Medical Romance™

SHARON ARCHER

The Man Behind the Badge

Sharon Archer

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About the Author

Born in New Zealand, **SHARON ARCHER** now lives in County Victoria, Australia, with her husband Glenn, one lame horse and five pensionable hens. Always an avid reader, she discovered Mills & Boon as a teenager through Lucy Walker's fabulous Outback Australia stories. Now she lives in a gorgeous bush setting, and loves the native fauna that visits regularly… Well, maybe not the possum which coughs outside the bedroom window in the middle of the night.

The move to acreage brought a keen interest in bushfire management (she runs the fireguard group in her area), as well as free time to dabble in woodwork, genealogy (her advice is…don't get her started!), horse-riding and motorcycling—as a pillion or in charge of the handlebars.

Free time turned into words on paper! And the dream to be a writer gathered momentum. With her background in a medical laboratory, what better line to write for than Mills & Boon® Medical™ Romance?

My thanks to lovely friends Anna Campbell and Nikki Logan, and especially Rachel Bailey, for listening and for the chance to bounce around ideas.

And always my thanks to Glenn!

CHAPTER ONE

TOM JAMIESON reached into the cabin of his four-wheel drive and slotted the handpiece of the police radio back into its cradle. He straightened, stripped off the yellow reflective safety vest and tossed it on the passenger's seat. The perspiration that had made his black T-shirt cling had begun to cool. Flexing his tired shoulders, he ran a hand over his face and felt the stubble rasp across his palm. It had been a long day and a longer evening but, for all the frustration, it had been oddly satisfying.

He smiled wryly as he listened to frogs croaking in a distant chorus. His city colleagues wouldn't believe the action that made up his average working tasks these days.

He breathed in a deep lungful of fragrant eucalyptus, the clean tangy oils still heavy in the air after a hot day. In the nearby trees, a lone magpie chortled, its diurnal senses confused by the brightness of the full moon. The gentle night sounds and scents gathered around him like a cloak of serenity.

Coming back to Dustin had been the right choice for him.

In the paddock beside him, a dozen bovine silhouettes munched contentedly on the pasture in their temporary new home. Moonlight gleamed off the black hides of the now-sedate Angus yearlings. A far cry from the fractious cavorters that had led him and his helpers on an hour-long chase along the roadside.

He shifted, reaching for the vehicle door. Time to go home,

get out of clothes that carried the aroma of cowpats and get clean. His stomach growled.

Shower. Food. Sleep. In that order.

A set of approaching headlights stabbed the night to form a weird hazy glow in a patch of low-lying mist. Tom glanced at the clock on the dashboard. Nearly one in the morning. An odd time to be travelling into Dustin on a Sunday night. He watched with reluctant curiosity as the car drew nearer.

A few seconds later, he recognised the shape of the small car. He frowned as his heart thumped hard.

Kayla Morgan.

Dustin's new doctor.

And currently the woman he fancied more than common sense dictated—especially given that she barely acknowledged his existence.

As the car zipped across the end of the side road where he was parked, Kayla's pale face was illuminated briefly in the side window. She glanced his way and for a second her eyes seemed to look right at him. His hand lifted in an automatic salute even though he doubted that she'd looked long enough to see him let alone identify him. Pretty much par for the course with their social interaction to date. He huffed out a self-mocking snort.

He, on the other hand, noticed every minuscule detail about her. From the top of her honey-blonde head to the cheeky pink-tinted toenails that peeped out of the sandals she'd worn to the hospital barbecue when she'd first arrived in town two months

ago. Even her eye colour…he'd never been fanciful about eye colour. Irises were blue, brown, green, hazel—standard cop's vocabulary. But not when it came to Kayla. Nope. She looked straight through him with eyes the colour of polished pewter.

She made him want things more in keeping with the old Tom Jamieson. The live-hard, play-hard party animal. The man he'd been before a bullet had stopped him in his tracks a little over two years ago. His near-death experience, the time in hospital and then the months of rehabilitation afterwards had forced him to reassess his priorities. Made him realise he wanted to go home to his roots, build his future there.

Start a family.

To do that he needed a wife and he knew what he was looking for. A down-to-earth woman, someone loving and generous. Someone with a sense of humour.

Not someone like Kayla. She was a city girl through and through. Polished perfection, dressed to the nines, designer labels, never a hair out of place. Positively stingy with her smiles.

Cool, reserved, fastidious.

For all that his brain knew what he *needed,* his body *wanted* otherwise. Kayla made him want to howl, beat his chest, risk potential frostbite to get close to her. He didn't much like this glimpse of his old self. That harder, hungrier, edgier man who wanted nothing more than to get Kayla Morgan into his bed… even when she flicked her unusual silver eyes over him as though he was invisible.

He frowned as he yanked open the car door and slid behind the wheel. What the hell was she doing in Dustin anyway, besides upsetting his equilibrium? He knew the short answer. She was working at the hospital and ultimately filling in as a medical locum for Liz Campbell's maternity leave.

But what had made her want to come all the way out here, to his country town, when she so obviously didn't belong?

And now she was returning after another weekend in the big smoke. Had she been getting a fix of civilisation, something to sustain her for her sentence in rural purgatory? Or did she have a man tucked away down there?

Someone happy to have a long-distance relationship with her?

Someone as controlled and contained as she was?

An image leapt into his mind. Male hands other than his touching her, sliding over that perfect, creamy skin. He cursed under his breath.

Jaw set tight, he slammed the vehicle door. The fangs of unrequited lust sank deep. He was slowly going crazy.

After clipping the seat belt, he reached for the ignition key.

An unholy shriek of brakes sliced through the air, the brutal noise cutting off the gentle murmurs of the mellow night. For a split second, Tom froze. Then, pulse rocketing, he jerked his head towards the sound. In the distance, a strange light show played erratically across the vegetation. Yellow beams dipped and spun like out-of-control searchlights. A moment later, everything stopped with a sickening crunch of metal.

Kayla!

A shaft of icy dread pierced his gut. With a quick, hard rev of the engine, he accelerated down the short stretch of gravel road to the intersection and spun the steering-wheel in the direction of the now stationary lights. His vehicle leapt forward as the tyres gripped the sealed road.

God, what would he find? The thought of that feminine perfection injured—or worse—appalled him.

His low beam cut through the thickening wisps of pale fog. The small jelly-bean-pink car was sitting diagonally across the middle of the road. It looked whole but perhaps the damage was on the other side.

On the driver's side.

He was still too far away to see clearly inside the vehicle, to see if there was any movement. He leaned forward over his steering-wheel, as though that would somehow help his vision.

A moment later, her car moved, headlights swinging around in a U-turn.

He swallowed, shaken by an abrupt wash of relief that left his joints momentarily water weak.

Kayla was all right, the car was whole.

Her headlights kept moving and for the first time Tom noticed a dark blue sedan with its bonnet crumpled against the trunk of a gum tree.

Her car stopped with the beam of lights trained on the wreck.

He positioned his vehicle across the lane to block any

oncoming traffic, emergency lights flashing and his headlights adding to the brightness of Kayla's. Her door opened and she scrambled out. He yanked on his handbrake and uttered a pithy curse as she ran towards the wreck.

What was the woman doing? The scene needed to be secured before she went charging in. They'd had no rain for weeks. Fire danger at the moment was extreme. Hot exhaust, long grass. A recipe for disaster.

As Tom threw open his door, a man's guttural cries echoed in his ears.

'Help me! Somebody. Please. Please.'

Fire extinguisher, woollen blanket and torch in hand, Tom ran to the front of the crumpled bonnet. The sweetly nauseating tang of petrol fumes filled his sinuses. In his peripheral vision, he was aware of Kayla swinging the driver's door wide.

'It's all right, we'll look after you,' she said, loudly enough to cut through the man's groans. She sounded firm, confident. Trustworthy. 'What's your name?'

'A-Andy.'

Charred grass smouldered and, even as Tom scuffed dirt into the blackening area, a flame flickered to life in the dry leaf litter around the trunk of the tree. Crisp twigs crunched beneath his boot as he stamped out the fledgling fire. He spread the blanket strategically to smother the tinder dry fuel.

'Hello, Andy. My name's Kayla. I'm a doctor.'

With one ear on Kayla's conversation, Tom shone his torch

into the engine cavity beneath the buckled bonnet. No obvious hot spots or smoke at this stage but that could change in an instant.

'You're going to be fine.' Her soothing voice continued. 'We'll look after you now.'

Tom placed the extinguisher on the ground within easy access then strode to where Kayla was crouched at the open driver's door. She'd positioned a cervical collar around the victim's neck and was shining a small pencil-slim torchlight into the man's eyes.

Tom leaned low and growled at her, 'This scene is not safe.'

'Then please organise it for us, Sergeant.' She sounded pleasant but remote. Her attention was fixed on her patient and she didn't look up.

Tom smiled grimly as he braced his hand on the top of the door and reached across her towards the steering column. At least she knew who he was. 'I have organised it, *Doctor.'*

'Well done.' The casual, dismissive praise rankled as he watched her twist further into the car and dig her hands down either side of the man in front of her. 'Any pain anywhere, Andy?'

'M-my ankle.' The slurred words were accompanied by a belch of stale alcohol. Tom could smell it even though he wasn't directly in its path. Kayla didn't flinch.

'Okay, I'll have a look.'

Tom gritted his teeth as his fingers found the key in the ignition. It was in the off position. 'We need to get Andy out. *Now*. There's—' His train of thought dried up abruptly as Kayla

shifted to the right and the bare skin on her shoulder brushed the sensitive skin of his inner arm. Electricity sizzled along his nerves, making his fingers fumble with the car key. He forced his thoughts back into line. 'Kayla, there's petrol vapour, a hot exhaust, tinder-dry grass. The danger of fire is extreme.'

She glanced around at him then and gave a quick, short nod. 'Of course. I understand. We need to move him.'

Instead of shifting back, as he'd expected, she leaned further into the car. Tom tightened his lips to stop himself from yelling at her. She was doing her job, and doing it well, but that didn't stop him wanting to pull her out of the car, get her to safety.

'Andy, can you move your legs?' Not by the tiniest quiver did her voice betray any concern.

'No.' The word was more of a moan. 'It hurts.'

By the time Tom strode to the other side of the car and wrenched open the passenger door, Kayla had her arm pushed down into the well beneath the dashboard.

'Can you feel that, Andy?'

'Y-yes.'

'Where am I touching you?'

'Leg. Shin.'

'That's great.' She withdrew her arm and shone her pencil torch into the cramped space.

Newspaper crinkled under Tom's knee as he knelt on the seat and leaned across to reach under the driver's seat.

'Be careful,' Kayla said sharply. A heady mixture of whisky

fumes and her light, spicy perfume assaulted his nostrils. 'There's glass from a broken bottle.'

'Thanks.' Tom winced at the gravelly catch in his voice.

'Andy's legs are caught under the dash. Apart from his ankle pain, there's no other obvious injury but visibility isn't great. I can't tell if he's trapped or just wedged forward with the seat.' She looked up, her wide eyes on a level with his for a breathless second. 'We can't shift him until we can straighten his legs and see. Before we try to move him out of the car, I'd like to try and shift the seat back so I can assess any lower limb damage properly.'

'Shift the seat. Right.' Tom drew in a lungful of air when her eyes swivelled back to Andy.

'Can you wriggle your toes for me, Andy?' she said, calmly carrying on with her examination.

'Y-yeah.'

'Are you allergic to any medications?'

'No.'

'Do you take medication for anything? Diabetes? Heart condition?'

'N-no. Need something for the p-pain.'

'Okay. You're doing great, Andy. I'll get you something for your pain now.' She turned away for a moment then was back with a vial and syringe in her hands. With the slender capping sheath clamped between her teeth, she filled the syringe. Tom blinked. He'd seen the paramedics use the same

technique countless times. But somehow Kayla's even, white teeth performing the familiar action was unbelievably sexy.

As she plunged the needle into Andy's leg, Tom shook himself mentally and reached across to grope for the lever under the driver's seat. 'I'm going to move the seat back as far as I can, Kayla.'

'Sure.'

He jiggled the lever. Nothing. Applied more pressure. Still nothing. The angle was awkward. He moved further forward, closer to Kayla. Closer to her evocative female scent. *Concentrate.* He braced his knee uncomfortably on the handbrake and yanked directly upward.

The chair slid back with a jerk. Andy moaned.

'Sorry, mate,' said Tom.

Kayla was there in an instant. 'Where is your pain, Andy?'

'Ankle. Still.'

Tom edged back outside. The deadly petrol fumes were stronger. They had to hurry. He clambered in behind the driver's seat. 'I'm going to lower the seat so we can take him out through the back.'

He wound the reclining mechanism with quick flicks of his wrist. 'Nearly ready to move him?'

She nodded, her mind obviously on the job as her voice sounded distracted when she spoke to him. 'Just let me make sure both his legs are free.'

There was a small popping noise.

‘Hell.’ Tom was moving as a terrifying whoosh followed. ‘Kayla! Get out! Now!’

He scooped up the fire extinguisher, pulling the pin as he ran to the flames that leapt out of the gap between the crumpled bonnet and the front fender.

Aiming the nozzle, he pulled the trigger. The fire retreated, beaten into temporary submission. Moving forward, with a sweeping motion, Tom covered as much of the engine as he could with the foam. As soon as the cylinder started to splutter, he threw it aside and spun back towards the cabin of the car.

Kayla was still there. She hadn’t done as he’d asked. Far from it, she’d taken his place in the rear of the car and had finished lowering the driver’s seat. She was struggling to move Andy.

‘I don’t know how long that will hold.’ He grabbed her by the upper arm, tugged her aside then slid in to take her place. ‘We have to do this now.’

‘We really need more hands,’ she said, for the first time sounding anxious.

‘We haven’t got them. Come on, Kayla. Don’t fold on me now.’ He threaded his hands under Andy’s armpits and locked his fingers across the man’s chest. ‘I’m going to pull him out. You try to ease his legs as they come free.’

‘Got it.’

‘Let’s do it.’ He grinned at her and could swear the corners of her mouth moved in a quick response.

‘Andy? This is going to be uncomfortable but we need to pull

you out of the car now.' It was the best he could do to prepare the victim for what had to be done.

'P-please. Get me out. D-don't leave me here.'

'We won't, mate.'

Tom moved back, taking the man's weight, feeling the resistance and straining past it. Andy groaned. Tom had to steel himself against the agony in the sound. If he left Andy here, there was every chance the man could die in the car.

Kayla had grabbed the thick newspaper from the passenger seat and she used it to support Andy's lower leg as his limb came free. In a move like a circus contortionist, she climbed onto the driver's seat, then over and through the back door, the whole time cradling Andy's injured ankle in the makeshift splint.

Between them, they carried Andy across the road.

'Behind my vehicle, Kayla. It'll give us some protection if the car goes up.'

They lowered a shivering Andy to the ground. Tom opened the back door of his vehicle and took out a blanket. 'Here.'

'Thanks,' Kayla said as she tucked it around Andy's body. 'I need my bag.'

'I'll get it.'

Tom paused for a second as she bent over her patient, getting straight back into the job, her fingers on Andy's wrist. 'How are you feeling, Andy?'

She was a real trooper, brave and resourceful. Damn, that was attractive. His heart swelled. He was…proud of her.

She looked around, one eyebrow shooting up as though she was surprised to see him. 'My bag, Sergeant?'

'Coming right up.' He smiled wryly, feeling chastened and deservedly so. She distracted the hell out of him.

He loped back to the wreck and grabbed her medical kit. The still-strong smell of petrol, coupled with the sizzle of foam on hot metal, was ominous. His prevention measures were still holding but he didn't know for how long. He turned and ran back.

'Here.'

'Thanks.' She reached for the bag as soon as he put it beside her.

'I'll call it in,' Tom said, reaching into the cabin of his four-wheel drive and grabbing the radio handpiece.

'It's Senior Sergeant Tom Jamieson, Dustin Police.' He turned to watch Kayla bandaging a more stable splint on Andy's leg. Her long, clever fingers were quick and efficient. She moved with such grace and competence as she went about her business that Tom was hard pressed to take his eyes off her.

He swallowed and dragged his mind back to his report. 'I need fire and ambulance to a single-vehicle accident on the Valley Highway, west of Dustin. About ten kilometres out of town, nearest intersecting road Reece Lane.

'We've got one injured male, approximately forty-five, possible broken ankle. Doctor on scene providing first aid now.'

He looked over the bull bar of his vehicle towards the wreck. 'The situation is extremely hazardous. One full foam extinguisher

has already been discharged to control fire in the motor vehicle's engine. It could reignite at any time.'

'Sergeant?' Kayla barked behind him. Tom turned to see her stripping the blanket off Andy. Her patient was clutching at his chest, his face twisted into a ghastly grimace. Then he collapsed, his arms slumping to his sides.

Kayla leaned over the now inert body, her fingers groping for a neck pulse.

'He's arresting. I need your assistance, stat. Get the resus mask out of my bag.' Kayla's hands were already in the middle of Andy's chest, the heels pumping down hard. 'Hurry.'

Tom let go of the handpiece and dropped to his knees beside the medical bag.

'That's it,' Kayla said as he lifted out a clear plastic mask with a pale green bag attached. 'Over his mouth and nose. Tilt his head back slightly. A solid puff now. And another.'

Tom did as he was directed.

'Good. Two breaths each thirty compressions. I'll count.' She kept up the rhythmic pressing.

It was the first time Tom had seen chest compressions performed on a live patient and it was a much more brutal process than he'd realised.

'Get ready.' Kayla's voice snapped his attention back. 'Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, Thirty. Again now.'

The radio dangling at the side of the car crackled. 'Sergeant Jamieson? Are you still receiving, over?' Tom ignored the tinny

voice as he held the mask and squeezed the bag, forcing the air out into Andy.

Turning, he grabbed the radio, clicked the button and barked, 'Here, Dispatch. The accident vic is having a heart attack.'

Press. Press. 'Twenty-seven, Twenty-eight.'

Tom dropped the handpiece and got ready.

'Twenty-nine. Thirty, now.'

As soon as he'd done his bit, he snatched up the handpiece again. 'We're doing CPR.'

'Roger, Sergeant. Ambulance and fire are on their way. I'll update them. Over.'

'Twenty-nine. Thirty, now.'

The seconds crawled by, turning into minutes as they moved in a bizarre choreography. He rapped out short staccato snips of information on the radio then returned to pump air into Andy's lungs. Kayla placed her fingers on Andy's neck then returned to her compressions.

She worked tirelessly, her slender arms taut, hands linked. With each compression, her hair bobbed on her shoulders, swinging with her exertion. Light caught on the wheat-coloured strands. Tom was intensely aware of her every move. She was a competent, assured expert. If Andy died it wouldn't be because of anything that Kayla failed to do for him.

Three minutes.

Five minutes.

Kayla laid her fingers against Andy's neck, felt the reassuring

bump in the carotid artery. 'Okay, we have a pulse.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the policeman sink back on his heels and lift the handset. 'Dispatch, the victim has a pulse.'

Kayla felt an odd shiver as she let the deep, calm voice wash over her. She shook her head. She was tired, her muscles trembling with fatigue in the aftermath of the adrenalin-charged situation. The tremors were nothing to do with a deep, dark, baritone voice.

The unit crackled. 'Thank you, Sergeant. They should be with you shortly. Standing by.'

She looked at the profile of the man who'd been helping her. Dustin's police sergeant. The strong jaw with a shadow of whiskers on his cheeks. He looked stern and forbidding with the black T-shirt clinging to his chest and sculpted biceps. Much as she loathed large, muscle-bound men, she had to be thankful he'd been here tonight. She'd never have got Andy out of the car on her own.

She swallowed and turned her attention back to her patient. She tucked Andy's arm along his body and reached across for his other one. 'We should turn Andy into the recovery position.'

There was a faint wail of sirens in the distance, creeping closer.

'Going to be sick,' Andy slurred.

'We need to roll him,' she said urgently. 'I'll support his neck, you roll him towards me. My command, on three. Got it? Okay. One, two, three.' Kayla fired out the order as she held Andy's

head.

And then the sour smell of vomit as Andy disgorged his stomach contents over the knee of her trousers. She swallowed the gag reflex that threatened. ‘Okay, let’s settle him so I can clean him up. Gently, gently.’

‘Wha’s happen…?’ Andy struggled to move as she slipped a folded towel under his head.

‘Just stay still for me, Andy.’ She kept her hand firmly on his shoulder, held him steady as she spoke. ‘You’ve had an accident. We’re getting help for you.’

The sirens were closer.

‘The cavalry’s on its way,’ Tom murmured, his rich, gravelly voice sliding over her.

‘Amen to that.’

She looked up to find shadowed eyes on her.

And then he smiled. A simple curve of his mouth and his face was transformed. Sergeant Jamieson was a very, very attractive man. Kayla’s heart squeezed hard.

Too much man for her to handle, whispered a confidence-sapping inner voice. Too much, too big. Too hard.

Andy moved under her hand. With relief, she wrenched her gaze away from the disturbing man opposite her patient.

CHAPTER TWO

THE smell of smoke drifted on the still air. Tom leaned sideways to look around the end of his car. Flames licked around the front tyre of the wreck.

As he got to his feet, the Dustin fire truck slid between him and his view of the fledgling fire. Thank God. He felt the tension ease across his shoulders.

A paramedic ran up to join Kayla as the ambulance backed slowly towards them. It stopped a couple of metres away and the second medic came around to open the back doors. Tom stood and moved back to give them more room. He watched a moment as Kayla meshed smoothly with the men, working to stabilise their patient.

Feeling superfluous, he crossed to the back of his four-wheel drive to take out the camera, tape measure and notepad. With his gear in hand, he walked around to the other side of the fire truck. The team had the wreck and surrounding area well doused with foam.

'Tom.' Dustin's fire captain, Jack Campbell, nodded to him then turned back to look at the crumpled car. 'How's your vic?'

'Looks like he'll make it, thanks to Kayla.'

'Lucky she was on hand.'

'Yeah.' Tom stared at the wreck, remembering the frenetic light and sound show in the seconds before the crash. 'Even

luckier she wasn't involved in the accident.'

'What happened?' Jack's voice was sharp with concern.

'I need to have a good look at the tyre marks and take her statement.' Tom lifted his shoulder. 'But I'd say she did some pretty fancy driving to avoid a collision. It'll have to be confirmed but indications are that the driver is alcohol-impaired.'

Jack grunted his disgust.

'Yeah.' Tom sighed heavily. 'I'm going to take some photos, make a few measurements for my report. I won't get in your way.'

'Sure. I called Dennis. He's on his way with the tow truck.' Hands on hips, Jack pointed his chin at the wreck. 'We're under control here but we'll hang around to make sure there are no flare-ups when the car's pulled off the tree trunk.'

'Thanks.'

Tom moved away and began snapping photographs from different angles. Inside the car, he took several pieces of the broken whisky bottle, making sure he got a clear shot of the label.

From a vantage point to one side, he made a quick sketch of the scene, placing the cars. On a walk along the road with his torch, he identified the skid marks—Andy's coming onto the main road from the lane; Kayla's where she'd braked and swerved to avoid him.

He could see quite clearly how the incident had unfolded. The tyre tracks told the story. Thick black rubber lines on the sealed road segued into gouges in the gravel verge before spiralling back onto the tarmac again. Just traversing the two

vastly different road surfaces in a *straight* line was enough to bring many motorists to disaster. It was nothing short of a miracle that her little car hadn't rolled with the massive forces it had been under.

By concentrating on his job, he could prevent himself from thinking about how close Kayla had been to injury or death. He laid out the measuring tape then jotted in distances on his sketch. With everything he needed for his report, he glanced over the road as he wound the tape up.

The paramedics were wheeling Andy to the back of the ambulance. Kayla was turned away from him, bent double as she wiped a towel down one leg.

Tom inhaled deeply then let the air out through his pursed lips in a silent whistle. The unimpeded view of her shapely bottom in the soft draping material of her trousers was very fine. Very fine indeed.

He wrenched his gaze away, looked down at the equipment in his hands. He wanted to talk to her…sensibly. Which was going to be a tough assignment if he couldn't rein in his physical response.

He gathered his thoughts. They'd made a connection here tonight and he wanted to build on that, not give her any chance, any excuse, to draw back. He'd seen a different side to her as she'd dealt with Andy. Brave, resourceful, competent—and he liked it. A lot.

Holding fast to those thoughts, he refused to succumb to

further masculine appreciation of the view as he crossed the road.

'Kayla.'

She straightened abruptly—staggered slightly.

'Oh…no.' Her words were a small, useless protest as she slowly pitched forward.

Tom took the last two steps to her side, catching her to his chest. 'Steady, I've got you.'

'Sorry, sorry,' she mumbled. 'D-don't know what happened… Must have…stood too quickly.'

She didn't resist as he stepped her over to a small tree stump and lowered her to sit. He bent over her and pushed her head between her knees, acutely conscious of the soft, warm skin of her neck beneath his fingers. After a minute, she struggled against his pressure.

'I'm all right. Thank you, Sergeant.' Her voice sounded strangled.

'Tom.'

'Anything. Whatever.' He felt her convulsive shudder as she turned her head towards him, her eyes closed. 'Please. All I can smell is the vomit on my knee.'

'Oh. Sorry, I forgot.' He released her, his grip supporting her as she sat up straight. Silky strands of hair teased the back of his hand. She took a quick breath and swallowed audibly. 'Just sit a minute.'

He kept a hand on her nape as he called to the paramedic who had just backed out of the back of the ambulance and was

closing the doors. 'Gaz? Can you take Kayla back with you for a once-over?'

'Sure, no problem.'

Beneath his palm, he could feel the delicate shifting of muscle as Kayla shook her head.

'That's not necessary, Sergeant. I—'

He looked back at her. 'I think it is, Kayla. You were a hair's breadth from being involved in a nasty accident tonight. And the name is Tom.' If she called him Sergeant one more time tonight, he'd plant a kiss right on that luscious mouth and completely ruin her opinion of him.

'But I need my car.' She looked mutinous, her silver eyes glowing with irritation.

'And I'll see that you get it,' he said as he stood. 'For now, I'm impounding it.'

Her mouth opened.

He bent, slipping one arm around her shoulders, the other under her knees and scooped her up. Her mouth snapped shut on a small squeak as she grabbed at his shoulder to steady herself. He smiled grimly. His hands were on Kayla and he couldn't do a thing about it. Torture. He looked down on the curve of lashes on her cheek, the gentle swell of her breasts…the fist in her lap. He'd take no bets on where she'd like to plant it.

He was a masochist.

'Open your front passenger door for me, Gaz.'

'Sure thing, Tom.' Gary grinned as he opened the door wide.

Tom shovelled his armful of warm woman onto the seat, wondering if his reluctance to let her go was obvious to anyone other than him.

God, he had to get out of here before he made an idiot of himself. He stepped back quickly and cleared the congestion from his throat.

'Buckle up, Doc,' he said as he shut the door.

Kayla's narrow-eyed glare should have sizzled his skin. At least her anger had brought some colour to her pallid cheeks. A little hectic but colour just the same.

Tom pivoted and strode over to where Jack Campbell was rolling up the hose. The bonnet of the car had been wrenched open and the engine was now well doused with fire-retardant foam.

'Kayla okay?' asked Jack.

'She says so.' Tom avoided his friend's shrewd eyes. 'I've sent her back with the ambos for a check over.'

'And she was okay with that?'

'Sure. Why wouldn't she be?' Tom set his jaw and ignored the laughter he could see in Jack's face. 'I'll get one of your guys to drive her car back to the hospital when we go, if that's okay?'

'Sure. Might as well be me. I want to roust Liz out. She should have been home a couple of hours ago.'

'Good luck with that.'

'Yeah.' Jack chuckled.

Kayla sucked another deep breath into her oxygen-deprived

lungs. Her diaphragm had frozen from the moment the sergeant had lifted her. Making a conscious effort to ease her tension, she uncurled the fists in her lap. Her short practical nails had dug into the soft tissue, leaving small red dints in her palm.

Even with his disturbing presence gone, she could still feel his touch. Hard enough when it had just been his hand on her nape, strong fingers clasped gently on her neck, the rasp of his calloused skin while he'd been holding her head down. Being clasped to his chest, surrounded by his warmth and strength… the awareness of her female softness against the hardness of his muscular frame had overwhelmed her.

The honest, earthy scent of him, a smell that owed more to a hard day's work than scientists testing essences in a laboratory, seemed to call to her in a way that was disturbing, primitive. She'd always liked men to be well groomed, wearing a subtle, musky aftershave. Yet no one she'd dated had ever affected her as profoundly as this man in his snug jeans and a simple black T-shirt.

Thank goodness he didn't realise he was responsible for her light-headed state. Or at least partially responsible. If she'd eaten a proper meal before leaving Melbourne, if she hadn't straightened from her bent position so quickly. If he hadn't crept up on her, spoken her name so unexpectedly. Panic had made her head jerk upright, had flooded her system with an explosion of contrary stimuli. Instead of doing anything sensible, she'd nearly pitched face down at his feet. Would have if he hadn't caught her.

Which brought her full circle back to being held in his arms. She shivered.

What was it about his brand of masculinity that left her dizzy with all sorts of chaotic feelings? Whatever it was, she didn't like the feeling of vulnerability. There were so many strikes against him. A career police officer, strong and hard. Controlled and used to controlling. She had to find a way to cram the sergeant back into the mental box she'd managed to keep him in for the two months she'd been living in Dustin.

He'd said she should call him Tom. She didn't even want to *think* about him that personally…intimately. Ridiculous though it was, if she thought of him as *Tom*, he'd become too real, a man she'd have to deal with. As Sergeant Jamieson, he was a police officer, someone she could keep at a distance. She was only here for another four months. Surely she could lock her unruly reactions down long enough to get through that.

She rolled her head to look at him where he stood with Jack Campbell. Both were long, lean, athletic men. Two of a kind. Yet she'd never felt threatened by Jack. He was a honey. She knew he and Liz had had their problems but they'd come through them and now their marriage was stronger than ever. They were a family, one adorable daughter and another baby on the way.

Sergeant Jamieson was a different proposition altogether. He had hot eyes. At the few social occasions she'd attended, she'd felt him watching her. He'd never put a foot wrong, but in her mind he was disturbing. Radiating a hunger that she didn't want

to think about. For things that weren't his, things he had no right to. She shivered again. He made her feel utterly conscious of her vulnerability as a woman.

She mentally shook herself. It didn't matter what he wanted. What *she* wanted was what counted. And she didn't want any man in her life at the moment.

And definitely not someone like Sergeant Tom Jamieson.

CHAPTER THREE

TOM fell into step with Jack as they walked towards the bright lights at the hospital entrance.

'Here are Kayla's keys.' Jack held out his hand.

'Thanks,' Tom said, spotting his quarry as soon as he stepped through the sliding door into the emergency depart ment.

Tall and straight in the shapeless green theatre pants and top, Kayla still looked entirely too appealing. Her pale face turned towards them. When she realised it was him, an interesting shade of pink bloomed along her cheek bones and her eyes darkened to stormcloud grey. He might have flattered himself that his appearance had that effect—except for the ferocious frown that pleated her forehead a split second later.

'Uh-oh, looks like you're in the dogbox, mate,' murmured Jack beside him as they walked towards her.

'Hey, Kayla.' Jack stooped to kiss her cheek.

'Hello, Jack.'

'Is Liz around?'

'She's in the tearoom with her feet up. I think she'll be glad to go home.'

'That's what I'm here for. Catch you two kids later.' Jack grinned at the two of them and winked.

Tom watched the expressions flit over her face as her eyes followed Jack. Then suddenly she turned to face him, her silvery

eyes impaling him, her mouth firm.

'My keys, please, Sergeant?'

He juggled them in his hands, tossing them from one to the other. 'Have you been cleared by your doctor…

Doctor?'

'Yes, of course.'

He tilted his head and considered her. 'So, your near collapse was because…?'

Her lips thinned and for a moment he thought she'd refuse to answer. He almost relished the opportunity to lock horns with her.

'Low blood sugar. Tiredness. Getting up too quickly. I prescribed myself a cup of tea and grilled cheese on toast while I waited for you to return my keys.' She held out her hand. 'And now I'd like to go home to bed.'

Tom's fingers clutched the keys as he bit back a tempting retort. She did *not* mean anything by her comment. It was *not* an opening or an offer. If he was a gentleman, he would definitely let that slide through to the keeper.

He cleared his throat and dangled the keys. 'In that case…'

As she reached out, he caught her hand, gently turning it over and depositing the keys on her palm with studied care. He curled her fingers over them one at a time as he held her eyes with his.

'Thank you.' She tugged lightly and when he didn't release her, she narrowed her eyes at him. 'Was there something else… Sergeant?'

‘Yes, there is. Kayla.’ He let his tongue linger over the syllables of her name. ‘You get a good night’s sleep.’

He felt her hand twitch in his, saw a flare of awareness in her eyes. And something else. A starkness, a vulnerability.

Surely she wasn’t afraid of him. He released his grip and her hand dropped to her side.

‘Thank you, Sergeant.’

She turned away, walking quickly, her movements oddly jerky as though she was having trouble co-ordinating her limbs. As though she couldn’t get away from him fast enough.

He wasn’t used to having that sort of effect on women. He knew, without conceit, that he was reasonably good looking. Kayla Morgan was indifferent, immune. No, more than that—she seemed to find him downright distasteful. Damn it, she didn’t know him well enough to feel that way about him. It rankled, made him want to get in her way, be hard to ignore.

Hands on hips, he watched until she was several metres away then he called softly, ‘Kayla?’

The stiff stride halted. ‘Yes?’

He waited, the silence stretched. She pivoted to look at him with obvious reluctance. ‘What did you want?’

There it was again, that hint of defencelessness, of desperately masked fear. It reached out and touched him. Made him want to gather her close, shield her from whatever was troubling her. Which was difficult because he seemed to be the main cause of her stress right now. How could he protect her from himself?

‘Come and see me at the station this week. I need you to make a statement about the accident.’

‘Oh. Yes.’ She swallowed, relief patent on her face. ‘All right.’

‘Goodnight.’ He jammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans.

“Night.’ And she was moving away from him again. A couple of steps later she stopped. He could almost see an internal battle being waged as she looked over her shoulder then turned to face him. ‘I should thank you for your assistance tonight.’

‘Should you?’

‘Yes, I should,’ she said firmly, squaring her shoulders. Her bearing reminded him of his nephew’s attitude when he’d had to apologise for a serious transgression. Courage, trepidation and determination not to flinch from an unpleasant task. No prizes for guessing what, or who, was the distasteful thing in this case. ‘You were great at the accident. Thank you, Sergeant.’

‘Happy to help…Doctor.’

With a quick nod, she spun around and moved away, without hesitating this time.

Why was he doing this to himself? Kayla was giving him red lights all the way. Yet he felt compelled to keep pushing, to try to get close.

She was confident and competent when doing her job, but so vulnerable and prickly with him when dealing with him on a personal level.

He watched until she moved out of sight without looking back

then he huffed out a breath. He'd thought she might look back at him, give him some indication that she knew he was still standing there. A vain hope.

He hunched his shoulders. Perhaps he should back off, let it go. Kayla was Liz's friend. Liz would skewer him if he upset her. The whole thing was complicated.

'Earth to Tom?'

He turned to find Liz watching him, curiosity and concern in her eyes. He wondered how long she'd been standing there, what she'd read on his face. She glanced along the corridor to where Kayla had disappeared.

'Jack was looking for you,' he said quickly into the brief silence.

'He found me. Tony just collared him about something so I came on ahead.' She paused. 'We stabilised your accident victim and sent him off to Melbourne. I organised that blood test for his alcohol level, too.'

'Good, thanks.'

'Tom…about Kayla…'

'What about her?' He tried to sound casual but knew he hadn't succeeded by Liz's troubled expression.

'Tom, I love you very dearly and I'm telling you as a friend. Kayla's not up to your weight.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't you?' she said dryly. 'I've seen the way you look at her. And not just today.'

‘Well, she’s not looking back so you can put your mind at ease.’

‘Perhaps.’ Liz looked along the corridor again. ‘Kayla’s my friend, Tom.’

‘I know. I’m just having a hard time picturing the two of you as pals. You seem like an unlikely pair.’

‘She came to my rescue when a charming date spiked my drink. I was in first year at uni and pretty green. Kayla stood up to him and took me to hospital. She looked after me, Tom, even though we didn’t know each other.’ Liz’s eyes examined his face as she spoke. ‘She didn’t have to get involved and yet she chose to. She was a better friend to me that night than all my so-called close friends.’

He rubbed his jaw. This picture of the valiant, loyal, caring Kayla was incredibly attractive. All the qualities a man could ask for in a potential life partner.

‘Why is she here in Dustin?’

‘You know why she’s here.’ Liz patted her protruding stomach and looked smug. ‘She’s working while I’m on maternity leave.’

‘But you’re not on leave yet.’

‘True.’ She tilted her head and looked up at him for a long moment. Her eyebrows rose. ‘Why don’t you ask her?’

He grimaced. ‘I would if she wasn’t so damned prickly. She *Sergeants* me to death and treats me like I’ve got her under bright lights for interrogation.’

‘You can be intimidating.’

‘Nah.’ He smiled at her. ‘I’m a SNAG.’

She gave him a droll look. 'I've yet to meet anyone less like a sensitive new-age guy than you. Except maybe Jack.'

Tom laughed. 'Then I'm in good company.' He waited a beat then said, 'So how about it? What's her story?'

Liz looked at him thoughtfully. 'You know I won't tell you that. But I will tell you that it suited both of us for her to come to Dustin early.' She smoothed her hand over her stomach, a small smile on her mouth. 'And when my time comes, I know I'm in safe hands with Kayla.'

He grinned as he saw Liz's husband approaching. 'Not getting Jack to play midwife for this one?'

'He's on standby. But even he admits he'll be happy to take a back seat for the arrival of future Campbells.' She grinned up at her husband as he slipped his arm around her waist. 'Won't you, darling?'

'Believe it. You, my sweet, are confined to town for the rest of your pregnancy. A maximum of two kilometres from the hospital at all times.'

'Uh-uh. There's the camp draft next weekend. You prom ised.'

'Only because Kayla's going. And only because it's within my fail-safe ten-kilometre radius from the hospital.'

The look that passed between his friends was one of such pure delight that Tom's heart squeezed. He wanted a woman to look at him like that, as though he was the most important man in her world.

And not just any woman.

He wanted it to be Kayla.

Kayla tugged the front of her shirt, suddenly wishing she'd worn something more substantial than her favourite red shirt. She'd never realised how low the front was, not that it showed cleavage but the respectable square neckline showed an alarming amount of her décolletage. All that bare skin suddenly seemed outrageously provocative. The short, cap sleeves left her arms bare and somehow vulnerable.

And it was red. Sure, it suited her. She'd worn it because red was the colour of confidence and she needed all of that commodity she could muster for this interview. But the colour also screamed, *Look over here, look at me* in a way that she'd never appreciated before.

If it weren't for the fact that she was actually standing on the veranda of the police station, she'd have fled home to change her blouse for something black that covered her from hyoid bone to scaphoid. She looked around surreptitiously and, sure enough, there was a security camera at the corner of the roof line. Great, now she probably looked like she was about to commit a felony.

She'd put off this moment as long as she could. The simple task of making the statement had grown into a task of monumental proportions. All she was doing was giving her version of events, for heaven's sake. A formality. It wasn't as if the accident was her fault. She'd been sober, driving carefully, and her quick evasive actions had prevented an even more serious situation.

As for Sergeant Jamieson…he was just a man. Doing a job. He wouldn't bite. He probably wouldn't even be the person she'd have to deal with so she was getting herself into a lather for nothing. She needed to get a grip, tell the person taking her statement what had happened, answer a few questions. Simple.

She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders then pushed open the door of the police station.

'Hey, Kayla.'

'Penny. Hi.' Kayla grinned at the neatly uniformed woman on duty behind the counter. The tension in her stomach began to smooth out. She could talk to Penny, give her statement, get on the road to Melbourne. She didn't need to see the sergeant. Reprieve!

'I hear you've got a new fan.' Penny smiled.

'Fan?'

'My niece. Suzy MacIntyre. You saw her the other day.'

'Oh, of course. She's a delight.'

'Isn't she? She was telling me all about her visit to see you. And how brave she was about her injection and the jelly-bean she chose and the cute little animal stamp you gave her. You know she wouldn't let poor Sarah wash it off for ages. They had to bathe her and wash around it.'

'Oh, dear.'

'Now she wants to come back to see you. She said she'd even have another injection if she had to.'

Kayla chuckled.

‘Anyway, you probably haven’t come by to listen to the ramblings of a proud aunty.’ Penny clicked her fingers. ‘Oh, I bet you’re here about Andy’s accident last week.’

‘I’m always happy to listen to proud aunty tales. But, yes, I’ve come to make a statement.’

‘Tom won’t be long. He’s just on a phone call at the moment. Want a coffee?’

‘No, thanks. Do you think…well, could I give you the statement?’

Penny looked doubtful. ‘Tom was very specific about wanting to see you himself. Which is a bit unusual really for something so routine.’

‘It’d be a shame to disturb him.’

‘Uncommonly thoughtful of you, Kayla.’

The deep voice made her jump. Spinning to her left, she met the sergeant’s knowing dark gaze. Heat swept her from head to toe and she felt as though she’d been caught planning something criminal.

He smiled at her. ‘I’m free now. All yours, in fact.’

The skin over her cheek bones was scorching as every particle of heat concentrated in her face. If only it was enough to combust her on the spot.

The dark, narrow-eyed stare raked over her already sensitised skin. ‘You’re looking better than when I last saw you.’

The personal comment allowed her to pull herself together. ‘Really, Sergeant?’

‘Tom. No need to stand on ceremony around here, is there, Penny?’ He smiled warmly at his constable and Kayla’s thought processes stuttered to a halt.

He looked back at her. ‘Want to come this way?’

No. She swallowed and forced her jellied knees to move her forward. The tension in her gut returned with an iron fist, making her glad it had been hours since she’d eaten.

Her heart set up a tattoo of great thumping beats as she followed him along a short corridor. She worked to compose herself, using the techniques that had served her so well for years when dealing with the large threatening males in her life. The usual methods weren’t working.

‘Grab a chair.’ He moved behind the desk to open a filing cabinet and take out a pad.

She perched on the edge of the seat and concentrated on the items on his desk. It was all very tidy. Orderly piles of paper, a container of pens.

Long fingers appeared in her line of vision, selected one of the pens and clicked it ready for use.

‘Tell me in your own words what happened last Sunday night, Kayla. You were returning from Melbourne?’ His smooth, velvety voice invited her to respond.

‘Y-yes.’ She marshalled her thoughts and began to describe the accident.

He made notes as she spoke.

‘So you didn’t see the lights of the car coming down the side

road towards you?' His dark eyes lifted to her face.

The question brought her up short.

'No. I was…um…distracted.' On that fateful night, she'd spotted him. In her mind's eye, she could remember the tall, still figure beside the police vehicle. She'd wondered what he was doing out there in the middle of the night. Heat crept up her neck and it was all she could do not to put her hand to her throat to try to hide the self-betrayal. 'I had glanced in the side mirror. The—the right-hand one on the…' She stopped. 'Right side.'

She was giving too much information, too much detail. Making herself sound like an idiot. Worse, she was drawing his attention and surely making him wonder what she was hiding.

Just as well she'd never contemplated a life of crime. Giving one tiny statement under Sergeant Jamieson's piercing eyes was turning her into a gibbering wreck.

'And then what happened?'

'I—I looked back and the other car was suddenly there, at my left-hand passenger door. I braked hard and swerved to the right side of the road. My car spun when I hit the gravel.'

He led her through several more questions, then she watched as he finished making his notes.

'Okay, that seems straightforward. I'll just get you to read through this and sign if you're happy with what it says.'

'Okay.' She took the pages. The short, terse sentences in his powerful, energetic script seemed to leap off the paper at her. She blinked and forced herself to concentrate. 'I just sign at the

bottom?'

'Yes. You can use my pen.'

The pen was still warm from his fingers. She leaned the paper on the edge of the desk to scrawl her signature then handed the papers back to him.

'So that's it?'

'Pretty much.' He looked at her. 'How about a coffee?'

'Coffee?'

'Yes. I wouldn't expect you to drink the station coffee if that's what you're worried about.' He smiled but his eyes were dark, unreadable.

'Oh, I'm sure it couldn't be as bad as hospital coffee.' She stopped, bit her lip. He'd think she wanted to stay for coffee in a minute. 'Thank you, but, no. I need to get on the road. I've got a long drive.'

'Going to Melbourne for the weekend?'

'Yes.' She gathered up her belongings and decided she'd get her car keys out when she got to her car.

His face was perfectly calm but there was an acute-ness about the way he looked at her that made her wonder what he was thinking. Perhaps all policemen cultivated that impression of predatory patience. Waiting to see what might be revealed if they waited long enough. 'Visiting family?'

'Yes. No. Sort of.' Her fingers tightened on her bag.

He raised his eyebrows.

She opened her mouth then shut it. He couldn't possibly be

interested in knowing this was her best friend's last weekend in Melbourne before she returned to the far-flung reaches of North West Australia.

His curiosity was a policeman's ingrained habit and she was like Pavlov's dog. A steady stare from an imposing male wearing dark blue epaulettes and it seemed she was still ready to rush into explanations. Her father had trained her well.

Growing up, she'd tried to tell herself it was a sign of his affection that had made him grill her and her sister. But she'd slowly realised it was an uncanny ability to sniff out the tiniest hint of trouble or rebellion.

A fantastic ability in a policeman.

Utterly crushing in a distant, regimented father.

In the end, she'd realised he'd been determined to crush any tendency his daughters might have harboured towards behaving like normal teenagers. Christopher Morgan had been a man with places to go, in line for promotions. No time for messy family dramas and misbehaviour. No taint of gossip would touch him through his family.

She suddenly realised she'd been sitting in the sergeant's office for far too long, staring back at him. She shot out of the chair. 'Well, I won't let you keep me.'

'Won't you?' He stood more slowly, his eyes hooded, a faint smile on his mouth.

She felt the heat rush into her cheeks when she realised what she'd said. 'I mean, I won't keep you.'

He inclined his head. ‘I’ll walk you out.’

‘There’s no need. I can find my own way. Thank you, Sergeant.’

‘Tom.’ His fingers fastened around her arm.

She looked at him blankly, her mind consumed by his touch on the tender skin of her inner elbow.

‘My name is Tom.’

‘Oh. Yes. Of course.’ She looked at him helplessly.

‘Say it, Kayla.’

She swallowed. The way he said her name sent a shiver down her spine. Almost as though he was tasting the syllables, trying out the feel of it in his mouth. At the L-sound, she’d been able to see the tip of his tongue touch the edge of his top teeth.

‘Say it,’ he repeated when she remained silent.

‘Tom.’ Her throat had difficulty making the sound and it came out raw and husky. She’d worked so hard not to even think of him by his name, and now he’d made her say it. She felt something akin to despair. Now he was real, now he was a man, not a uniform.

He nodded. ‘That wasn’t so hard, was it?’

He opened his office door and ushered her across to the exit with that gentle but inexorable hold. Her feet moved her along beside him, across the veranda, down the steps to the side of her car. His fingers slid lightly across her elbow joint and finally released her.

He waited while she fumbled in her bag to find her keys to

unlock the door. Then he leaned forward to open it for her. 'Drive carefully, Kayla. See you when you get back next week.'

Not if she saw him first. She slipped into the seat and managed to slide the key into the ignition.

'Bye, S—' She gulped the rest of the word when his eyes narrowed. 'Goodbye, Tom.'

He towered in the opening, one hand on the roof and the other on the door, as though he might say something more. But in the end all he said was, 'Bye, Kayla.'

He stepped back and shut the door gently.

As she stopped in the driveway to check the way was clear, she caught sight of him in her rear-vision mirror.

Thank goodness she drove an automatic car. It would just be the last straw to grind the gears or bunny-hop out onto the road under his watchful eye.

She didn't quite know what to make of Tom Jamieson.

But one thing was certain: he was a serious handicap to her enjoyment of Dustin.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM his position in the corridor just outside the hospital cafeteria, Tom watched Kayla through the glass window and listened with half an ear to his sister's plans for the coming weekend. Kayla turned from the counter and threaded her way through the tables.

'Tom!'

'What?' He looked down at his sister's indignant features.

'You haven't heard a thing I've said, have you?'

He arched an eyebrow. 'Mum's still jet-lagged after travelling back from England on Tuesday and you're concerned about her overdoing it at the barbecue on Saturday night,' he said smugly and glanced back into the cafeteria as he spoke. Kayla had selected a seat by the window. 'You've arranged for Dad to get the meat and everyone else to bring salads and sweets.' He looked back at Charlotte, who gave him a narrow-eyed glare. 'Am I right?'

'Do you know how irritating it is when you can do that?'

'What? Prove I've been listening?'

'Mmm.' She craned her neck to look into the cafeteria. Tom had an overwhelming urge to block her line of sight to Kayla. 'What's so interesting anyway?'

He was saved from answering by the piercing beep of Charlotte's pager. 'Damn. Got to run. See you on Saturday night,

then.'

'Sure thing.'

Thankful for the narrow escape, he pushed open the door and headed towards Kayla. A moment later, her head came up, eyes darting around the room as though she'd sensed imminent danger. No mistaking the dismay on her face as her gaze settled on him. He suppressed a sigh. Nothing had changed—he was a sucker for punishment. Continuing towards her, he set his mouth in a grim smile. Her instinctive intention to bolt was plain. He wondered for a moment if he'd get some early cutting practice for the weekend camp draft—perversely, the thought made his smile broaden. Kayla sank back in her chair—he could practically see each muscle relax as she realised that flight was not an option.

She'd managed to avoid him for a couple of days, once in the supermarket and the other time at the library. And she hadn't returned the message he'd left her but that wasn't a surprise because he'd made it clear the message was private, not official. Perhaps he'd have to resort to something official to get a response.

A roadworthy check, a breathalyser set up outside the hospital just for a chance to talk to her. She was reducing him to a sad state.

But not today.

He tightened his grip on the bag he carried. Today, he had a cast-iron reason to see her. And plenty of time, too, since he knew she'd only just started her lunch break.

He stopped beside her table. ‘Kayla.’

‘Sergeant.’

He let that slide as he pulled out the chair on the diagonal from her and sat down, setting the bag on the floor. ‘You’re a hard woman to pin down.’

Her brows arched over darkly lashed grey eyes. ‘I wasn’t aware that I needed pinning.’

A glorious procession of X-rated images sprang unhelpfully into his mind and he could feel an unfamiliar warmth mushrooming in his face.

Hell, he was blushing.

He never blushed.

‘You don’t…er…need pinning.’ He coughed to clear the huskiness from his vocal cords, all the while aware of her faintly perplexed expression. ‘I’ve been trying to catch up with you.’

‘I know. I got your message but it didn’t seem urgent. Is there a problem with my statement about the accident?’

‘Nope. No problem with that.’

‘Good.’ Her soft mouth pursed briefly and then she made a production of looking at her watch. ‘I really should be getting…’

She trailed off as the cafeteria owner slipped a plate in front of her and then a cup of coffee. Tom stifled an urge to laugh at the comical look of guilt on her face.

‘Hey, Tom,’ said the woman with a smile. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘A coffee would be great.’

‘Black, no sugar, coming right up.’

He turned back to look at Kayla. ‘Tsk, don’t you know it’s bad form to lie to a policeman?’

A strange spasm crossed her face. Pain? Then she lowered her eyes. ‘Yeah, I do, as it happens.’

His interest sharpened but he left the questions unasked. Instead, he filed her response away with all the other things he wanted to know about her.

‘I’ll let you off this time.’

‘Gee, thanks.’ The sarcasm was unmistakeable as she lifted her eyes back to his.

He frowned and let his gaze roam over her face, watched with interest as she fidgeted and a tinge of pink crept into her cheeks. ‘You know, if I was a suspicious man, I’d think you were avoiding me.’

She tilted her head to give him a considering look. The corner of her mouth crimped for a moment and then she said, ‘You’re a policeman. Suspicion is in your job description.’

‘Okay. Good point,’ he said, biting back the laugh that threatened. She had a quick wit and he was damned if bandying words with her wasn’t wickedly good fun. Hoping to provoke another exchange, he reached over and snagged a chip off her plate. ‘Eat up. Don’t mind me, I’ve already eaten.’

‘Not enough by the look of it,’ she said as he blew on the chip.

‘Always room for a chip or two.’ He popped it in his mouth.

‘In that case, do feel free to help yourself,’ she said, her tone

withering as she picked up her knife and fork.

He grinned and grabbed another. 'I hear you're going to the camp draft this weekend.'

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'Yes. I am.' She sounded reluctant to part with the details.

'With Liz and Jack?'

'Yes.'

'Looking forward to it?' he said, making a mental note to check with Jack to see if they intended to stay out at the grounds over the weekend. They did usually but with Liz being pregnant they might opt for the comfort of home and just drive out during the day.

'I'm sure it'll be interesting.' She pushed the grilled fish around on her plate then cut a small portion off the end. 'What was it you wanted to see me about? '

'I've got some gear for you from Penny. Boots and a hat.'

'Oh. I was going to pick it up from her tonight.'

He shrugged. 'I was coming this way so I offered to drop it off to you.' Which was a long way from the truth. He'd practically had to prise the bag out of his confused constable's fingers.

'Thanks.' She laid the knife and fork on her plate.

'My pleasure.' He looked at her substantially untouched food and frowned. 'Not hungry? You should eat more. There's nothing of you.'

More colour flooded into her cheeks and the grey eyes sparkled with irritation. 'Thank you for that professional

assessment, Sergeant.'

'Tom. And it's not a complaint. What there is of you is a very nice package.' He knew he was out of line but something about seeing her mouth open in a perfect oval of outrage was irresistible. Baiting her like this was probably doing little to help his cause, but he couldn't seem to help himself. 'I wouldn't like to see you fade away while you're in Dustin.'

'Highly unlikely.' She gave him a fulminating glare from stormy grey eyes. 'Unless you're going to make a habit of dropping by to pilfer my lunch.'

'If that's an invitation, I accept.'

'It's not.'

'Shame. Well, much as I'd love to, I can't stay and chat. There's work to be done.' He pushed himself to his feet and lifted the bag onto the chair. 'Your accessories for the weekend. See you, Kayla.'

Not waiting for an answer, he walked towards the exit. A quick glance in the mirrored glass on the wall showed Kayla watching him leave. Perhaps he should check his shirt for scorch marks when he got back to the station.

He suppressed a grin. At least he could get under her skin. Not his first choice of reactions but it did mean she wasn't completely indifferent to him.

What had that been all about?

Kayla frowned. Since the accident, she seemed to have had more to do with Tom Jamieson than for the entire time she'd

been in Dustin prior to that.

She watched the door shut behind him then shifted her gaze to the bag on the chair beside her.

The knots in her stomach unravelled enough to allow a gurgle of hunger to escape.

She looked back at her plate and after a moment picked up the utensils. Stupid to let good food go to waste because the sergeant was so disturbing. Doggedly chewing a mouthful, she tried to banish him from her mind by thinking about the last patient she'd seen before lunch.

A sixty-year-old male, heavy smoker with a long-standing cough. He'd wanted a quick pass through the office and a script for antibiotics but she hadn't liked the wheezing sounds she'd heard in his lungs on auscultation. He hadn't liked her insistence on him having a chest X-ray.

Kayla sighed. She seemed to be bent on annoying the men who came into her orbit today. The expression in the sergeant's deep chocolate eyes had swung between frustration and puckish humour.

Except for those few moments when she could swear he looked embarrassed. He didn't strike her as the sort to be easily disconcerted. Her own system had been so jangled by his presence, she couldn't remember what they'd been talking about.

Her eyes slid back to the bag from Penny.

The weekend. Would Tom be at the camp draft? Her appetite abruptly evaporated and she had to force the food down her

throat.

She reached for her coffee and took a swallow. She'd agreed to camp out at the grounds with Jack and Liz. Her first experience in a tent. She wasn't sure if she was dreading it or looking forward to it. Either way, having Sergeant Tom Jamieson around would only complicate things. He was a hard man to ignore when he got in her face.

She lifted her cup, then, as a sudden suspicion leapt into her mind, she froze with it halfway to her mouth. Surely he wasn't putting himself in her way deliberately.

No. Why would he?

She huffed out a sigh of impatience. In a minute, she'd be chewing her fingernails or twirling a hank of hair like a fourteen-year-old anguishing over the way a boy had looked at her.

So what if Tom Jamieson was there at the weekend. She'd just avoid him.

Easy. Now, if only she could get him out of her thoughts.

Picking up the fork again, she stabbed another piece of fish.

Who'd have thought she'd get such a kick out of the camp draft? Kayla grinned. The dust, the horses, the energetic noise of it, she loved it all. The people of Dustin were putting a touch of country into the city girl.

She looked down at herself and her good humour deepened. The dusty brown cargo pants, her most casual pair of trousers, and the long-sleeved cream shirt were her own. The scuffed elastic-sided boots on her feet and the felt hat perched on the seat

beside her were on loan from Penny. Mandatory fashion wear for attending a camp draft event, she'd been told. When she'd dressed to drive out here this morning, she'd been self-conscious in her unfamiliar trimmings. Now they looked just right. She almost felt like the genuine article.

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