Blaze
Take My Breath Away...
Cara Summers

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Why are the bad ones always so very, very good? FBI special agent Nicola Guthrie is on her first field assignment. To find security expert turned art thief Gabe Wilder. And, late one night, she does. Not to mention a whole lot more! Who knew her traitorous body would respond so strongly to Gabe's sensuous lips, her own irresistible need?Gabe can't believe that Nicola thinks he's the bad guy! Then again, he's almost tempted to confess, just so he can keep tasting her incredible mouth. But a daring criminal is terrorising the city's wealthiest collectors.Gabe and Nicola quickly realise the smartest way to catch their quarry is to join forces. Of course, they'll have to find their way out of bed first…

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Praise for Cara Summers

"The sex scenes were incredibly hot! Ms Summers knows how to entertain her readers while writing something a bit risqué."

—*Night Owl Reviews* on *Led into Temptation*

"Sensationally sensual … this tale of a forbidden, guilt-ridden love is a delight. Brimming with diverse, compelling characters, scorching-hot love scenes, romance, and even a ghost, this story is unforgettable."

—*Romancejunkies.com* on *Led into Temptation*

"Great characters with explosive chemistry, a fun intrigue-flavoured plot and a high degree of sensuality add up to an excellent read!"

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Taken Beyond Temptation*

"So steamy you can practically see the steam rising from the pages … Filled with intrigue, mystery, humour, sizzling-hot love scenes, an absorbing plot, non-stop action, suspense, a well-matched couple, plot twists, and a surprise ending, this story is unforgettable and definitely a winner."

—*Romancejunkies.com* on *Taken Beyond Temptation*

"A writer of incredible talent with a gift for emotional stories laced with humour and passion."

—*Rendezvous*

Dear Reader,

St Valentine's Day has always been one of my favorite holidays, and I thought it would be the perfect backdrop for my fifth WRONG BED book. I love writing stories in which two people, who

think they are so wrong for each other, discover (much to their initial horror) that they make a perfect match!

Special FBI agent Nicola Guthrie and Security expert Gabe Wilder share a common goal. They are each determined to catch a thief—namely the media celebrity who's been robbing Denver's socially elite and who only strikes on holidays. With St Valentine's Day a mere forty-eight hours away, the clock is ticking, and Nicola's prime suspect is Gabe. Of course, that doesn't stop her from falling into bed with him the first chance she gets …

For news about upcoming books, please visit my website, www.carasummers.com.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Cara Summers

About the Author

Was **CARA SUMMERS** born with the dream of becoming a published romance novelist? No. But now that she is, she still feels her dream has come true. She loves writing for the Blaze® line because it allows her to create strong, determined women and seriously sexy men who will risk everything to achieve *their* dreams. Cara has written more than thirty-five books, and when she isn't working on new stories, she teaches in the Writing Program at Syracuse University and at a community college near her home.

Take My
Breath Away …
Cara Summers

www.millsandboon.co.uk
To all of my readers everywhere!
Thanks so much for your support.
Happy Valentine's Day!

Prologue

The day after Thanksgiving …

"I'M THINKING WHAT WE'VU got here is a copycat thief." FBI Agent Nick Guthrie kept his eyes steady on Gabe Wilder as he gestured to the Monet propped on the credenza to the left of his desk. In front of the cleverly forged painting lay a copy of that morning's *Denver Post.* The headline read: Priceless Monet Stolen on Thanksgiving Day.

"Don't you agree? He replaces the original with a very good copy. That's what your father always did. He's even signing your father's initials."

Gabe said nothing, letting the silence stretch between them. He'd been coming to grips with the fact that someone was imitating his father ever since Guthrie had called him to the crime scene the night before. At 6:30 a.m., the FBI offices were still empty, and Guthrie hadn't bothered to draw the shades on the glass walls that divided his office from the others in the White-Collar Crime Division.

"Well?" Guthrie prompted Gabe. "What are you thinking?"

"We're not dealing with a copycat." He shifted his gaze to the Monet.

"No?" Guthrie frowned. "The thief broke through one of the best security alarm systems available, one of yours. He has a detailed knowledge of the M.O. your father used. And it's a French Impressionist painting. Raphael Wilder was particularly talented at forging those. I say someone is deliberately imitating your father's style right down to signing the forgery with the initials, R.W."

"But my father never sent announcements bragging about his thefts," Gabe pointed out.

"Agreed," Guthrie said. "But everything else is the same."

Gabe couldn't argue with that. But why would someone choose to imitate the style of a legendary art thief and then deviate in a major way from his method? And why was this thief choosing to copy his father in the first place? Those were the questions that he intended to find the answers to.

"I had a chance to study the original painting when my company set up the security at the Langfords' house." Gabe nodded his head toward the Monet. "The forgery is a good one. It might have been years before the fake was detected."

Guthrie leaned back in his chair. "So why announce the theft?"

"Exactly. Raphael Wilder never would have." Then Gabe met Nick Guthrie's eyes. "That's why I'm not willing to agree that this thief is simply a copycat. There's more going on here. Why don't you come right out and ask *me* if I had something to do with stealing the Monet? The possibility must have crossed your mind. No one would know my father's methods better than I. His initials are on the painting. The Langfords were using *my* security system."

Guthrie said nothing.

"Perhaps I substituted the forgery when I installed the alarm system. That would eliminate the need to go back and break in later. I could sell the original and no one would be the wiser, perhaps ever."

"That's what your father would have done." Guthrie shot him a frown. "And maybe your involvement in the theft did cross my mind, but I dismissed the possibility. Raphael Wilder was a thief, a very good one, and if you'd followed in his footsteps, I imagine you'd have made a very good one also. But you haven't. We go back a long way, Gabe."

That much was true. The first day he'd met FBI Agent Nick Guthrie was the day the man had come into his home and arrested his father for grand larceny. That had been over fifteen years ago. And within a month of Raphael Wilder's conviction, he'd died in prison of pneumonia. Ever since then, Nick Guthrie had kept close tabs on Gabe. What might have begun as feelings of guilt or responsibility on Guthrie's part had evolved gradually into a friendship, one that ran both ways.

And Nick Guthrie had been one of the people who'd helped him stay on the straight and narrow at a time in his life when he might have chosen a different path. He owed other people, too, of course. Father Mike Flynn and the St. Francis Center for Boys had played a key role.

Nick Guthrie leaned forward. "I know about the promise you made your mother when she was dying. I was with you and Father Mike the day that you renewed that promise to your father in the prison infirmary. There's no way that you would break those vows by starting to steal paintings. You've built a business to protect people from theft and from harm. And you're doing a damn good job of it."

Gabe didn't smile, but the knot that had been in his stomach when Guthrie had asked him to come into the office that morning eased. If Nick Guthrie hadn't requested this meeting, Gabe would have insisted on one himself. He'd needed to know just how much G. W. Securities was going to come under suspicion because of his father.

Guthrie ran his hands through his hair. "Besides, if you were to take up a life of crime, I can't see you sending announcement cards. And why target one of your own security systems? I've known you since you were thirteen. You're not that dumb."

Now Gabe *did* smile. "So it really did cross your mind?"

Guthrie sighed. "Of course it did. I'm an FBI agent. I have to consider all the possibilities. But you didn't steal the Monet. And I'm not releasing any of the details about the thief using your father's M.O. to the press."

"Well, you're right about me, as it happens. I didn't steal the painting. But …"

Guthrie raised his hands, palms out. "I know. I know. You still think I was wrong about your father."

It was a discussion they'd had often over the years. Gabe was willing to admit that his father had been a thief, a brilliant one. And a reformed one. He'd never believed his father had stolen the Pissaro that Guthrie had arrested him for stealing. Raphael Wilder had denied the theft even on his deathbed. "My father made the same promise to my mother that I did. He didn't steal that painting."

Guthrie rose and walked to the window. Over the years they'd agreed to disagree. The first time they'd argued about his father's innocence, Gabe had punched the older man. He'd been thirteen and angry.

Guthrie had taken the punch and told him that he could take another. Anytime. But Gabe hadn't punched him again because it hadn't helped soothe any of the pain or the loss away. What had eventually helped was the time he'd spent at the St. Francis Center for Boys. At a crucial time in his life, Father Mike Flynn had helped him more than he could ever repay. Truth told, the priest was still helping him. He'd been the first person he'd called after he'd left the crime scene the night before.

"There was a time when I thought you might follow in your father's footsteps," Guthrie said. "But you've built a very different kind of life."

Yes, he had. And G. W. Securities was becoming known beyond Denver. Partly due to some consulting work he'd done for Nick Guthrie, he'd recently landed jobs as far away as D.C. and New York City. Gabe stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles.

"So why is someone imitating parts of your father's M.O.?" Guthrie spoke the question that was foremost in both of their minds.

As it hung unanswered in the air, Gabe's attention was distracted by the young woman who'd just stepped out of the elevator in the outer offices. Something moved through him as she strode purposefully toward a desk in one of the glass-walled offices and set her briefcase down.

Not recognition.

Or was it? He gave her another few seconds of his attention. There was plenty there to warrant a second look. The gray slacks and jacket did little to disguise the long legs and the curves in that neat, athletic body. The bright blue of the shirt drew his gaze to her face—also worth a second look.

This time he was sure it was recognition that flickered. He knew that short upturned nose, the stubborn chin.

"Who …?"

Gabe wasn't even aware that he'd spoken the question out loud until Guthrie answered, "That's Nicola, my daughter. She started working here a week ago."

Gabe registered the frown in the older man's voice, but he didn't take his gaze off of the woman.

"She didn't even tell Marcia and me that she was applying to the FBI, not until she'd been accepted at Quantico. She finished her training there last month and received the Director's Leadership Award. I had to pull a lot of strings to get her transferred here."

Nicola Guthrie. Of course. It was the hair that had thrown him. Now it fell straight as rain until it curved beneath her chin. Fifteen years ago a mass of curls had framed her face. He'd teased her ruthlessly about them and even pulled them a few times.

"I'm going to limit her to research on this case," Guthrie was saying. "She's smart, but she's not ready for field work. As long as she's in the office and behind that desk, I can be sure she's safe."

Gabe was about to turn his attention back to the Monet when Nicola Guthrie turned and her gaze suddenly locked on his.

The impact ricocheted through his system, coming into contact with every nerve ending. For a moment he couldn't breathe. Everything else faded, and all he was aware of was her. The sudden tightening in his gut was raw, sexual and compelling. Without any conscious volition, he rose from the chair.

"Gabe?"

Guthrie's voice came from a distance. Still, the sound might have been the only thing that allowed him to keep his feet firmly planted on the floor. The urge to go to her was so intense. He'd never felt a pull that strong. He couldn't drag his gaze away from her. He felt trapped. But he couldn't seem to summon up the will to fight his desire.

"What is it?" Guthrie's voice was closer now. Gabe felt Guthrie's hand on his arm. But it wasn't until Nicola turned away that he was able to draw in a breath. Or gather a coherent thought.

"What's wrong?" Guthrie asked.

"It's this case." Gabe was surprised to find his voice worked. He was still looking at her as she picked up a file and leafed through it.

What the hell *was* wrong with him? No woman had ever affected him this way before. All that had happened was that their eyes had met. She was standing a good twenty-five feet away and she'd made him feel weak, winded.

What would she do to him when she was closer? When he kissed her? When he touched her? When he was inside of her?

No.

Ruthlessly, Gabe reined his thoughts in and turned to face the man he called a friend. "I want some answers. I don't have any idea why someone is using parts of my father's M.O." But there was a reason. He was sure of it.

"The announcement cards are easier," he continued. "This particular thief craves attention. Which means that he may strike again to get more."

"I wish we weren't thinking along the same lines," Guthrie said in a grim tone. "That brings me to the reason I asked you to come in today. I figure you're going to be working on this case and I'd like you to agree to share any information you come up with. My office will do the same. What do you say?"

Gabe managed a smile as he held out a hand. "I say two heads are always better than one."

Guthrie glanced toward the painting again. "I hope that we're both wrong about another robbery."

Gabe hoped so, too. But his gut told him they weren't.

As he left the FBI offices, he noted that more people had reported to work. And in spite of his determination not to, he glanced once more in the direction of Nicola Guthrie's office.

Her head was bent over a file.

Gabe wasn't sure it was relief or disappointment he felt as the elevator doors closed and he descended to the street level.

1

Two and a half months later, February 12

"TURN LEFT IN point nine miles."

The calm voice of her GPS system had FBI special agent Nicola Guthrie gripping the steering wheel of her car and peering through the windshield into thickly falling snow. Easing her foot off the gas, she narrowed her eyes to study what lay in the beams of her headlights.

Not much. She was finding it more and more difficult to distinguish the narrow mountain road from the treacherous ditches that bordered it on either side.

The storm had been steadily increasing in intensity ever since she'd left Denver at 6:00 p.m. And her little Volkswagen Beetle convertible was not known for its winter weather capabilities. The one-hour drive to the church of St. Francis had stretched into nearly three.

And counting.

But it was going to be worth it. The moment that Father Mike Flynn had walked into her office and showed her the note, she'd gotten that tingling feeling deep inside of her—the same one that had guided every important decision she'd ever made. And it had never failed her.

Tonight, she had a good chance of finally identifying the art thief who'd been leading the FBI on a merry chase for the past three months. On each holiday since Thanksgiving, he'd relieved one of Denver's art collectors of a priceless painting. And if she unmasked him tonight, her father would finally have to relent and take her career choice seriously.

Nicola glanced at her speedometer. She could walk faster than this.

"Turn left in point five miles."

Not much longer. Her decision to join the FBI had not set well with either her father or her stepmother. Her father's tendency to be over-protective she could understand. Her mother had been an agent who'd worked with him, and she'd died in the line of duty when Nicola had been a toddler.

Her stepmother was a different kettle of fish. Marcia Thorne Guthrie had been born to wealth, and her ideas about a woman's role in society were slightly and almost lovably medieval. Marcia thought women should study art and literature, marry, run a lovely home and spread her largesse through the community by doing good works. *And* by throwing huge charity balls like the one Marcia gave every year at Thorne Mansion on Valentine's Day.

In fact, that's exactly where Nicola should be right now—at Thorne Mansion helping her stepmother make the final dessert selections for the ball.

The problem was Nicola didn't want to follow in her stepmother's footsteps. She wanted to follow in her father's. But she dearly loved both of her parents—enough to get a Masters in Fine Art degree before she'd secretly applied to the FBI. Throughout her life, her rebellions against her parents had ended in eventual victories, but they had always been hard-won. And actions had always spoken louder than words. Eventually, she'd win them over.

Which was why tonight was so important. If she could just catch herself a thief. And if that thief turned out to be who she thought it was? Well, her father would have to give her bonus points for that because he thought Gabe Wilder was as innocent as a newborn babe.

She didn't.

"Turn left in point three miles."

"Where?" Nicola frowned into the swirling snow.

Then she saw it—just the outline of the church steeple. Ahead and to her left. She might have missed it if not for the headlights of a vehicle parked nearby. When a sudden break in the wind gave her a better look at the silhouette of the parked car, Nicola's pulse jumped.

It was an SUV and it looked familiar. Could it be …?

The tingling sensation moved through her. She'd felt the same way when Father Mike had visited her office and shown her the note announcing that the statue of St. Francis was going to be stolen tonight. Gabe Wilder might very well be here.

"Turn left in one hundred yards."

One step at a time, Nicola. First, you have to find the driveway. Then the thief.

During the long drive from the city, her practical side had been cautioning her that a semi-retired Franciscan priest like Father Mike didn't fit the profile of the previous wealthy and socially prominent victims of Denver's well-publicized art thief. However, during the twenty years he'd served as the director of the St. Francis Center for Boys, Father Mike had certainly rubbed elbows with the movers and shakers of Denver.

And the thief always delivered a note to his next target on the day he struck. Father Mike had received his note today. She'd read it.

I've always admired the statue of St. Francis—ever since I first saw it in the prayer garden at the St. Francis Center. I was so disappointed when you moved it to that isolated church. So, I've decided to take it off your hands. Enjoy Lincoln's Birthday.

The bragging tone and the specificity of the note were similar to the other ones in the file. The art piece and the holiday were always mentioned by name.

No one had expected the thief to make a move on Lincoln's Birthday, February 12. The press, the FBI and most of Denver's socially elite were expecting the thief to strike on Valentine's Day. A priceless Cézanne was going to be auctioned at the annual Valentine's Day Charity Ball—the one her stepmother was throwing—and the theory was that the thief wouldn't be able to resist it.

No one had given any thought to the possibility that the thief might target the statue of St. Francis. Truth told, she hadn't thought of it either. She'd been certain her father was right, and the thief would go after the Cézanne.

The small marble statue currently residing on a side altar in St. Francis Church didn't have the monetary value of the artwork previously stolen. But there were those who would testify that it was priceless.

The statue of St. Francis had been donated to the Franciscan order in Denver years ago by an immigrant family from Assisi, Italy. They'd claimed it had been sculpted in the image of the saint himself, and that it possessed special powers to grant prayers. Since its arrival in Denver, the reputation of the statue had grown to legendary proportions. Even in its original home in the small prayer garden next to the St. Francis Center for Boys, the statue had attracted crowds. Many thought that paying a visit to the statue and saying a prayer was like having a direct line to God.

There were no documented miracles. Yet. But there were plenty of people who'd testified to the fact that the prayers they'd said to the statue had not only been answered but had changed their lives. People had fallen in love, marriages had been saved and babies had been born to supposedly infertile couples. And almost everyone testified to finding peace.

The article published in last Sunday's edition of the *Denver Post* had included several of the stories. They ranged from recovering lost jewelry to improvements in health and relationships. There was even a local congresswoman who claimed she owed her latest election victory to St. Francis.

Nicola remembered a time when she'd believed in the power of the statue herself. She'd said a prayer, one she'd desperately wanted to be granted. But St. Francis hadn't been listening that day. She hadn't wasted another prayer on him since. But she was definitely in the minority.

When the St. Francis Center for Boys had been torn down and replaced by upscale townhomes as part of the city's urban renewal program, Father Mike had received permission to relocate the statue to St. Francis Church. Since then the pilgrimages to pray to the statue had picked up in numbers.

Nearly half the money that had sustained the St. Francis Center had come from visitors who'd left donations in the small prayer garden where the statue had stood for fifteen years. Currently the

three masses Father Mike commuted to say on Sunday were packed, and at least twenty percent of attendees were people from out of state who'd come to say a prayer.

What was the value of a piece of art that could answer your prayers? Nicola figured it might bring in a hefty price from some collector.

Evidently enough to have Father Mike hiring G. W. Securities, the premier firm in Denver, to protect it at its new location. That little known fact had also received quite a bit of play in the *Denver Post* article.

So if the statue of St. Francis was stolen, it would be the fourth piece of art snitched while under the protection of G. W. Securities. And to Nicola's way of thinking that made the company's owner, Gabe Wilder, a prime suspect. The fact that Gabe was the son of legendary thief Raphael Wilder added more weight to her suspicions.

"Turn left in twenty-five yards."

As Nicola peered into the snow, a blast of wind slammed into her car and the rear wheels fishtailed. Holding her breath, she eased her foot off the gas and kept her hands steady on the wheel. Her headlights shifted, briefly pinning the SUV, and Nicola's pulse jumped again. That was Gabe Wilder's car all right.

This time the tingling feeling racing through her was so strong that she nearly trembled. Then she felt her tires regain traction, and she shifted her attention to the road.

Her suspicion that Gabe Wilder had to be playing a key role in the thefts was the reason she'd spent the past few weeks tailing that SUV all over Denver during her off duty hours. Not that her surveillance had done her any good. Thanks to secure underground parking garages and the fact that he lived in an apartment above his office, she hadn't even been able to get a good look at the man himself.

Still, Nicola couldn't rid herself of her gut feeling that Gabe had to be connected to the thefts. Each time she'd tried to connect the dots in the case, he was the one who triggered that tingling sensation.

Beneath her, she felt her tires spin and slide to the right.

Focus, Nicola. When she peered through the windshield all she could see in the glare of her headlights was a whirling tunnel of snow. But the driveway to the church had to be close. The GPS lady was never wrong. She pressed her foot lightly against the brake. Surely that SUV would have left tracks. Any minute now she'd see the indentations in the snow. She slowed some more. But if she made a left turn without being sure, she'd end up in the ditch.

"Recalculating," her GPS system chirped.

"Damn." She'd missed the driveway, but at least she hadn't gone off the road. Not yet.

"Drive point four miles to Balfour Road."

"In your dreams," Nicola muttered as she eased her car to what she thought was the side of the road and stopped. That was when she saw the other vehicle. It was about fifteen yards ahead of her, just at the end of where her headlights reached. And it was tilting to one side in the ditch she'd been trying so hard to avoid.

Hoping that she'd left enough room for any possible travelers to get by her, she turned off the engine and then studied the other not-so-lucky car in her headlights. It was completely covered in snow, so it was impossible to figure the make or model—or even the color. It looked as if it had been abandoned. Just to make sure, she pressed the heel of her hand on her horn and gave three sharp blasts.

Nothing.

The church would be the closest refuge. She grabbed a flashlight out of her glove compartment, tucking it into the pocket of her coat. Then she turned up her collar and opened the driver's door. Fighting the wind, she climbed out.

Her first surprise was that the snow almost came up to her knees. The second was the force of the wind that pushed her back against the car. Nicola shoved her hair back and managed to get the door closed.

Reaching the church ASAP had to be her first priority. Gabe Wilder had left his headlights on, which made it easier for her to see through the darkness. Assuming that *was* Gabe Wilder's SUV, he had to be here because of the statue. And she couldn't discount the possibility that whoever had been driving that abandoned car was inside with him. If one of them was the thief, that didn't bode well for the other.

She shifted her gun from her holster to her coat pocket for easy access and moved forward.

2

HE WASN'T ALONE in the church.

Gabe had sensed that from the moment he'd found the door unlocked and the security alarm disabled. His conviction had grown steadily during the time it had taken him to walk quietly up the aisle to the side altar.

Since the storm had taken the power out, the place was as dark and cold as a crypt. The only illumination was provided by the three-tiered stand of votive lights in front of the altar. Nowadays, people didn't light real candles. Instead they donated money to purchase lights powered by lithium batteries. And they "burned" brightly enough for him to see that the statue of St. Francis was still there, enclosed in a shatterproof glass dome.

Inwardly, Gabe grinned. Turnabout was fair play. And very satisfying. The guy who'd had such smooth sailing so far must be feeling at least some of the frustration he'd been feeling for the past three months. There was no duplicate of the security system he'd created for the statue, not even a prototype out there, because he'd just invented it. It was very difficult to crack a safe or break through a security system when one had nothing to practice on.

Gabe started up the short flight of steps to the altar.

It was only as he reached the top that he saw it—the second statue sitting in the shadows at the foot of the altar. Crouching down, he examined it in the dim light, running his hands over it just to be sure. Then he welcomed the pump of adrenaline. It was a copy of the St. Francis, and that had to mean that his instincts had been right. The thief was still here.

Where?

In spite of the fact that all of his senses were now on full alert, Gabe was careful to keep the expression on his face perfectly neutral as he rose, narrowed his eyes and pretended to study the St. Francis that still stood beneath the glass dome.

The trap he'd set had worked. It was Father Mike who'd first suggested the idea that he might use the statue as bait, and the more Gabe had thought it over, the more he'd wanted to try it out. He'd called a friend at the *Denver Post,* and the resulting article in last Sunday's paper had not only highlighted the "priceless" reputation the statue had always had for answering prayers, but it had also mentioned that G. W. Securities had designed a premier alarm system for its protection. Evidently the combination of information had lured the thief into planning an attempt on the statue, just as he'd hoped.

The timing had surprised him. It was still two days until Valentine's Day, and the press as well as the law enforcement agencies had been expecting the thief to strike then. But the moment that Father Mike had called to tell him about the note, he'd sent the priest to the FBI office to update Nick Guthrie and he'd rushed up here.

Now, with the statue's help …

He mentally said a prayer, and then he just listened. There was nothing but the muted howling of the storm outside. His eyes had fully adjusted to the dim light, and he saw nothing in his peripheral vision that seemed out of place in the shadows.

His guess was that the thief had found a place to hide. His gaze went immediately to the door of the choir loft. It was open. Slipping quietly away from the altar, he moved along the side wall of the church until he reached the door.

For a moment, he paused and listened hard.

Nothing.

Then he heard it, the scrape of wood against wood, and he felt a draft of icy cold air. Pushing through the door, he ran into the room.

The blow caught him by surprise. Pain exploded in his head and icy water poured down the collar of his shirt. With stars spinning in front of his eyes, he stepped to the side and the kick aimed for his groin glanced off his thigh.

Off balance, he threw himself forward and took his opponent to the ground. They rolled across the marble floor, each struggling for an advantage. A table overturned and glass shattered. He was on the bottom when their bodies slammed into a wall.

Hands closed around his throat and cut off his air. Vision blurring, Gabe gripped his attacker's waist and bucked upward. The hands loosened around his throat, and Gabe reared up and butted heads with his opponent. Pain zinged through his skull, but it did the trick. He was suddenly free.

Scrambling up, he ran after his opponent. He would have been successful if his feet hadn't suddenly shot right out from beneath him. He fell backward, heard the crack as his head struck a counter. Then another explosion of pain blacked out everything.

NICOLA DUCKED HER HEAD and fought her way into the wind. Icy pellets stung her skin, and the boots that had been entirely appropriate for a day in the Denver office were no match for the snow that came closer to her knees as she moved forward.

Using her hand to shield her eyes, she checked on the SUV's location and adjusted her course. The headlights of the parked vehicle were all she could see now and they were helpfully aimed toward the long flight of steps that led to the front door of the church.

Everything else was totally engulfed in darkness and snow. When she reached the SUV, she leaned against it for a moment to catch her breath. Then she checked the license plate.

She felt a lot more than a tingle now. This confirmed it was Gabe Wilder's car. The plate numbers were as familiar to her as the details of the file she'd been compiling on him for nearly three months. She'd been right. From the first moment her dad had assigned her to gather research on the case, she'd been sure that Gabe had to be involved.

It wasn't just the fact that the thief was using his father's M.O., nor that Gabe's firm had handled the security for each victim. There was something about Gabe Wilder that just … fit. She knew what it was like to want desperately to follow in your father's footsteps—and to have to sometimes disguise that desire. But a person couldn't do that forever.

Just then the headlights went off. Was it one of those models where that happened automatically? Just to make sure … she felt her way along the side of the vehicle and pulled open the driver's door.

Empty.

He had to be in the church. Circling around the SUV, she pulled out her flashlight and headed toward the stairs. Finally, she was going to have a face-to-face meeting with Gabe Wilder, and she had no idea what he looked like. At least not anymore. The last time she'd seen him he'd been thirteen and she'd been ten.

As she gripped the iron railing and started up the long flight of stone steps, she let her mind return to those six months of her life when her stepmother had taken her every Saturday to the St. Francis Center. Charitable works were high on Marcia Thorne Guthrie's list.

The St. Francis Center had been located in a brick storefront building in downtown Denver. The first time she'd seen Gabe, she'd been standing in the small prayer garden that sat like a tiny oasis between the main building and a fenced in basketball court. He'd been tall with longish dark hair and scruffy jeans, and he'd had bad boy written all over him. At first he'd totally ignored her as he'd dribbled, jumped and sent the ball flying through the hoop again and again and again.

It had been Father Mike's idea for her to weed the garden while Marcia shelved donated books in the library. But she'd never gotten to the weeds. She hadn't been able to take her eyes off of Gabe Wilder.

Of course, she'd read all about his father, the notorious art thief, and how he'd died in prison. And she'd overheard her father speak about Gabe—about how hurt and angry he was. She'd known that he was at the center so that Father Mike could save him.

That's what Father Mike did—he saved bad boys. Most of the ones who came to the center shared Gabe's reputation. They came from all walks of life—some from the streets, some from the wealthiest Denver families—but as Marcia had put it: "Until they came to Father Mike, they were trouble with a capital *T."*

And that was exactly what Gabe Wilder had appeared to be. Trouble. She could see the anger and recklessness in the way he handled the ball. But she could also see a passion for the game. And it fascinated her. He fascinated her.

Suddenly he'd turned to face her. "What are you staring at?"

Nicola recalled that she'd swallowed hard and finally managed to blurt out, "You."

Bouncing the ball, he'd moved a few steps closer.

"Why?"

A part of her knew that she shouldn't even be talking to him. She should be weeding. But she hated gardening and basketball looked like it would be so much more fun.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out. "Because you're great at basketball."

He turned and sent the ball whooshing through the hoop. Then he turned back to her. "You know how to play?"

"No." Basketball was not on Marcia's list of approved activities. Painting lessons, piano, ballet —those were.

To her utter amazement and delight, he'd sent the ball twirling on the tip of his finger. "I could teach you."

"No, I—I couldn't …" She knew very well that her stepmother hadn't brought her here to play basketball with one of the center's boys. But something in his eyes was tempting her, daring her.

"Why not?" he asked.

Why not indeed? It wasn't as though her stepmother was here watching her. And she did want to play. So much.

He bounced the ball again. "Look," he'd said, impatience clear in his tone. "I got friends coming in an hour. Want to shoot a few or not? "

Nicola could still recall the tingling sensation that had streamed through her whole body as she'd raced through the garden gate and onto the court.

"Ready?" Gabe had asked.

And when she'd nodded, he'd tossed her the ball.

After that, she'd played basketball with him every Saturday morning for an hour before his friends Nash and Jonah had shown up. That was always when Father Mike had come out to call her back into the center.

When Marcia had discovered what had been going on, she hadn't been pleased. Basketball was a boys' game. But Nicola hadn't ever regretted those Saturdays. Gabe had teased her, tormented her and endlessly critiqued her game. But she'd learned. Playing basketball had been her first rebellion against the kind of woman Marcia wanted to mold her into. In an odd way, she owed Gabe Wilder, she supposed. If it hadn't been for him, she might never have found the courage to take a stand in high school and try out for the basketball team.

Who knew? If it hadn't been for Gabe, she might not have rebelled against Marcia's and her father's wishes even further and become an FBI agent.

Having finally reached the top of the church steps, Nicola stepped into a portico that partially shielded her from the force of the wind. She hadn't seen Gabe Wilder for more than fifteen years —in spite of the fact that her last act on leaving the St. Francis Center for Boys had been to say a quick prayer to St. Francis that she would.

Some prayers went unanswered, and some bad boys couldn't be saved.

She'd just reached the door of the church when she heard it. A crash? It was muffled by the wind, but Nicola was certain she'd heard something. Glass shattering? She recalled the picture in the *Denver Post* of the statue of St. Francis standing in its supposedly shatter-proof glass dome.

As she pulled out her gun, she ran her flashlight over the door and saw that it stood ajar. After slipping through the narrow opening, she paused again. There was illumination that wasn't coming from her flashlight. Candles. She spotted the blur of light at the front of the church to her left.

She'd barely taken two steps up the center aisle when she heard another noise. This time there was no doubt about it—glass shattering.

After pocketing her flashlight, Nicola raised her gun and raced forward. As she neared the front of the church, she thought she spotted movement near those candles on the side altar. Then she saw it—a shadowy silhouette standing in front of the altar, its hands outstretched.

"Stop." She gripped her gun with both hands as she cut around the front row of pews. "FBI. Raise your hands."

A body rammed into her and she fell, landing backside first on the floor, then sliding into the first row of pews. Her head cracked against the wood and for a second, all she saw was stars.

"Stop." She scrambled to her feet and raced down the aisle after the fleeing shadow. Without breaking stride, she raised her gun again and steadied it with her other hand. "Stop or I'll shoot."

He kept on running.

She fired her weapon just as the darkness swallowed the shadow. Sprinting after him, she reached the front door of the church just in time to hear the motor of the SUV rev up. Then it lurched forward.

She ran out onto the front steps. As the wind whipped her breath away, she gripped her gun in both hands and took aim, but the tail lights dimmed as the vehicle gained speed. Then even those vanished into the falling snow.

A mix of anger and disappointment welled inside of her as she lowered her weapon. More than anything, she wanted to fight her way back to her car. But there was no way she could give chase. Not in this kind of weather. Even in that SUV, Gabe Wilder would be a lucky man if he could drive down off the mountain without spinning into a ditch.

But at least this time, she had proof that he'd been at the scene of the crime. He was connected to the thefts all right. She had to fill her father in. Pulling out her cell phone, she glanced at the time. Nine-fifteen—barely ten minutes since she'd left her car.

And the signal was dead. She looked back at the open door of the church. Hopefully, there was a landline inside. Wilder might deny being here, but she'd have more than a gut feeling when she talked to her father this time, and he'd have to listen to her.

And Gabe Wilder would have some explaining to do. She'd identified herself as FBI and he hadn't stopped.

Suddenly, Nicola frowned. Of course, she could only accuse Gabe Wilder of leaving a crime scene *if* there'd been a crime.

Hunching her head against the wind, she fought her way back to the open church door. Once inside, she pulled it shut, locked it and reholstered her gun.

She located a light switch, but nothing came on when she flipped it. Not surprising. The storm must have knocked out the power lines. That had to be why it was so cold. The moment she turned her flashlight on, she could see her breath in the frigid air.

She hurried toward the side altar. The statue of St. Francis was still there, standing on the narrow altar completely enclosed in a glass case just as it had appeared in the photo. So that hadn't been what she'd heard breaking.

Then she felt it—a prickling at the back of her neck telling her that she was not alone in the church. Pulling out her gun, she turned, listening hard as she scanned the shadowy darkness behind her. But Gabe Wilder couldn't have come back. Not this fast. And she'd locked the door.

Keeping her gun at the ready, she ran the beam of her flashlight over the floor. No sign of broken glass. It wasn't until she climbed to the top step of the altar that she spotted the second statue, and her heart skipped a beat.

After setting her gun and her flashlight down, she lifted it and set it on the altar. Then she picked up her weapon and ran the beam of light over both statues. They seemed to match perfectly. Both carved in beautiful Italian marble. The would-be thief had brought along an excellent forgery, but instinct had her gaze returning to the one under the glass dome. She was betting that one was the real deal. Though she hadn't seen it in over fifteen years, there was the same look on its face, the one that lured you into trusting.

Nicola gathered her thoughts. She still hadn't found any broken glass—or any explanation for the sounds she'd heard when she'd first entered the church. Turning away from the statue, she raised her gun, and moved away from the altar. No sign of glass anywhere. A brief fan of her flashlight showed a door along the side wall.

She moved toward it. The cold blast of air hit her just as she spotted the boots. Work boots, well worn on the soles and scuffed on the toes. As she stepped into the room, her flashlight caught the rest of him, and her stomach knotted. The man was sprawled full-length on the hard marble floor.

And he wasn't moving.

3

AS SHE DROPPED to her knees next to the man, Nicola absorbed other details. His legs were long and clad in black jeans. She noted the narrow waist, broad chest and shoulders. He wore a black T-shirt and an open Paul Bunyan-style plaid flannel shirt. It was rolled halfway up muscular forearms.

His face was cast in shadow. But the beam of her flashlight caught pale skin, dark hair, a strong nose and chin, a slash of cheekbones.

Recognition flickered at the edge of her mind, then faded when she saw the nasty-looking gash on the side of his forehead. Blood had already pooled on the marble floor beneath his head.

Nicola's stomach knotted again. His skin was too pale, his body too still. Setting down her gun, she balanced her flashlight to point upward. Then she slipped her hand beneath the collar of the plaid shirt and felt for a pulse.

She found one.

As it pushed strong and steady against her fingers, she let out a breath she hadn't even known she was holding. Whoever he was, he was still alive. And someone had worked hard to bring him down. The man was big. But his skin was cold and clammy.

And wet. So was his shirt. So were her slacks, for that matter. Then she noted for the first time the shards of broken glass and the flowers—a spray of red roses that lay strewn across the marble floor. The blood that had pooled around his head and shoulders was mixed with water from the broken vase.

Who was he? A janitor? The driver of that other car? Had he surprised Gabe Wilder when he was trying to steal the statue? But now wasn't the time to deal with any of those questions. When she glanced at him again, she once more felt a flicker of recognition, but she couldn't quite remember.

His cut needed attention. And if she didn't want him to go into shock, she was going to have to find a way to keep him warm.

Nicola took off her coat and tucked it as best she could around the unconscious man. It barely reached his knees. She slipped out of her suit jacket and pulled her silk T-shirt over her head. Folding it carefully into a square, she pressed it to the cut on the side of his forehead.

Finally, she placed her free hand on the side of his face and leaned closer. "Hey, can you hear me?"

No response.

She patted her palm firmly against his cheek. "You're going to be all right."

At least she was praying he would be.

Reaching for his hand, she drew it onto his chest and covered it with her own. Not an easy job. His palm was much larger than hers, his fingers long. They might have belonged to an artist, a pianist perhaps, except the backs of those long fingers were callused.

And they were cold. So was she. The draft of air she'd felt when she'd first entered the room was growing more frigid by the second. Glancing around, she spotted the open window and scrambled up to close it. Then she returned to her knees beside the injured man and took his hand again. Squeezing his fingers, she raised her voice. "Can you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered. She noticed for the first time how dark his lashes were, how long.

"Come on. Open your eyes."

He did. For an instant, as his gaze locked on hers, the punch of awareness and the flare of heat in her belly stole her breath away.

She'd seen this man before. He'd been in her father's office on the day after Thanksgiving. And he'd had the same effect on her then. Even through a glass wall, even at a distance of twenty-five feet, she'd felt the impact of his gaze like a punch. He'd made her lose track of everything.

"Cur …?"

The sound was little more than a gasp. *Cur?* It made no sense to Nicola. But it allowed her to shove the memory away and focus her attention on the injured man. She drew in a breath and felt her lungs burn.

"Head … hurts …" His fingers linked with hers and tightened.

This time when she met his eyes, she checked to see whether or not they were dilated. They weren't. Even in the dim light from her flashlight, she could distinguish clearly between the pinpoint of black at the center and the cloudy gray of his irises.

Then his lids drifted shut.

"Does it hurt anywhere else?" she asked. She had to find that out. And it was much safer to concentrate on that task than on what she'd just felt. Or what she'd felt that day in the FBI office.

But in the three months since it had happened, she hadn't been able to rid her mind of the memory. From the moment she'd walked into the office she'd been aware of him, but it hadn't been until his eyes had met hers that he'd registered fully on her senses.

And he'd registered *fully* all right. She was sure the impact might have been caught on a Richter scale—if there'd been one handy. Part of what she was feeling, she'd recognized—that tingling sensation that always told her something was just … somehow right.

But it had made no sense and it had never before made her feel as if the ground were dissolving beneath her feet. Not that she'd been able to feel her feet. All she could feel was him. And she'd wanted to feel more of him. Heat, glorious waves of it, had washed through her system. Every cell in her body had melted and yearned.

And when he'd risen to his feet in one fluid movement and taken a step toward her, she'd nearly run to him. Right through glass walls like some kind of superhero. The impulse had been so baffling, so totally insane, so verging on the irresistible that she'd finally found the strength to drag her gaze away from him.

And she couldn't, she wouldn't let him affect her that way again. Closing her eyes, she pulled in air, felt the burn in her lungs and then exhaled, and breathed in again.

Mental list time. When she opened her eyes, she checked the cut first and saw that the bleeding was slowing. After replacing the square of cloth, she slipped her fingers behind his head to check the back. The instant she touched the bump, he winced and made a sound.

So he'd suffered a double whammy to his head. No wonder he was woozy. Shifting her coat aside, she ran her hands on a quick journey from the back of his neck, down his arms. When he neither winced nor yelped again, she drew her palms from his shoulders to his waist, then from his hips down those long, long legs. The man was one solid wall of muscle.

And she still wanted him. There was no mistaking the heat that had flared to life deep inside of her as she'd run her hands over him. No controlling it, either. She knew what she was feeling. She wasn't stupid, so she'd pegged it the first time she'd seen him. Lust. Pure and simple. And incredibly intense.

Whoever believed that lightning couldn't strike twice was dead wrong. But wherever the lust had come from, it could just go back there. She had a job to do—a possible thief fleeing down a mountain, an injured man who was sliding into shock and two statues of St. Francis. Her plate was currently full.

She glanced down to where her hands still rested on his ankles. First step—she had to stop touching him. Releasing her grip, she was about to get to her feet when a sudden thought occurred to her. When she'd patted him down, she hadn't felt a wallet. But she checked his pockets just to make sure. She located a cell phone, but nothing else.

Had Gabe Wilder taken this man's wallet? Why?

She glanced back at his face. His eyes were closed now, and he looked even paler. She had questions, but he was in no condition to answer.

Fishing in her coat pocket, she located her cell and tried again.

Nothing.

Then she stared at the time. Nearly nine-thirty. Rising, she glanced around the small room and spotted the landline on a counter. There was no dial tone when she lifted the receiver. Even if she'd been able to call 911, it would take help some time to arrive. So she was on her own.

Grabbing some candles she found next to the phone, she lit them. Then she located a pile of linen towels and mopped up the water around his head and shoulders. Finally, she dropped to her knees and took his hand again. It was so cold. "It's all right," she murmured. "You're going to be all right." As if to reassure herself of that, she lifted her square of T-shirt again and checked the cut. It was clean and not very deep. "You probably won't need stitches, and the bleeding has nearly stopped."

And she doubted he heard a word she was saying. But when she tried to pull her hand away, his grip tightened again—as if she were his lifeline.

"Statue …" he murmured.

"It's still here," she said.

"Both …?"

"They're both here." Curious about how much he'd seen, she leaned closer. "What happened?"

He didn't answer her this time, and a second later his hand went limp in hers. She felt the instant surge of panic and shoved it down. The steady rise and fall of his chest beneath their joined hands assured her that he was still with her.

For the moment.

"It's going to be all right. It's going to be all right." And it was. It had to be. Step number one was to get him warm.

Shivering, she slipped back into the jacket she'd discarded earlier and buttoned it up; then she tucked her coat around him again. There had to be something in the closet that she could use to keep him warm.

Behind the first door she opened, she found choir robes hanging on hooks. Though they were a different color, they reminded her of the robe that St. Francis wore in the sculpture. She thought of the statue's special prayer-answering powers. In spite of the fact that she'd tried praying to him once before without much success, she decided to give him a second chance.

"Help me keep him safe and well until I can get him medical attention," she murmured. Then she started pulling robes off their hangers.

GABE STRUGGLED TO FIND his way to the surface again. He'd done it once, hadn't he? Or had he just dreamed that he'd seen Curls leaning over him?

Focus.

His thoughts were spinning like little whirlpools—just out of reach. There was something important, something he needed to take care of. The statue … the effort it took to remember had pain stabbing his head again.

Okay. For a moment, he gave up, letting himself drift. And he saw her again.

Curls.

The moment her image took shape in his mind, his headache eased, and the memory slid into place. He let himself drift with it. He'd been at the St. Francis Center shooting baskets, and he'd sensed someone watching him. Not his friends, Nash and Jonah, who never made it to the center until noon. And sure enough, there she'd stood in the small garden beside the basketball court, her hands wrapped around the narrow poles in the wrought-iron fence. She'd looked like a prisoner. Perhaps that's what had appealed to him, what had triggered a sense in him that they were kindred spirits.

Because at that time, he'd felt like a prisoner, too, trapped in promises that he wasn't sure he wanted to keep. He'd stood beside his mother's bed holding his father's hand as they'd both sworn their vows. He'd promised to never follow in his father's footsteps, and his father had promised to give up his lifelong profession.

But the promise hadn't done his father much good. Raphael Wilder had been falsely accused and convicted, and he'd died shortly after in prison.

So why should he bother to keep his promise? That was the question he'd been asking himself as he'd lunged, dribbled and shot basket after basket. And all the time she'd watched him. When he'd finally wheeled to confront her, it had been her eyes that had captured him.

He'd seen admiration and hero worship in them. Those had been balm to the raw, angry feelings of a thirteen-year-old who'd been newly orphaned.

So he'd taught her what he'd known about the game, and no teacher could have dreamed of a more responsive student.

The memory blurred for a moment. That wasn't what he should be thinking about. There was something else. Something important. Urgent. When he reached for it, pain pierced like a fiery arrow.

Curls.

This time when the image surfaced, it wasn't the child who had enchanted him, saved him when he was thirteen, but the woman who had gripped his hand and said that everything would be all right.

And it would be. He let out the breath he'd been holding and slipped under again.

TO PREVENT HER TEETH from chattering, Nicola clamped them together as she dragged the last choir robes out of the closet and added them to the pile at the injured man's feet. Thank heavens there'd been a generous supply. And they were heavy.

In spite of her efforts to keep her mind on the task at hand, she couldn't prevent herself from thinking about her reaction to the man. At twenty-six, she was no stranger to desire or lust. She'd had her moments and thoroughly enjoyed them. But those feelings had never flared quite so quickly or intensely before.

And she didn't seem to have any control over them. Each time she'd added to the pile of robes, she hadn't been able to prevent herself from looking at him. And each time she did, she felt that catch of her breath, that flare of heat.

There was no logic to it. There hadn't been from the beginning.

He was a stranger. But her heart was pounding. And in spite of her determination, her mind kept spinning back to those moments in her office and just minutes ago when he'd looked into her eyes and her thoughts had clicked off just as completely as if someone had thrown a switch.

Dropping the last robe on the pile, she drew in a deep breath. *Mental list time again.* She knelt down to check her patient. His pulse was steady, the bleeding on his forehead had stopped, but she knew he had to be very cold. She certainly was. Even with the window shut, the room felt like a deep freeze. Her feet had gone numb and she'd begun to shiver.

She had to get him out of the clothes that had been drenched by the vase of water. The Paul Bunyan shirt was easy enough. Placing his arms over his head, she tugged on the sleeves. Once they were off, she finessed the rest of the shirt from under him.

His T-shirt presented more of a problem, but it had to go. In the flickering light, she could see the wet stain covered his shoulders and ran in streaks nearly to his waist. She began by tugging the material free from the waistband of his jeans. But the moment the backs of her fingers brushed against his bare skin, she knew she was in trouble, and it deepened steadily as she eased the shirt up, uncovering the narrow waist, the broad chest.

Keep your eyes on the shirt. On his face. But not on his mouth. That was a definite danger zone.

By the time she'd pushed the T-shirt up to his armpits, Nicola was aware of two things. She had some control over her eyes, but none over what she was feeling as her fingers brushed against that smooth skin stretched taut over rock-hard muscles. The little flame of lust this man had ignited in her was being fanned brighter and stronger with each contact.

She kept her eyes steady on his face, on the dark slash of brows, the shadow of a beard on that strong angled chin as she moved behind him. But her mind wandered, wondered. So far the touching had been purely clinical. Almost. And one-sided. Definitely. Still, her throat had gone dry and her

pulse was racing. What would happen if she ran her hands over him with the intent of arousing him, pleasuring him? And what if he touched her back?

Whoa.

Just thinking about it stopped her teeth from chattering and made her heart pound so loudly that she was amazed the noise didn't wake him up. She carefully maneuvered the T-shirt off one arm, then the other before she eased it carefully around the wound on his forehead.

Then her gaze slid to where it had wanted to be from the beginning. She sat back on her heels and simply stared, letting her eyes feast on what her hands had already gotten more than a hint of. The muscles in his shoulders and upper arms were well-defined; his chest was broad with a triangle of thick black hair that tapered down over equally defined abs. The man was built like a Greek god. She could imagine him in bronze or sculpted in marble.

She shivered then and shook her head. She had to get a grip. He wasn't a god. He was a man who might be in shock, who was in danger of slipping into hypothermia.

Moving quickly, she grabbed one of the robes, opened it up and tucked it along the length of him from shoulders to boots on one side. Then she did the same on the other side. A part of him would still be lying on the cold marble, but there was no way she was going to be able to roll him over.

The man was so tall she had to use two of the shorter robes to fully cover him. After she'd arranged them, she leaned down and patted his cheek again.

"It's going to be all right," she said.

His lashes fluttered. "C … c … old."

"I know. You'll be warm soon. I promise."

How soon? That was the crucial question. There were only two robes left. She'd had some idea of using them for herself.

She glanced at her coat. It was damp on the outside. And she was going to have to get out of her wet slacks and boots.

And then what?

Nicola very carefully avoided looking at the man. Because the answer was obvious. And it had been there lurking in the back of her mind ever since she'd started undressing him.

She was an FBI agent. She'd been trained in survival tactics, and the quickest, most efficient way to keep both of them warm—for the time being—was to share everything. Including body heat.

And the only reason she was stalling was because of the effect this man—this complete stranger—had on her senses. Annoyed—no, angry at herself, Nicola arranged the last two robes. They were both adults. And she was the only fully conscious one. What was her problem?

She tugged off her boots. If he tried anything, she could handle herself. Shrugging out of her holster, she placed it next to her gun and the flashlight.

But what if you *try something?*

"Not happening," Nicola muttered as she wiggled out of her wet trousers. A little fantasizing, a little lust. She could handle it.

But she didn't look at him as she joined him beneath the pile of robes.

Every muscle in her body tensed when his arm snaked around her and pulled her close. Suddenly she was wrapped around him as intimately as a lover—her thigh across his, her head nestled into the crook of his shoulder. She might have objected if she hadn't felt a blast of warmth at each and every contact point.

Or if he'd moved another muscle.

But he didn't.

She waited, counting the seconds … five … ten … fifteen … twenty.

But the only thing that moved was the rise and fall of his chest beneath her palm. Still, she kept her eyes open, her mind alert as the seconds stretched into minutes.

But he lay there, still as a stone. And all the while the warmth spread, slowly, deliciously until she was certain she could feel it penetrate her muscles and even her bones. The instant she could feel her toes again and wiggle them, she considered moving. It would be the prudent thing to do.

And she'd always figured herself for a practical kind of woman.

He was warm now. She could feel the heat of his skin beneath her palm and along her stomach where her jacket had pulled open. It was probably safe to move away. It was probably safer to move away.

The yawn took her by surprise. Even more surprising was the realization that at some point she'd relaxed fully against him. And she didn't want to move.

Not the most practical decision. She'd reconsider it in a minute. Just one more minute …

4

GABE SURFACED QUICKLY this time and began to orient himself. There was still pain thrumming at the back of his head and near his temple.

The fight.

The details were there, but he pushed them away for now, along with the pain. Both were secondary.

Primary was the flood of sensations storming through his system because of the woman. He was surrounded by them, trapped by them. The pressure of each one of the fingers splayed across his chest might have been a brand. The leg she'd thrown across him imprisoned his thighs and ignited an almost uncontrollable fire in his loins. His whole body was aroused, throbbing.

Who?

Opening his eyes, he shifted slowly until their positions were reversed. Her head lay in the crook of his arm, and it was his leg that held her prisoner now. Even as her eyelashes fluttered and then stilled, recognition streamed through him.

Nicola Guthrie.

What the hell was she doing here? He gave his head a shake, hoping to clear the fog. Pain stabbed. He shut his eyes against it and gritted his teeth as he willed details into place.

He remembered Father Mike's phone call about the note, the long drive through the storm. He'd arrived at the church, hoping to surprise the thief. Instead, he'd been the one surprised. He recalled the open window that had lured him into the choir room and the blow to his head. But it hadn't taken him out. He'd managed that on his own. The last thing he could dredge up was his feet flying out from beneath him. That's when the fireworks had exploded in his brain.

Moving more carefully this time, he glanced around the room. A flashlight and candles provided the only illumination. That and the howling of the wind outside told him that the storm hadn't let up. He should get up and check on the statue. But he was confident that his new alarm system had held, and his prayers to St. Francis had worked.

This time.

He glanced back down at Nicola. None of what he remembered explained why FBI special agent Nicola Guthrie was here, lying beneath him on the floor of the choir room.

Except.

He frowned as the image slipped into focus—her face filling his vision, her voice telling him everything would be all right. Assuring him that both statues were still here. He thought he'd been dreaming. Just as he'd dreamed of her too often in the past three months.

Because he'd known from the first instant he'd seen her in the FBI office that Nicola Guthrie spelled trouble for him with capital letters. When she'd met his eyes in that brief instant of contact, he'd felt everything else slip away until there'd only been her. The wanting had started that instant, and he hadn't been able to shake free of it.

So he'd avoided her like the plague for nearly three months. Although he'd consulted on the case, he'd never once set foot in the FBI office. Nick Guthrie was a good friend, one he owed. One he intended to keep. And the flare of hot, primitive desire he'd felt in that one meeting of glances with Nicola was the last thing he wanted to feel for a friend's daughter. Getting involved with her meant complications, and where women were concerned, he liked to keep his relationships simple. He'd even managed to avoid her during the past few weeks when she'd started tailing him during the evening hours. He had a pretty good idea why. Nick Guthrie might be convinced that he'd had nothing to do with the robberies. But it was a more than good bet that someone at G. W. Securities was up to his or her neck in them. So Guthrie had assigned Nicola to follow him—just to cover all his bases.

Gabe was fine with that. What he wasn't fine with was that having her on his tail had only increased the number of times she'd slipped into his thoughts each day—especially when he'd been working here at the church on the security for the statue.

He couldn't keep her out of his mind. That scared him. It ticked him off. It also fascinated him. No one, nothing had ever pulled at him the way she did.

And she was doing it again now. Without even trying. She was asleep, totally unaware of him. Like Sleeping Beauty, blissfully ignorant of the effect she was having on him. He should get up, move. But he couldn't seem to make his body obey.

Baffled, he studied her in the dim light, taking in the creamy porcelain skin, the sprinkling of freckles. Before he could prevent himself he brushed a strand of hair off of her cheek and behind her ear. At that simple contact of skin against skin, desire shot through him, a rusty claw in his gut.

He'd spent nearly three months being prudent and safe. Perhaps it was time to try a different tack.

One taste. That's what he told himself as he leaned closer and began to tease her lips apart with his. One taste. He rubbed his mouth softly over hers, then unable to stop himself, he sank in.

Her lips were soft. He'd imagined they would be. And warm. He'd expected that also. But when he finally slipped his tongue between them, he found a surprising mix of flavors. Cool and hot, sweet and pungent. Each flavor drew him, tempted him to taste and taste again.

She began to tremble. That, more than her flavors, undermined his resolve and he plunged in to take the kiss deeper.

IT WAS LIKE WAKING UP in the heart of a firestorm. One minute she'd been fast asleep, and the next, every nerve in her body was alive, burning, yearning. Before she could think, she wrapped her arms and legs around him and held on.

His mouth was so hot and nearly savage. The press of his body against hers vibrated through her right down to her bones. And the feelings he aroused in her were so vivid. So new. Desire had never been this sharp. Hunger had never gone this deep. Need had never been this demanding.

In some far corner of her brain where rationality hadn't been burned to cinders, she heard a voice telling her she had to think. The practical Nicola. But how could she pay any heed when her pulse was pounding in her head and his taste, ripe and rich, was pouring through her like a drug?

She wanted more. She had to have more. When he slipped a hand beneath her jacket and slid it up her bare skin to cover her breast, she arched, determined to get even closer to that hard, rangy body. Oh, yes, she had to have more. A sound, something primitive, clawed its way out of her throat.

As if in answer, he used his teeth, scraping them along her bottom lip before he moved his mouth to her neck. With sensations hammering through her system, she heard the practical voice again. This couldn't be right, shouldn't be right. But every nerve in her body tingled with the conviction blossoming inside of her that it was. Exactly right.

Stop. The word had become a chant in his head, but Gabe's body ignored the order. She was all wild flavors and silken textures, and she was driving him crazy. Wherever he touched or tasted, she responded with a huge unreserved pleasure that fascinated him. Captured him.

He'd thought about what it would be like ever since that first meeting of eyes. But any fantasies he'd entertained fell far short of reality. He hadn't wanted her to stir up this kind of primitive need. But hadn't he known she would? He slid his hands down to her hips, and when she arched up and tightened her legs around him, the only thing that kept him from taking what he was craving was that he was still wearing his jeans. His fingers were struggling with the snap when he recalled how he'd started this, kissing her when she was still asleep. He'd taken her this far without an invitation. Stealing a kiss without asking was one thing, but he wanted more.

He drew his head up then and brought her face into focus. She was awake now. He could see himself in those chocolate-colored eyes. She held him just as surely there as she did with her arms and legs. A warning bell sounded, but it was distant.

"You stopped," she said.

Her voice might have been a throaty murmur, but there was a note of accusation in the tone.

"Paused," he corrected. "And I won't stop if I kiss you again," he stated. "I wanted to make sure you were on board with that."

For a moment she said nothing. But she didn't move.

Neither did he.

In his mind, he might intend to play the gentleman, but his body hadn't gotten the memo. He was very much aware that they were pressed closely together, center to center, heat to heat, with nothing more than denim and her panties separating them. His body throbbed at every point a pulse could beat.

He rocked into her, saw the heat flare in her eyes, felt the shudder move through her body. One thread of whatever control he had left snapped.

"It would be a mistake." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"We're on the same page there." It would be a huge mistake. Hadn't he given himself that lecture countless times? But he'd also known that this moment was coming, that as hard as he might try, he wouldn't be able to prevent it from happening.

He ran his mouth along her jaw, then nipped at her chin. "What do you say?"

Say? She wasn't at all sure that she could form a word. But even as she desperately reached for one, she wrapped her arms and legs more tightly around him. The heat, the glorious blast of it was so intense, she felt as if she'd been caught in a sudden back draft of flames. There was pleasure pulsing through her in an endless stream until it was all she could feel. He was all she could feel.

And he felt so right. She was very aware of the hardness of the floor beneath her. His body was even harder and so hot that she wanted nothing more than to melt into him. She caught herself before she arched against him again. If she did, she might climax. She could feel it almost within reach.

"I should thinks …"

Had she said the words aloud? She must have because he drew back enough to meet her eyes, and there was a question in his. There was also a glint of something dark and reckless that ignited that familiar tingle deep within her. Her practical side might want to worry about mistakes and consequences, but something much closer to the bone ruled. Some mistakes were worth making.

"I want you so much," she said.

He kissed her then, and she felt that wonderful heat began to build inside of her again. She knew what happened when you played with fire. But she wanted the flash point. And she wanted it now. She tightened her legs around him and arched again.

He immediately gripped her hips and stilled her movements. Then he lifted his head.

She tried to move and couldn't. "You said the next time you kissed me you wouldn't stop."

"Protection." His voice was hoarse. "I don't—"

"We're good." She dragged his mouth back to hers and nipped his bottom lip.

"We're about to get even better," he promised. "But first, we have to get rid of the clothes."

"Oh … right." But she kept her mouth on his the whole time his hands slid between them to push down his jeans. Her clothes weren't an issue. He pushed the thin lace of her panties aside and slid a finger into her. "Now, come for me."

He gave her no choice. The climax that had been threatening erupted through her in wave after wave, each one sharper than the last. Helpless, she gave herself over to it and to the man who was giving it to her.

Her body was still quaking from the last ripple when he drew his finger out and pressed the head of his penis against the slick heat of her core. He wanted to go slowly, but her response, her surrender, were so much more than he'd imagined. How much further could she take him? Raising his head, he said, "Look at me."

She opened her eyes, and he watched them go wide and blurry as he thrust into her in one stroke. She was hotter and tighter than he'd expected. The feel of her muscles trembling and tugging urged him to go deeper. Hooking his arms around her legs, he lifted them so that he could push even more fully into her.

Her eyes went dark, then blind with pleasure. And for a moment he was sure his own did the same. He couldn't think of anything but the mating of their bodies. He couldn't even move. All he could do was sink farther and farther into her. The thought of withdrawing even a little, even to push into her again—he couldn't do it. This was where he wanted to stay. Where he belonged.

But as she continued to contract around him, the pulse of his own release tore through him. He tried to hold back, to hold her, to hold them both where they were right now. But as another climax radiated through her in little convulsions, his own pleasure overcame him, consuming him and finally overpowering him completely.

5

REALITY TRICKLED IN slowly. Nicola heard the sound of breathing, slightly ragged, but she couldn't tell if it was him or her. She could smell the faint tang of incense, and him—soap and water and something that was very male. She was still wrapped around him.

And he was still inside of her.

Without any hesitation, she grasped him, let go, then grasped him again.

"Ready?" He whispered the question in her ear even as she felt him grow harder inside of her.

"Mmm."

He gripped her hips and eased her into a rhythm.

Pleasure shot through her, but she managed to raise her head, just enough to meet his eyes. "I'm not … not usually. I don't understand … It's you."

"Or you," he countered as his fingers dug into her hips and he abruptly increased the speed of his thrusts.

Then it didn't matter, not with his heart pounding against hers, beat to beat. Not with pleasure pummeling through her again and again with each thrust. She couldn't think, didn't want to. Not while she could take this wild ride to that place where there were only the two of them and only the intense pleasure that they could bring each other.

He cried out first as he drove into her one last time and the world around them shattered.

GABE WOKE TO FIND Nicola still sprawled on top of him. The steady sound of her breath going in and out signaled that she was asleep. And he could no longer hear the sound of the wind outside. In its place, he caught the closer clank of a radiator heating up, so the power and the furnace were back on.

Opening his eyes, he lay perfectly still, taking a moment to orient himself. The light overhead was also on. He lifted his arm to glance at his watch. After midnight. So roughly three hours had passed since he'd arrived at the church. When he turned his head, pain poked at his forehead, but it was manageable. The back of his head throbbed a bit, but his memory of what had happened was crystal clear. He hadn't caught the thief.

Instead, he'd caught Nicola Guthrie. Ready or not. He shifted his gaze to the top of her head. Her scent reminded him of spring flowers. And she felt right lying on top of him. The fact that he didn't want to move might have worried him, but his more immediate concern was that he was still inside of her. So there was a definite part of him that did want to move.

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