy, silky shorts women sometimes used as underwear. Tap pants? Something like that, he was pretty sure.

Now he didn't merely shift, he stretched and arched, the tightness of his jeans signaling her effect on him. He might be single by choice these days, but that sure didn't mean he couldn't appreciate a great pair of legs, or imagine what they'd feel like wrapped around his hips. Or his neck.

And those shorts...Did she have to be wearing sexy lingerie, too? What was it with women, anyway, the slinky dresses, the silk undies. What was wrong with jeans and plain cotton underwear?

Other than the fact that they would be much too rough against the silky perfection of her skin. Would mar it, redden it, and never do it justice.

Hell. He was in trouble here. Big trouble. Part of him wanted to grab the hem of her dress and yank it back down to her knees. Another part wanted to ask her if she'd like to pull over to the nearest secluded spot and have wild, crazy sex.

He'd seen a movie once where a woman claimed she wanted total honesty, for a man to say he didn't want to trade lines or play games. She swore she longed for no pretense, just for a guy to say, "I want you, let's cut to the chase and go for it."

It was tempting. It was also bullshit. Though it sounded good, it was a total lie. They all wanted the strings, even if they swore they didn't. And Mike wasn't into strings. He hadn't been, not since the last time he'd almost gotten hanged by tying himself up with them. Well, not hanged exactly. Just shot.

So he didn't think telling this woman he wanted her was a good idea, particularly after a ten-minute acquaintance.

It was only when he heard her hiss in pain that he was able to stop casting quick glances at those thighs and the pink fabric caught between them and pay attention to her foot...the one with blood on it. "Jeez, lady, what'd you do to yourself?"

"The road wasn't exactly paved in cotton."

"So why didn't you stay put and wait for help?" he growled, hearing the annoyance in his voice but unable to hide it. Did the woman have no common sense?

"Waiting around for help's not my thing," she muttered.

Yeah. He was getting that. Stubborn woman.

She poked and prodded at her foot, still oblivious to the peep show she was providing. If he was any kind of gentleman, he'd tell her. Then again, Mortimer was the gentleman of the family. Mike had never even pretended to be one.

"Ouch," she said with a wince, touching the tip of her index finger to a particularly raw spot.

He rolled his eyes. "Why didn't you say something sooner? I would have helped you to the Jeep." Or some other nearby flat surface where she could get off her feet. Preferably landing on her back.

"I guess I didn't feel anything. I was too busy walking on a cloud of righteous anger," she said, still never glancing at him. Instead, without asking permission, she opened the glove compartment and dug out a few wrinkled-up napkins. Wetting one with her tongue, she put it on the ball of her foot, which was bleeding in two or three spots.

"Perfect, add infection to your pain," he said with a disgusted sigh. Reaching into the back seat, he flipped the lid on a small cooler there and grabbed a bottle of water. As he lifted it out, he shook it off, then tossed it to her. "Here. Clean it with that. The spit-on-a-cut thing only works if it's your mother's spit."

"Thanks."

She opened the bottle, wet the napkin and cleaned off the sores on one foot, then the other, apparently not minding when specks of blood—and the water—flicked onto her dress. A few drops also plopped onto the high arch of her foot and slid down her heel, onto her leg, landing just above her other knee. They glided up her bent limb, riding a long, soft line of flesh, weaving an intricate trail across the ridges of her skin. His hands tightened on the wheel. His jaw and jeans tightened, too.

When the droplets reached the lacy fabric of those panties of hers and rode on underneath, she finally noticed. Sucking in a surprised breath, she glanced down, realized that her dress was hiked up almost to her crotch, and immediately looked over at him. Mike managed to keep his eyes forward, as if he hadn't been stealing glances at her like some horny fourteen-year-old peeking into the girls' locker room. He still saw out the corner of his eye as she grabbed the hem of her dress and yanked it down. And wasn't sure whether to give thanks or curse his luck.

"You could have said something."

Playing dumb seemed the safest course of action. "About what?"

She frowned in disbelief. "I thought boys outgrew their fascination with girls underpants by the time they hit twelve."

That immediately sparked a genuine laugh, and Mike had no control over it. It spilled out of his mouth, as warm as it was unfamiliar, tasting strange. But feeling...good. When was the last time he had really been amused by something? Before his transfer, perhaps. Before the drug case that had brought about that transfer, even.

The ridiculousness of her claim echoed in the car and within two seconds, she was chuckling with him. Laughing at herself. "Okay. That didn't come out right."

"No, it didn't."

"I meant..."

"I know what you meant. You were talking about that boys' elementary-school urge to catch a glimpse of some fellow third grader's Strawberry Shortcake panties."

"Well, it so happens that I don't wear Strawberry Shortcake panties," she retorted.

"Yeah. I know," he murmured, unable to get rid of the tiny smile still tugging at his lips.

"You were looking."

"All the male angels in heaven would have looked." Never glancing over at her, he continued, "We might not want to see the pink cotton under your school uniform anymore, but we are instinctively bred to zone in on anything made of silk and lace. Especially when it's resting between a pair of soft thighs."

Where in the hell all that had come from, Mike honestly didn't know. He couldn't remember stringing together such a thought in a long time, much less actually saying it to someone. A woman. A stranger.

A stranger who was watching him from the other seat, her jaw hanging open and her cheeks a little pink.

"Don't go grabbing for the tire iron, I'm still not going to leap on you," he said, his tone dry. "I was just making a point." Returning his attention to the road, he noted the few small scattered buildings that made up the outlying area of the town of Trouble. And another one of those Trouble Ahead signs. "Who named this place, anyway?" he muttered.

She cleared her throat, glad for the subject change. As was he. Talking about a woman's silky panties and her silkier thighs was a bad idea less than an hour into a relationship.

Not that they were in a relationship! No way. Their acquaintance was going to last approximately twenty minutes...the length of time it took to get her to her car.

"Probably the same person who named the towns of Paradise and Intercourse, Pennsylvania," she said.

He wondered if he ought to point out that some considered paradise and intercourse connected but figured he shouldn't. They'd managed to skate off thin ice and he definitely didn't want to glide back out onto it. He just needed to get this woman to her destination, push her out of the Jeep and keep on going to his grandfather's house. Where his world was normal. Not involving kooky women who got pissed off and walked until their feet bled. Ones who made him laugh. And leer.

"The name Trouble definitely suits some of its residents. My relatives included."

"You going to tell me how they ditched you?" he finally asked.

She sighed, then shook her head in resignation. "We went for a drive, then pulled up at a rest stop outside town. I, uh...made a suggestion they weren't happy about and they demanded to leave. When we got to the car, one of them started screeching about her handkerchief blowing away and demanded that I chase after it."

"Let me guess. You kicked off your shoes to run?"

"Uh-huh."

"And they got in the car and left without you?"

"Yep."

"Where does the tire iron fit in?"

She made a sound of frustration. He glanced over, seeing a look on her face that matched it.

"Aunt Ivy waved it out the window as they drove away, yelling that she'd hit me over the head with it if I tried to force her to move out of her house. I picked it up along the way and was fantasizing about shoving it up the old witch's nose."

Bloodthirstiness obviously ran in the family. But he figured it wasn't the time to point that out, particularly since she'd finally let go of the tire iron.

“She better not have scratched my car when she dropped it,” Jen muttered, sounding more disgruntled than genuinely angry.

Hmm. Tire iron flying out the window of a moving car. He somehow suspected she wasn't going to get her wish for no scratches. She'd be lucky if there were no dents. But that was for her to work out with her aunt—and her insurance agent—so he kept his opinion to himself.

“Why would you try to force her out of her house?”

“I'm not trying to force them. But I suggested that they move somewhere more appropriate.”

Like a mental institution, from the sound of them. But he figured he'd better not say that, either. He'd been doing a lot of keeping his mouth shut since he'd met her, which really wasn't surprising considering he genuinely liked to mind his own business and let other people mind theirs. However, they still had a few minutes to kill, and he was curious, so he asked, “Why do you think they should move?”

“Because they each live in ancient monstrosities that are held together by the beehives and termite nests hidden in their foundations, and the congealed dust and mildew on the walls.”

“Pleasant.”

Grunting, she rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. Her nicely curved chest, which curved up even higher with the pressure from her arms. Not quite into stop-your-heart territory, but definitely beyond the wonder-if-they're-real zone.

Real. Oh, yeah.

He cleared his throat and glanced away.

“They're in their mid-seventies, one's already had a hip replacement. Yet they insist on living in these two old mausoleums that could fall down under a strong spring breeze. Neither can drive—”

“They took your car,” he pointed out.

“Neither can drive legally,” she clarified. “Ida Mae had her license, but it was taken away because of her vision. Or the road-rage charges. I can't remember which.”

Again, she startled a small chuckle out of him. Must be some kind of record. Or maybe it was simply because it was a bright, sunny day, he was far away from the city and he had a long weekend off. He'd probably be laughing at Mutt right about now if he hadn't stopped to pick up his unexpected passenger.... It didn't necessarily have to do with the woman herself.

“When they're not refusing to let workmen in their house to fix things—unless they're young and good-looking, of course—they're calling me to bitch about each other.”

“Not exactly a pair of Red Riding Hood's grannies, huh?”

“Only if Red Riding Hood's granny owned a shotgun and wanted a wolfskin coat for the winter.”

He heard a note of something in her voice—maybe, though she'd probably hate to admit it, a tiny hint of admiration. As though she couldn't help liking the ballsiness of the old ladies, even if they drove her crazy. This one didn't like being thwarted, and her relatives were a big old thorn in her side, but something told him she admired them just the same.

“So, you tried to make them leave their homes?”

She sat up straighter. “I suggested that they move into an assisted-living facility where they could have each other for company and have medical help at the push of a button.”

Sounded reasonable. And while he would never expect such a thing of his grandfather, who had enough money to surround himself with staff and live anywhere he damn well chose, he certainly understood the concept of wanting an elderly relative taken care of. Especially taken care of somewhere other than in the crappy town they were entering. “They disliked the idea so much one of them threatened to kill you?”

“She threatens to kill everybody, including cookie-peddling little girls if they ring her doorbell during The Jerry Springer Show,” Jen muttered, waving an unconcerned hand. Then she glanced at her mangled feet. “I just didn't expect they'd hate the idea enough to maim me over it.”

That soft, wistful tone in her voice told him a lot, hammering home the fact that despite her groaning about them, she cared about these aunts of hers. Cared about them a lot. And was hurt by what they'd done. "Are you giving up?"

Not answering for a moment, she leaned back in her seat, her chin tilting up and her eyes narrowing. From the other side of the Jeep, Mike could feel the temperature go up a degree or two as she got all hot under the collar, every bit of softness and hurt disappearing. Her muscles went tense, which merely emphasized the smoothness of the skin over those muscles, and the slenderness of her body.

"I never give up when there's something I want, Mr. Taylor." Her jaw stiff, she stared out the window. "Never."

ALTHOUGH SHE HAD NEVER BEEN married, Emily Baker liked to think of herself as an expert at love. After all, every expert had to start somewhere, most times by studying rather than doing. And though she'd never done it, heaven knew she'd studied it. Being in love, that is.

She'd been a student of love for years. Ever since she'd been a teenager growing up in the town of Trouble, longing to go see the big wide world but knowing she'd be here until the day she died.

That hadn't stopped her from dreaming, of course, or from learning all there was to know about love. She'd been a bridesmaid to all her friends, watching their courtships with genuine happiness... and only a little bit of envy. She'd read all the romantic novels she could find and gone to the movie shows whenever a juicy love story was set to appear.

Studying. Never doing.

Fantasizing. Never living.

Longing. Never loving.

It had been a given that she'd never leave this place, not with her being the only daughter of an aging set of parents who'd always needed her. Her younger brother had moved away and built a life of his own, but Emily had stayed, month after month, year after year. Eventually, as she'd known she would, she had ended up alone. Her father had died in the late nineties, her mother following him two years ago. And she'd finally been free of all her responsibilities. Free to finally start to live her own life.

Free. In her seventies...when it was too late.

Somehow, through all the years of watching over others, her own life had slipped by. She'd grown old with the town until now she barely remembered the girl she'd been. The girl who'd daydreamed of winning the heart of Cary Grant. Or the young lady who'd longed to find a big-hearted man who'd want to settle down and share a normal, middle-class life with her. Or even the middle-aged woman who sometimes thought there might be a widower out there who needed someone to help him raise his children.

She was none of those anymore. Her dreams had sparkled like faraway stars in a night sky at different times in her life. And each had eventually flickered out, smothered by the reality of time and age. Those thoughts had long since been put away.

But it didn't matter so much anymore. Because she didn't need dreams of her own romance... not when she had so many others to enjoy. When she lost herself in the movies that had become her secret life, she lived every blissful moment, experienced all of the anguish and the joy of falling in love.

Whoever had invented those VCR machines had to be the greatest person on earth. Because ever since her brother had bought their parents one as a Christmas present way back in the eighties, she'd found a world of love and romance that were the closest thing to heaven she'd ever known.

She knew every line from Casablanca, every word to the songs in The Sound of Music. Could ask Rhett Butler where she would go and what she would do if he left her in a perfect Vivien Leigh accent. She had held her breath endless times through the ending of Titanic, praying that this time it would turn out differently.

Romance. Love. Fantasy. All at the flick of a switch.

She used to watch the daytime stories, in addition to her cherished movies, but these days they seemed comprised mostly of intrigue. Or just sex and cheating. Not the “you’re the only one for me, I can’t live without you” tales her soul craved.

Right now, her video collection took up an entire spare bedroom in the house she’d inherited from her mother. Alphabetized and organized by her very own cataloging system, the films were her special secret, always there, behind a closed door. Her private haven from the world.

It was only recently that she’d found reasons to come out of that haven. And the two main ones were, right at this moment, lying on the floor of her living room, sharing one of the most tender, lovely scenes she’d ever personally witnessed.

“He likes you,” said a young woman’s voice, so filled with happiness it made Emily’s heart ache to hear it.

“I like him, too,” was the laughing response as a dark-haired man bounced a sweet baby on his stomach. “He’s perfect, Allie.”

The three of them—man, woman and baby—were sprawled out on the carpet, the strange man having won little Hank over immediately with his warm voice and gentle tickling. They were laughing, touching, loving. Forming the new family Emily had prayed her young friend—and tenant—Allie Cavanaugh would find.

And now she’d found it. The handsome young drifter Allie had fallen so madly in love with earlier this summer had come back for her. He’d been waiting here for her when Allie had gotten home from working at Mr. Potts’s house this afternoon.

Emily had seen him outside, in his car, and had known immediately who he was. She’d been worried at first, knowing how hurt the girl had been by his rejection last month. But when Allie had brought him inside to meet both her and the baby, the gleam of love shining in the man’s startlingly violet eyes had been completely undeniable, especially to an expert like Emily.

Which both thrilled her...and broke her heart. Because it meant one thing: she was going to be alone again. The single mother and her one-year-old son, who’d become Emily’s family since moving into the small upstairs apartment last fall, were now going to be part of someone else’s family. This man’s.

“As it should be,” she murmured, watching from the dining room as she laid out plates for supper.

Before calling them in, she wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her dress. She wouldn’t want the blissfully happy young woman to think for a moment that Emily wasn’t thrilled that, once again, true love had conquered all.

If only it had, just once, done so for Emily.

CHAPTER THREE

“My husband died” is so much simpler to say than “My husband screwed our eighteen-year-old babysitter in the back seat of our Lexus and is now shacking up with her in Laguna Beach while I try to bleed the bastard dry for child support.”

—Why Arsenic Is Better Than Divorce by Jennifer Feeney

THROUGHOUT THE REST of their brief drive into town, Jen's reluctant rescuer kept the conversation to a bare minimum. Keeping his hands tight on the steering wheel, his jaw remained rock hard, his lips firmly set, making her wonder if she'd imagined the smile she'd seen once or twice since they'd met. He sat up straight, military-like, and with the single exception of the line about her panties, he hadn't made any effort to flirt with her. Or pick her up. Or even ask for her phone number.

From some men, she'd think the behavior was just gentlemanly. But she sensed that Mike Taylor, though he'd certainly been good to come to her aid, didn't much care about things like being a gentleman.

She knew his type. She'd written about his type in her books. He was the dark, sexy, intense brooder who could have a woman on her back with her legs over his strong shoulders within five minutes of meeting her.

Then he'd be gone. On to his next challenge, his next woman in need. The lonesome cowboy or hardened soldier, having satisfied his basic urges and taken care of his little woman, would head back to battle, leaving her behind to clean up whatever messes he'd caused along the way. Typical story...he saves the world, she pays the electric bill.

How many women had written to her about this type of man during her days as the Single in the City columnist at Her Life? How many more had she talked to when writing her books?

Tons. And they all had the same story. The classic Mr. Hot and Deadly might be wickedly good in the bedroom, but he failed in nearly every other aspect of a relationship.

So just have sex with him.

Though the idea came out of nowhere, it certainly did have merit. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had no-strings sex. Being the Single in the City girl, it had almost seemed like her sacred duty to be out there participating in the bar hookup scene on the occasional Saturday night. Of course, that had been many years ago, when she'd been twenty-three, stupid and horny.

Now she was twenty-nine, wise...and still horny.

Being honest, she had to admit the idea of having sex with him had not come out of nowhere. Her body had been intensely aware of him from the moment he'd stopped to pick her up. She'd just been too angry at being ditched to really consider it until now. But how could she not have noticed his hot, masculine smell and the coiled strength of his body? Especially once they were enclosed in the small confines of his Jeep.

He was just about the hottest thing she'd ever seen and Jen had gone past amber straight to red alert right around the time he'd oh-so-casually mumbled that line about silky panties and soft thighs. Even now, minutes later, she had to shift in her seat as his words rolled around in her brain again, the memory of that gruff voice driving all other sound away. The rumble of the engine, the hiss of the air conditioner, the whoosh of the world passing by as they drove through it...

Ceased. To. Exist.

There was just the echo and his low, nearly inaudible breaths. And maybe the thudding of her own heart. Having opened the floodgates in her mind, she was now nearly drowning from the erotic possibilities playing out there.

“You cool enough?” he asked, glancing over at her, as if he could feel the temperature rising with the heat of her thoughts.

Jen quickly nodded, crossing her arms in front of her, where goose bumps suddenly rose.

He noticed. Was there anything he didn't notice? "Sorry, turn the AC down if you're too cold."

"I'm fine," she muttered, wishing he'd just shut up, stop looking at her, stop noticing everything about her. She needed him to get out of her head so she could figure out what to do about her interest in him.

Because there were definitely some issues preventing her from acting on that interest.

First, she was staying with her crazy aunts who would probably drug Jennifer and steal the man for themselves if she ever did get him into her bed. Second, she was so out of practice with the let's-get-it-on game that she wasn't even sure how to tell him she was interested in no-strings sex. And third, he'd shown almost no sign that he was the least bit attracted to her.

That, more than anything, kept her from so much as making a suggestive offer to pay him back for his help. If she'd felt certain her interest was returned, she might have given it a shot. But he hadn't, other than that one comment about her underwear, which almost seemed not to have happened at all given how reserved he'd been for the rest of the drive.

She was too weary, wary and on guard to risk rejection right now. Especially after having been so soundly rejected by her own relatives less than an hour ago.

Jen knew she was attractive, but men had as often spewed at her as flirted with her lately, especially after her appearance on a national morning show to promote her new book. She'd gotten both creepy propositions and hate mail from men afterward. Those she could usually ignore, but some nasty calls to her unlisted home number she could not. They'd concerned her, which was why this trip to Trouble had been so perfectly timed.

"So," she said, trying to fill the silence, "your grandfather said he just moved here last year?"

He nodded.

When he didn't say anything, she reached in and tried to pull a few more teeth...er, words... out of his mouth. "I thought most people chose to move away from Trouble. My father certainly did. He took off right after high school and never looked back."

"My grandfather's not most people."

"I noticed."

He glanced over, as if to see if she was being snarky. She wasn't. She had noticed what an intriguing man Mr. Potts was. And if she didn't want to drag her two aunts out of town so badly, she would probably have liked to get to know him better.

Apparently seeing the lack of criticism in her expression, he admitted, "He bought the town last year."

Jen's jaw dropped. "Bought?"

"Most of it," he clarified. "I guess due to some mismanagement and embezzlement, the place was on the verge of bankruptcy. Or extinction. So they advertised for an investor—" he sighed "—and Grandfather answered the call."

She didn't know people could buy entire towns, unless they made \$20 million a movie or were dictators of small countries.

He shrugged. "The place is getting back on its feet."

Not that Jen would have noticed.

"He sold them back their municipal buildings—at a loss."

"Not much of a businessman?"

Mike laughed—for real this time—a low, lazy sound that sent shivers of awareness bursting through her. Seeing him genuinely amused, complete with the flash of a dimple in his cheek, nearly melted her into a puddle on the seat. Lord, the man was handsome.

He quickly stopped laughing, as if surprised by his own reaction. "He doesn't give a damn about business, but Grandfather inherited Midas's fingers because there's nothing he touches that doesn't turn to gold."

They were passing a dilapidated old shopping center, obviously abandoned for years, with weeds growing up through the cracks in the parking lot. The boards on the windows were either completely obscured by graffiti or else falling off altogether. Jen glanced at it, then back at him.

“Don’t say it,” he said. “My brothers and I have been working on him to unload this place since the day he bought it.”

Mr. Potts had mentioned grandsons—plural. She just hadn’t been able to wrap her mind around the idea that there could be more than one man this sexy in Trouble. “Well, it seems we both have elderly relatives we’d like to get away from this place.”

“I think your job is going to be tougher than mine. Grandfather will find something else to distract him. A gold mine for sale in Nevada...a desert island up for auction. Something.”

“He sounds wonderful,” she murmured, meaning it.

Mike looked over, flashed that devastating—but scarce—smile, and nodded. “He is.”

Jen suddenly wanted to keep driving. To bypass the aunts’ houses and keep riding around in this Jeep with the smelly dog in the back and the wind whistling by the closed windows. Where she could get this guy to smile at her, and maybe even laugh again. And make more comments about her soft thighs.

But suddenly, they reached their destination and she realized how right he’d been. His task definitely seemed easier than hers. Because her aunts obviously hadn’t had a change of heart about moving.

Their feelings were underscored by what was awaiting Jen in Ida Mae’s driveway. When they pulled up in front of the house, Jen spotted her car, pointed out toward the road, the driver’s side door standing open. A big scratch marred the passenger one.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered under her breath.

A tic started in her temple. It quickly turned into a pounding when she noticed the rest of the things on the ground, beside the car. Her makeup case lay open in the dirt, a new bottle of foundation and a tube of toothpaste—without a cap—beside it. She suspected the shiny, glisteny liquid winding a snail-like trail from the case to the grass beyond it had been caused by the expensive shampoo she’d picked up at a Manhattan salon.

Her nice new Italian leather suitcase—one of the few things she’d upgraded after her recent financial upswing—lay half-open. A splotch of pink fabric, visible from the road, said her new silk dress had been yanked off a hanger and shoved inside. And if she wasn’t mistaken, that was the strap of her new Cole Haan sling backs sticking out of the obviously broken zipper.

Okay. She’d upgraded her shoes, too.

“Think they want me to leave?” Sarcasm dripped from her words as Mike Taylor pulled into the driveway she’d directed him to.

He followed her stare and whistled. “Yeah. I think so.” Then, getting a good look at the houses, added, “Good God, someone actually lives here? I thought these places were abandoned the first time I came to town.”

Weary, and not wanting to get out and fight the battle lying ahead, Jen leaned back in the car seat and closed her eyes.

He obviously noticed, and sighed. “You want me to drive you around the block a couple of times before you get out?”

It was as if he’d read her thoughts and the offer tempted her. She’d listened for a note of sarcasm in that gruff voice, but instead heard only a quiet resignation. As if he’d accepted the possibility of being stuck with her for a few more minutes and, despite not liking the idea, was willing to help her out for a little while longer.

How very nice.

And how very strange that suddenly some unexpected moisture stung the corners of her eyes. Moisture. As in tears.

Jen never cried...almost never. Yeah, yeah, she'd cried when Sirius Black had died in the Harry Potter books, but she sure never cried at stupid, sappy movies like Titanic or The Lake House. So why, for heaven's sake, had tears appeared in her eyes just because a man was being grudgingly considerate?

It had to be because of the lousy day she'd had. On top of the lousy week she'd had. On top of the lousy month of hate mail and nasty phone calls she'd had.

Bad timing and exhaustion, that was why she was being such a girl. During her visit with the aunts, she'd spent half her time shuffling them to their doctors appointments and their hair appointments. When not chauffeuring them, she'd been cleaning their carpets, washing their linens, scrubbing their dirty kitchens—all because they refused to let her pay a “stranger” to come in and do housework. Not to mention the fact that her feet were bloody and raw. Good Lord, it was a wonder she hadn't bawled like a baby when she'd seen her ruined Cole Haans.

Those were the real reasons for the tears. Definitely.

Not this guy. Not his gruff consideration. Not his reluctant niceness. Not.

“You okay?”

Squeezing her eyes tight one last time, to ensure no moisture escaped from them, she nodded. “Yeah,” she said as she finally lifted her lids, blinking rapidly, making sure she'd gotten herself under control.

Moisture gone? Check. Crisis averted? Check. Battle about to begin?

Most definitely.

THOUGH HIS UNEXPECTED passenger insisted she would be all right and that he could leave, Mike just couldn't do it. Maybe it was the way she winced when she saw all her things littering the ground beside her car. Maybe it was because of her threats—and her visible anger that had returned in the past few moments. Maybe it was because of the rawness of her bloody feet, about which he still felt guilty as hell.... He'd known when he'd first spotted her that they had to be sore from walking on the gravel and he still hadn't offered to help her to the Jeep.

Whatever the reason, he couldn't watch her get out, then drive away. Not without making sure she was okay first. And making sure she didn't commit a murder.

So after she thanked him and then basically told him he could go, he muttered, “Hold on a minute.” Without an explanation, he got out, walked around to the passenger side door and opened it. “Stay here.”

She stared up at him, as if trying to figure out whether he'd just discovered he wanted to play gentleman, or if he had something else in mind. He did have something else in mind. Namely her blistered, bloody feet.

Striding over to her suitcase, he unzipped it, trying to avoid tearing the dress sticking out of it. When he felt its silkiness between his rough fingers, he half wished he hadn't bothered. Because it reminded him altogether too much of the silky fabric the woman was wearing underneath her dress.

“What do you think you're doing?” She started to get out.

“Wait, you need something on your feet,” he said. He quickly examined the first pair of shoes he found, a pair of spike-heeled sandals with a torn strap that had been caught in the suitcase zipper. There was only one way to describe them; they were high-priced, first-class screw-me shoes. Perfect for driving a man crazy with lust, but not for soothing blistered heels. “Definitely not,” he muttered from between clenched teeth.

“My feet?” she said. Her jaw dropped, those expressive eyes growing wide and round. “You're...”

“I'm getting your damn shoes, would you stay where you are?” he growled, tossing the sexy shoes aside, trying hard not to think about how they'd feel digging into the backs of his legs while he was between hers.

Her mouth snapped shut, but she continued to watch wide-eyed, as if not believing he was poking around in her stuff, trying to find something to protect her feet. The feet he hadn't given a damn about when he'd first picked her up.

Guilty conscience. That was the only reason he was reaching into the dangerous confines of her luggage, pushing aside all sorts of silky, sexy things that made a sweat break out on his brow. Did the woman not own anything but underwear? How many frigging bra and panty sets did one female require? Blue ones, pink ones...He was losing his mind here. And had she never heard of sneakers?

Finally, feeling the rubbery sole of a flip-flop, he tugged it out, then felt around for the other one. It wasn't there. "I guess your aunts weren't really worried about doing a good packing job," he said as he tossed her the shoe.

"Try that one," she said, pointing toward a smaller case.

He did as she suggested, unzipping the smaller case. She was right, the other shoe was inside. Thank God.

Tossing it over, he rose and stepped to the Jeep in time to watch her slip the flip-flop on her bare foot. "You're not taking that with you," he said, nodding toward the tire iron.

Tilting her head to one side, she stared up at him for a moment, then sighed. "You're right. I probably shouldn't."

"You still feeling violent?"

She stared hard at the screw-me sandals. "Do you know what I paid for those shoes?"

Whatever it was, it couldn't have been enough to cause the instantaneous reaction in him. "Give me the tire iron."

"What if I get a flat tire?"

"Call AAA. You'll have a car with you this time."

She handed the iron bar over grudgingly, then stepped out of the car, hissing as her weight shifted onto her feet.

"You all right?"

"I'll be fine." She was entirely focused on her belongings and her scratched car, staring at them, then at the two old houses. And suddenly her anger appeared to fade again. He could have sworn he saw a tiny, reluctant smile playing around on those full lips of hers. "They are tough old birds, aren't they?"

"Just don't wring their necks and stuff them."

She laughed, as though he'd been teasing her. He supposed he had been.... Where did that come from?

Jen bent over and began picking up her things, shoving them into her bags. Without asking if she wanted him to, Mike began to help her. He avoided anything silky, sticking only to toiletries. Even that was a little dangerous considering he wanted to lift a bottle of creamy lotion to his nose and smell it, to try to figure out whether it had provided the incredible scent wafting from Jennifer's soft skin.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" he asked, having no idea where the impulse had come from. He could honestly say it wasn't out of fear that she was going to do anyone harm—despite her anger, he knew she wasn't going to hurt her elderly relatives. No, he had made the offer because of that hint of vulnerability he'd seen earlier during their drive. And the touch of humor he was seeing now.

He liked this woman. He sensed he could like her a lot. Considering he already wanted her more than he'd wanted anyone in ages, it was probably a pretty dangerous combination. One that should have sent him running, considering his track record with relationships. As in: two typical losses at the end of long, drawn-out, nine-inning matches. And one total strikeout, complete with a hospital stay for a bullet wound.

"That's nice of you, but no thanks."

He still didn't go. Even with Mutt whining from the back seat, wanting either to get moving or get out, he just stood there, waiting to see if she needed him.

Women often needed him. His brothers thought he liked that. Hell, maybe they were right. Maybe he did have some basic urge to take care of people who couldn't take care of themselves, quite often attractive women. He had the feeling anybody who wanted to be a cop had the basic urge to protect. And, in his line of work—particularly when working vice—he met a lot of women who'd been abused or taken advantage of. By pimps, dealers, hustlers. There was always somebody in need.

Maybe this woman wasn't like any he'd met on the streets of New York. She was, however, still in need, whether she knew it or not. Even if all she needed was for someone to make sure she had a pair of shoes on her feet.

He wasn't abandoning her. Not yet.

"I'm going to be fine," she said with a resolute nod. "Obviously I have a lot to say to my aunts..."

"Are you sure you can say it without a weapon in hand?"

"My tongue has been registered as a lethal weapon in a couple of states."

There was a suitable comeback to that, he was quite sure. And it would have rolled out of his brother Max's mouth immediately. But Mike wasn't wired that way, to grab any opening a woman provided and charm his way through it. No. Instead, he kept his reactions deep inside, schooled in giving no one an advantage by revealing his thoughts. Especially like the ones flooding his mind right now...the heated images of what her tongue was capable of doing. Wicked things. Amazing things.

She glanced at the house. "I feel like I'm heading into the lion's den." Her face was a little pink. Probably from her stroll in the sunshine—not a subtle admission that she knew what had been going through his mind. And certainly not that her thoughts had echoed his.

"Have any idea what you're going to say?"

"Not exactly. They don't understand," she said, not looking very sure who she was trying to convince more, herself or him. "I need to make them see that I'm talking about The Love Boat on land for seniors. Not the nasty, run-down home for the indigent that they're picturing."

"Sounds reasonable." And it did. To him. A twenty-seven-year-old single male living in a small house in Queens. If he were the one being asked to leave his home and move into a sterile "retirement community"? Well...he wasn't so sure.

"Thank you, Mr. Taylor. I really do appreciate you stopping, but I can handle this on my own now."

He stared into her face, noting the blueness of her eyes, a contrast to the stormy gray they were when she was angry. She looked calm...resolute. Able to take on any challenge. He suspected her relatives would have more trouble on their hands with a determined Jennifer Feeney than with an enraged one. Because something told him this woman didn't give up when there was something she wanted. Ever.

Oh. Right. She'd told him exactly that, hadn't she?

"Goodbye," she said, putting out her hand to shake his. She didn't suggest they see one another again, didn't offer her phone number or ask for his. And since he already knew she didn't give up on anything she wanted, there was only one conclusion he could reach: she didn't want him. The attraction was purely one-sided.

That, it seemed, was the end of that. The interesting interlude was over and he'd never see Jennifer Feeney again. By her choice. He wondered why the thought bothered him so much, considering he'd known her all of an hour.

Left with no other option, he put out his hand. Ignoring the cool softness of her skin against his, he said, "Good luck. Don't kill anyone."

Without another word, he got in his Jeep, and drove away.

RIGHT AFTER SHE'D BEEN DROPPED off in the driveway by Mr. Hunky-but-alooof, Jen calmly finished picking up all her things. Well, pretty calmly, considering how painful it was to see the mangled shoes and broken luggage. If her parents had been around to hear the words coming out of her mouth, they would have regretted wasting their money on her parochial-school education.

Somehow, she put aside her anger and managed to repack. Though she suspected Ida Mae and Ivy were watching from their windows, no matter how many times she looked toward them, she never caught as much as a twitch of a curtain.

That didn't mean anything. The old structures were so dark inside—as forbidding and unwelcoming as a pair of caves—either of the aunts could have been standing behind an uncurtained window, studying her every move. Her gaze would never have been able to penetrate the murky recesses of the houses to see them. But she could see them in her mind. Arming themselves in case she came in. Or praying to the gods of mean old ladies for her to get in her car and drive away, never to bother them again.

Fat chance. Not giving up, not giving up, not giving up.

When, she wondered, had it become a crime to offer to pay a fortune to put up your relatives in a pricey, lovely retirement village where they could be waited on, kept fed and entertained, with lots of elderly single men to keep them occupied?

She simply had to explain—had to make them see.

Once she'd picked up all her things, she carried them to Ida Mae's porch and reached for the doorknob. It was, for the first time she could ever recall, locked.

Pounding on the door, she cupped her hands around her eyes and tried to peer through the dirty inset glass. About all she could make out were the tiny dead bugs stuck between the window and the door frame. "Aunt Ida Mae? Come on, open up, we need to talk about this," she yelled before pounding again.

A full minute went past. No Ida Mae. No Ivy. But from somewhere above, she heard the squeak of a window. Quickly backing off the porch, down the front steps, she looked up just in time to see a toothbrush come sailing through the air.

It was hers. And it landed in the dirt.

Jen gritted her teeth as the window slammed shut. "I'm not leaving," she shouted, glaring at the second story of the house.

The window slowly groaned open again.

"Aunt Ida Mae?"

This time, her hairbrush was sent flying. It landed in a patch of mud a few feet away from the toothbrush.

"This is war," she muttered, marching back up to the porch and trying the windows to the parlor. Though they didn't budge, she wasn't about to give up, and made her way around the entire perimeter of the house. Knowing the old woman wasn't too concerned about security in this small, quiet town, she tried every single window, certain Ida Mae wouldn't have locked them all since she'd ditched Jen in the middle of nowhere.

"Damn," she muttered, trying the last one, to no avail.

Still not giving up, she went next door to Ivy's monstrosity, only to discover the same thing. "They're pretty serious," she whispered, still not sure whether to scream and pound on the door or laugh at how darned determined they were.

The warped back porches of both houses nearly touched each other, and the two sisters went back and forth constantly, never trying to keep each other out. If Ida Mae had locked her door against Ivy, her sister would likely have taken offense and burned her house down.

Some would speculate that it wasn't the first time.

Despite being a Feeney, Jen was not an arsonist. "But I am capable of a little breaking and entering," she murmured. Especially because she paid the bills on these two houses.

Eyeing a small window into Ida Mae's laundry room, she gave it some serious thought. It was already dingy and cracked, and would be just big enough for her to squeeze through.

Well, maybe. Given her recent love affair with two guys named Ben and Jerry, who'd substituted for any real man in Jen's life, she had some serious hip action going on and she suspected some in

the hood would say she had back. But she still suspected she could push herself through and pop out the other side like a cork emerging from a bottle.

Only to land on her head on the washing machine and bleed to death because, given her mood, Aunt Ida Mae wouldn't lift a hand to call 9-1-1, if they even had such a thing in this town.

Okay. No breaking and entering.

She couldn't force her way in, and she knew the best thing to do when dealing with the Feeney sisters was to outwit them. Or outwait them. So, deciding to make them think they'd succeeded, and, hopefully, let down their guard, she went around front, got her stuff and threw it into the trunk of her car.

"Put away your weapons, start celebrating," she whispered as she started the car. "Just unlock a door."

As she drove off, watching the houses in her rearview mirror, she waited for one of the women to come out on her porch and do an end-zone happy dance. Jen couldn't watch for long, however, because she hadn't gone a single mile when the car's engine started to sputter. Quickly glancing at the gas gauge and seeing it firmly below the E, she groaned. "Oh, no, you did not!"

But they had. The two maniacal old women had gone on a joy ride and emptied her tank. And for the second time that day, Jen found herself stranded, thanks to the wicked Feeney sisters.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Napoleon dumped Josephine, don't you think she was dying to run around saying, "That thing about a man's height and his length...it's true, it's true!"

—I Want You, I Love You, Get Out by Jennifer Feeney

AFTER MIKE HAD DROPPED JEN OFF at her aunts' houses, he'd made the short drive to his grandfather's place. With every second, he'd tried to force all thoughts of the strange interlude he'd just shared with her out of his head. In the future, he'd probably look back and grin, thinking about the sexy, crazy woman with the tire iron. But for now, he was still too focused on the sexy part of the equation. Which wasn't good. He didn't need to be thinking that way about anyone right now, especially not a woman who had a violent streak. A woman he'd never see again.

He got as far as his grandfather's driveway before he remembered the one thing he had neglected to pack. The dog snuffling against the back of his neck reminded him of the dog food still sitting on his kitchen counter at home. He had nothing for Mutt.

"Sorry, boy," he said as he drove up toward the house.

He knew better than to just get out and leave a trip to the store until later. Mortimer would insist on giving Mutt an entire grilled sirloin, which would make Roderick sniff and mumble stuff about cooking for dogs. They'd snipe at each other like an old married couple—Roderick would get his feelings hurt, Mortimer would be completely oblivious and Mike would sit in silence all evening.

Uh-uh. No thanks.

The crotchety and affectionate, love-hate relationship between the two men might make people who didn't know them wonder how close they were. Looking at them under today's standards, their relationship might be questionable. But Mike knew better. In their day, Mortimer and Roderick had forged a completely unbreakable brotherhood, fired in battle, cemented during years of adventure and treasure-hunting. They'd been the modern-day equivalent of pirates, with women on every continent. Even stuffy Roderick had, per Mortimer, "cut a dashing figure" in his day.

Which made it strange that they were both now alone, and had been for many years. He didn't doubt his grandfather would have liked to fall in love one more time, and he suspected Roderick would have, as well. They'd spent so long raising Mike and his brothers, though, they seemed to have let those dreams slip away. Now that the two old bachelors had taken up residence in Trouble, Pennsylvania, the odds of them meeting the kind of women they'd met in the capitals of Europe were slim to none. So they were apparently stuck with each other for life.

"I know Grandpa would welcome you right up at the table, pal, but old Roddy's pretty particular." Reaching over his shoulder, he scratched the animal's scruffy head. "He won't like cooking for a dog, not even one as superior as you."

Besides, even if he did, Mutt didn't handle table food well and Mike would spend the night cleaning up after a sick pet.

That cinched it.

So, doing a quick turnaround, he headed back to Trouble, hoping the small grocery store carried the right brand. For a mutt, Mutt was pretty finicky.

For some reason, his foot lifted off the gas pedal and he slowed down when he passed the old house where he'd dropped Jennifer off a few minutes before. He'd seen no sign of her.

That was good. Great. Perfect. So why, he wondered, had he been holding his breath, half hoping to see her yelling curses up at the window? Alone. Stranded.

In need of rescue again?

The idea was stupid and he kicked himself over it as he ran his errand. Why one hour in the company of a woman would have him wishing he'd have to come to her aid again, he honestly didn't know. Talk about selfish.

Hell, maybe his brothers were right and he did have some kind of protector fixation. One more reason to stay away from women right now. All women. Especially the brunette who'd been filling his head since the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

Arriving at the store, he parked out front, then tied Mutt up to a pole by the door. Fortunately, the store was tiny and he could see him from inside. Even more fortunately, they carried the right brand, if not the same flavor of food.

He was heading back to Mortimer's Folly, as his brother Morgan liked to call the ugly old white elephant their grandfather lived in, when he saw something that made him wonder if he was some kind of jinx. Or just the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet. Because ahead of him, parked on the opposite shoulder of the two-lane road, was a car. And standing beside it was a very frustrated-looking woman.

It was all he could do not to let Jennifer see his amusement when he did a quick U-turn and pulled in behind her. Getting out, he called, "Problem?"

She glared at him through her bangs, which had fallen into her eyes. "I ran out of gas."

"Good. I was afraid the old ladies had ditched you again."

Shifting her gaze away as he reached her side, she admitted, "They used up all my gas and I didn't even notice it."

"You know, I have to admit, someday I'd like to see those two aunts of yours for myself."

"You can come to their funerals. They'll be next week. Ivy would definitely want an open casket."

"Still feeling murderous?"

"You have no idea."

Oh, he felt pretty sure he had some. Dangerous or not, the woman was cute as hell when she was mad. "I think you need to be a little more on guard with those two."

That full, sexy mouth of hers pulled tight. "No kidding." She gazed longingly at his Jeep. "I don't suppose you have a spare gallon or two?"

"No," he admitted, "but there's a gas station a quarter mile away. Let's go."

She hesitated for a moment, staring at him with those big, incredible eyes. She looked tired and annoyed still, but also wore that hint of vulnerability he'd seen before. She'd obviously had a very long day and looked about at the end of her rope.

Mike reached out and took her arm, giving her some physical support. And maybe some of the emotional kind, too. Not even realizing he owned such a gentle tone, he murmured, "On second thought, you've been through enough today. Why don't you wait in your car, I'll be back in five minutes."

She nodded slowly, not pulling away. A tremulous smile curved her mouth up. Not her usual smile of snarkiness or mischief, but one of relief, of gratitude. "You know, it's not going to do my reputation any good if people find out a nice, considerate guy came to my rescue not once but twice today."

Ha. As if anyone would recognize him as a nice, considerate guy. Seemed they were both suddenly acting out of character. "I won't tell if you won't."

Opening her car door, she got in. "Fair enough. Thank you."

She didn't say anything else as he walked away, nor much when he came back ten minutes later with a small gas can. Though he offered to follow her to the station after he'd put some gas in the tank, she insisted she'd be fine.

He didn't press it. Whatever moment of weakness she'd allowed him to see earlier, it was under control now. She was staunch and resolute, appreciative, but also once again very self-confident. So accepting her final thank you and knowing there was nothing more for him to do, Mike got in his Jeep and drove away from her for the second time that day.

JENNIFER DIDN'T LIKE THE END of anything. Whether it was one of her books that she was having a great time writing or a visit from her parents or simply the joy of the holiday season, she hated reaching The End.

She especially hated watching people leave. Particularly people she'd just met—sexy people—who she'd like to get to know better. Like him.

But it obviously wasn't to be. Like before, he'd played the hero and ridden away on his Jeep Wrangler steed. Big, strong, silent. As she watched Mike Taylor's taillights disappear into her history again, she felt like a saloon girl watching the handsome lawman ride away in some cheesy western.

Pathetic. She was thinking like one of the women who wrote to her talking about how wonderful her own handsome hero had been before he'd turned into a cheating toad.

This latest incident was simply the crap-flavored icing on her mud pie of a day. One for the to-forget books.

After filling up her tank at Trouble's one and only gas station—paying prices that would make an oil baron blush—she headed downtown. Her mood had slipped from mostly gray and cloudy to nearly black and stormy. A big part of her wanted to just keep driving, straight back to New York. She had a book to finish—her third—with a hefty check waiting at the end of it.

But she had a feeling that if she left, she would never be able to make herself return to Trouble and see her aunts again.

While that appealed to her on one level, on another, she knew that, as twisted as they were, she'd miss them. Miss their stubbornness and their independence, their caustic natures and the aura of mystery that had always surrounded them.

No. She wasn't going anywhere. Not until they'd hashed things out, face-to-face.

But first things first. She steered the car toward the local store. Once inside, Jen ignored the shelves full of expired canned goods for a nickel to scout the first-aid area for bandages and antiseptic to clean her blisters. She managed to find a tube of stuff that didn't look as if it had been produced during the Carter administration. Adding a toothbrush to her cart, she paid for her things just as the store closed at six.

Six o'clock on a Friday night and the town was closing up shop. Rolling up its sidewalks. The one stoplight in the main square had already stopped changing from red to green and turned into a flat, blinking yellow beacon that screamed, "You're in the middle of nowhere! Get out while you still can!"

"Unbelievable," she muttered, glancing across the street at the one business that still appeared to be open. But it took a few minutes for her to muster the courage to actually go over and enter Tootie's Tavern. Because if the Travel Channel ever stopped doing shows on the ten scariest places in the world, and started naming the ten scariest places to eat, this would probably make the cut. She'd bet it was on an FDA watch list somewhere.

Finally, though, she forced herself inside. Knowing Aunt Ida Mae and Aunt Ivy were very untrusting, she suspected they hadn't even crawled out of their hiding places yet, much less unlocked any doors.

"Hey there, missy, thought you was gonna spend your whole week here without comin' in to see me!"

This comment came from the owner, Tootie herself, who was shaped like a box—as wide as she was tall—with hair the color of congealing sausage gravy. But she had always been nice to Jen as a kid. Even if Jen's mother had always made her throw away any cookie or treat Tootie had slipped to her during a family visit.

"Hi," she said. "I, uh, need to use the ladies' room."

Jen immediately wished she hadn't put it like that. She knew she'd been overheard when a meaty guy at a nearby table, wearing a Bud T-shirt and a backward baseball cap, snickered like a third grader who'd spotted a little girl's underwear.

That, of course, instantly made her think about the conversation she and Mike had had earlier... and his wickedly erotic comment about the soft fabric between a woman's soft thighs. The soft fabric between her soft thighs had gotten a mite damp after the remark, that was for sure. And just thinking about Mike now could probably make it more so.

Forget it. He'd driven away—twice—without mentioning the possibility of seeing her again. Besides, she didn't like the big, strong, drop-dead gorgeous, dangerous, silent type.

Hmm. Maybe... No. Not her type, even though her friends all thought she should be happy with any guy who was breathing. But she wasn't that desperate. Yet.

"Sorry, sweetie, facilities are for paying customers only," the proprietress said with an apologetic shrug, her loud reply ensuring they were being overheard now.

Then the words sank in. Perfect. She was actually going to have to eat here? "Oh, uh..."

"Meat loaf's on special."

She was tempted to ask what type of meat was in it—armadillo, mastodon—but wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Unfortunately, every other place in town was probably already closed. This might be the only bite she'd have until she could get her aunts to let her in. That could take a week.

"Could you just get me a plain salad and an iced tea?"

Tootie nodded. "I'll have Scoot put in the order, but you'll have to sit at the counter. There's no tables."

She glanced at the counter, seeing a sea of men wearing red plaid and wife-beater T-shirts. All packed shoulder-to-shoulder, heads down, like horses at a trough. All probably having heard her ladies' room comment and right now thinking about her walking into the next room and pulling down her panties.

Eww.

"Can I get it to go?"

"Didn't she already say she had to go?" a phlegmy voice asked. The question was accompanied by a lascivious chuckle. Both had emanated from a guy at the closest table who, judging by his comma-shaped posture, was between one hundred and death.

Tootie leaned close. "I don't blame you, sugar. Some of these fellas act like mongrels over a bone when a pretty woman comes around. Me 'n' Scoot have taken to giving each other signals when we need help extricating ourselves from one when he gets over-amorous."

Scoot. That was the waitress. Tootie's assistant. Practically Tootie's twin. The hottest single ladies in Trouble?

"Ooo-kay," she murmured, keeping her eyes forward, focusing on the door to the ladies' room. "I'll be back."

Once inside the bathroom, however, she realized she'd made a tactical error. "This place is dirtier than the ground," she muttered, staring in dismay at the mildew climbing up the backs of the sinks and the peeling, puke-green linoleum on the floor. She'd be better off cleaning her cuts in a truck stop men's room.

If there had been a hotel anywhere in the vicinity, she would have given up for the night, blowing off Ida Mae and Ivy's houses for clean sheets, hot water that wasn't the color of dirt and free HBO. But, if she recalled correctly, Trouble had only ever boasted two inns and both were now closed. One—Seaton House, where she had once stayed with her parents as a child—due to the death of its former owner. And the other, the Dew Drop Inn—where she had never stayed with her parents as a child because the owner was a nudist—also closed. From what the aunts said, the owner, Mr. Fitzweather, had had a bit of a run-in with a dog during his nudist days and had since retired.

"This is ridiculous," she told her reflection, continuing to shift her toes to keep them protected by the flip-flops, so they wouldn't come into contact with the dirty floor. "There has to be something I can do."

Then she remembered something. And started to smile.

During Jen's last visit, Ivy had nastily told her that Ida Mae was a loose woman, praying for a burglar to come along and ravish her. In order to make it easier for said burglar, Ida Mae always kept a spare key under the rusty iron bench sitting on her front porch. Knowing Ivy, she'd probably forgotten she'd spilled the secret five minutes after the words had left her lips, just as Jen had forgotten the comment. Which meant Ida Mae probably hadn't removed the key.

A half hour later, when she returned to Ida Mae's, holding a plastic container full of salad, she checked. And hit pay dirt. The key was there.

"Oh, Luuuucy, I'm home," she called as she let herself into the house, hoping Aunt Ida Mae had calmed down and could be reasonable. She didn't dare hope for such a thing from Aunt Ivy.

"How did you get in here?" a stern-sounding voice said, emerging from the dark, cluttered parlor.

Jen immediately swung toward it and strode into the room, carefully picking her way through the maze of furniture. Good thing she'd become familiar with it during her week's stay because it was nearly dark outside and not a single light was on within. The heavy oak and crushed-velvet pieces stood in odd positions around the room, competing for every inch of floor space. It was like being inside a child's antique dollhouse which had too much toy furniture. Jen had never left this house without a bruise or two from having banged into something.

She'd already been bruised, battered and cut enough at her aunts' hands today, thank you very much, and didn't need any more war wounds. "I used your spare key," she said, plopping onto the sofa and opening her bag of food. She'd ditched the drink right after leaving Tootie's because, after sucking in a big mouthful through the straw, she'd had tea leaves coating her tongue.

"Who said you could come into my house?"

"Technically, Aunt Ida Mae, since I cover your mortgage, paid for the new roof and am responsible for all the utilities, I think it's partly my house."

That got the old woman out of the darkness. She came out of the corner and expertly wove her way across the room, flipping on a single lamp as she went by it. The whiteness of her round face, emphasized by dark circles under her brown eyes, said she'd been tense, waiting for this confrontation.

Ida Mae had probably never been considered pretty—though Ivy had. Judging by the pictures Jen had seen, the younger Feeney sister had been more than pretty; she'd been a knockout. But the older one would have to be described as handsome rather than pretty, even today at seventy-eight. Ida Mae carried herself well and was proud of her thick, snow-white hair. Usually up in a bun, it now hung loose, halfway down her back, stark against her pink housecoat. Thick and lovely, it was definitely her best feature.

Way nicer than her smile. Which almost never got any use. Kind of like Mike Taylor's.

"You can have your roof and your utilities."

Jen opened her salad, tore open the packet of Italian dressing that had come with it and squirted it onto the wilted lettuce. Ignoring the obvious impossibility of removing the new roof, she murmured, "So you want to sit here in the dark and get rained on?" she asked before taking a bite.

"That's just what you'd like, isn't it? To make me so sick and miserable I'll let you put me in an almost-dead-folks home?"

Jennifer couldn't contain a small laugh. Ida Mae was nothing if not blunt. "Look, can we please call a truce? I have absolutely no intention of forcing you to do anything."

"As if you could," the woman mumbled, eyeing Jen's salad.

Without saying a word, Jen pushed the container across the coffee table, watching Ida Mae grab an olive and pop it into her mouth. With Ivy, only liquor, ice cream or an oldies CD for the stereo Jen had bought her last Christmas could have done the trick. Ida Mae was much less picky when it came to bribes.

The ploy worked. The older woman slowly lowered herself onto the opposite chair, but kept griping. “Shocking lack of respect for your elders. Your dear, sweet father will be horrified to hear this.”

“You’re not going to bother my father,” Jen said, her tone steely. “You know as well as I do that he can’t handle the stress. Mom said he’s just now strong enough to walk to the mailbox without coming back winded. None of us are going to do or say a thing to worry him.”

Ida Mae sucked in her bottom lip. The only thing Jen could ever do to get the old woman to back off anything was say it wasn’t good for Ivan Feeney. Ida Mae and Ivy did have a soft spot in their brittle hearts for their much younger brother.

“Sweet baby boy,” Ida Mae said, sounding about as gentle as Jen had ever heard her. “I do wish your mother would have let us stay longer to take care of him.”

Ha. Smother him was the better term. Jen’s mother had almost shot herself when her two elderly sisters-in-law had come down to North Carolina to “help” her parents get settled in their new home. If they went back, Mom was likely to have a heart attack and end up right beside Dad.

Which was why Jen intended to take care of the aunts whether they liked it or not. “I’m very sorry my suggestion came across as an order.”

Getting better. Ida’s posture eased a tiny bit, but she wasn’t finished grumbling. “Think I buried one husband and divorced another just so I could let somebody else order me around?” She didn’t wait for an answer, instead grabbing a cherry tomato and a slice of green pepper. The aunts usually lived on canned tuna, so fresh veggies had to be a real treat. Even if they had come out of Tootie’s greasy kitchen.

“I would like...I would hope, that you and Ivy would at least consider moving into someplace a little nicer.”

Oh boy. Tactical error. She knew it the minute the words left her mouth.

Ida Mae’s spine stiffened as if somebody had sent a bolt of electricity through her. She launched herself up on her sturdy legs and glared down, a bit of pepper flying out of her mouth as she snapped, “Nicer? You’re saying my house is not nice? Well, young lady, you may feel free to stay somewhere else then.”

“Aunt Ida...”

“Out.”

She shrugged. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The shrug, and reasonable tone, seemed to get Ida Mae’s attention more than anything Jen had said. She appeared a bit nonplussed that her niece hadn’t launched to her feet and started arguing back—as Ivy probably would have done. Ida Mae could handle anger. But she wasn’t so good at holding up against calm, rational conversation.

Maybe that was one reason she never battled with her brother. Jen’s father was the absolute epitome of a laid-back, kindly man. Which had made his massive heart attack at fifty-nine that much more frightening.

As if knowing she’d lost the skirmish—though, she’d never concede the battle—Ida Mae glared. “Fine. Stay then. Just be gone tomorrow.”

Without another word, she bent down, grabbed Jen’s salad and stalked out of the room.

THE LAST TIME MIKE HAD VISITED his grandfather in Trouble had been during the winter, at Christmastime, to be exact. So it hadn’t quite hit him just how hot this part of Pennsylvania could be in August. Particularly in a monstrous old house with no central air-conditioning. Even his hair was sweating.

He hadn’t noticed it as much when he’d first arrived the previous evening, since Roderick had served up a great dinner on the back patio. With newly installed ceiling fans spinning lazily overhead, an icy cold beer in his hand and his grandfather’s fine company, he hadn’t even felt the temperature.

Until he’d gone to bed.

Then he'd turned into Mr. Heat Miser from that old Christmas show.

His grandfather had said he'd looked into installing a system when doing renovations on the old monstrosity over the last year. But supposedly the lines of the oddly constructed building—which, in Mike's opinion, looked like a bunch of kid's card houses on top of one another—would be affected by installing central air. So Mortimer hadn't done it. He'd merely brought in a few window units, though none for the third floor.

Hence the sweating. Even Mutt had known better than to sleep up here. He'd come in with Mike the night before, then turned right back around and gone downstairs where it was cooler. Man's best friend. Huh.

Mike had to concede it: the steaminess of his first night in the house might also be attributed to the dream he'd had. He couldn't remember all the details. But he definitely remembered it had involved Jennifer Feeney, a bottle of massage oil and a pair of his handcuffs.

It had also caused him to wake up as hard as a tree trunk.

"Get out of my head, lady," he muttered as he got up, knowing there was no point trying to sleep any longer. When his feet hit the floor, he groaned. Even the scratched old wooden floors of the attic room were hot, and it was only 9:00 a.m.

His brother Max, who'd spent a few weeks here last summer, had sworn this third-floor room got the best cross breezes from the two turret windows. Supposedly, its greatest benefit was that it was out of earshot of Mortimer's snoring, which had been known to knock pictures off walls.

Mike was apparently a lighter sleeper than his brother. He'd heard his grandfather sawing away from one story below until at least 3:00 a.m. And if a breeze had come through the front window last night, it had tiptoed around him sprawled naked on the bed and gone right out the other side. Now that some rainy weather had rolled in, the humidity was thick enough to drink from a cup and his whole body felt sticky.

He didn't know how Max had managed to stay here last summer. Then he thought about his new sister-in-law. And he knew how.

His brother had fallen hard and fast for Sabrina, and more power to him. Maybe with one grandson settled, Mortimer would get some great-grandchildren who'd distract him from this mess of a town he'd purchased a little over a year ago.

The man was never as happy as when he had someone to scheme and fuss over, and a new baby would definitely fit the bill. The way Grandpa talked about Hank, his secretary Allie's kid, he sounded as if he'd already bought stock in Pampers. He adored the boy who was, to be technical, a relative, since he was Sabrina's nephew. Mike couldn't even imagine what Mortimer would do with his own great-grandchild...beyond loving him more than life.

Just as he had his grandsons, who'd never forgotten what he'd done for them when their parents had died. He hadn't shuffled them off to private schools or dumped them on paid servants. Hadn't treated them as if they were a nuisance. Hadn't allowed them to wallow in their own unhappiness. No. Instead, he'd become a true parent all over again, in every sense of the word.

Mike had only been a kid when his dad had been blown out of the sky during the first Gulf War. But he remembered full well how terrified he'd been of losing anyone else he cared about. So the death of his mother from cancer less than a year later had brought his entire world to a crashing halt.

Mortimer had made it start spinning again. Eventually. And as it had spun, he'd dragged his three grandsons across it, giving them the kinds of lives most kids only dreamed of having.

"Michael?" A tap on the door gave him about ten seconds' notice before it was pushed in by his grandfather. Which was just enough time for Mike to grab his shorts and yank them on.

It wouldn't have been the first time his grandfather had walked in and seen him sporting some morning wood. But that hadn't happened since he was fourteen. The memory of the sex talk Mortimer had insisted they have afterward still gave him chills.

He would do anything for his grandfather. But he didn't want to think about the man's wild sex life, which had, he said, served him well through a few marriages and many love affairs.

"Good, you're up. I was hoping you could do me a favor and go down to the market for a newspaper."

He certainly didn't mind, but was curious about the request. "I can't believe you don't have the Times, the Journal and the Post delivered to your doorstep every morning anymore."

"The town doesn't carry 'em. Besides, the only paper carrier around here dropped dead of a heart attack when Mrs. Sneed's pit bull came through her screen door at him."

The comment rolled out of Grandfather's mouth as if he'd been living in this Podunk town all his life. Obviously Mortimer was playing a new role: small-town old-timer. He even had a completely phony twang in his voice.

"Okay," Mike said. "I'll run down there right after I shower."

Grandfather frowned. "I could really use that paper."

A newspaper emergency? One reason leaped to mind. "Stock issues? Do you want me to check the market on the Internet?"

Mortimer shrugged. "Roddy does that computer thing for me every day. No, there's, er, some town business I need to find out about and it should be in today's paper. So, a bit of a hurry-up would be most appreciated."

The old man was nervous. His smile was too wide, his eyes too bright and he was bouncing on his arthritic legs. Whatever this town business was, it appeared to be important. If Mike didn't go for the paper, he felt sure his grandfather would. And Mortimer Potts and automobiles didn't go so well together anymore, as several wrecking companies around the globe could testify.

"Sure. You bet," he said, grabbing a pair of jeans.

"Take the back way, left at the bottom of the hill. It's quicker. Brings you right in behind the market."

"You live a mile from downtown either way," Mike replied, making no effort to keep the dryness from his tone.

Mortimer didn't answer, he merely kept his smile in place, then turned and hurried out of the room. Leaving Mike to wonder what, exactly, was going on with him.

He really began to wonder twenty minutes later. Because after he'd grabbed the paper and a box fan from the ancient drugstore and was heading back to the house, hoping he'd make it before the skies really opened up and dropped the moisture barely contained in the pregnant clouds, his cell phone rang.

"Michael? I've just remembered, that article isn't going to appear today. There's really no rush for you to get back."

His head began to pound. All he'd wanted this morning was a cold shower to get the sweat off his body and bring his skin temperature back down below a hundred degrees. But he'd been sent out on an emergency errand...which now wasn't an emergency?

"So, feel free to, uh, go see the sights or something."

See the sights. Right. The Holland Tunnel was the sight he most wanted to see today, but he'd promised to stay through Tuesday. He hadn't even had a real conversation with his grandfather yet—like the one he'd come here to have, which started with "Why don't you come back to New York with me?" and ended with Mortimer waving, "Bye-bye, Trouble!"

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he finally said with a sigh. Then, something up ahead caught his attention.

A brunette. Wearing a sexy jean skirt and bright pink top. Walking down the side of the road. "I'll be damned," he said, unable to believe what he was seeing. He began to smile, simply unable to fathom how this could be happening. Again.

"What?" his grandfather said over the phone.

“Nothing,” he said. “Just, uh, maybe I will see the sights, Grandpa. I’ll be back later.”

“Good, good. Enjoy yourself. Have fun.”

Fun? Well, he didn’t know if he’d call rescuing Jennifer Feeney fun. But it sure was entertaining.

At least this time, she was wearing shoes. And she wasn’t carrying any lethal weapons. Probably only because he still had her tire iron on the floor of his Jeep.

Dropping his phone back in his pocket, he pulled up beside her. He couldn’t hide his rueful amusement as he lowered the passenger side window. “Good morning,” he called.

She stopped and swung around, a glare on her face. It quickly faded when she saw and recognized him. Then those pretty cheeks pinkened and she nibbled a hole through her bottom lip.

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