



TRISH WYLIE
New York's Finest Rebel

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Trish Wylie

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«HarperCollins»

Wylie T.

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Doesn't every girl love a man in uniform? Jo and Daniel had a lot in common – her brother was his best friend back home, they've each left behind a troubled upbringing and are living a fresh new life, and they absolutely bring out the worst in each other. Daniel is an ex-Marine New York cop. Jo is a feisty fashion blogger with a weakness (strength really) for Manolos. A million miles apart, you'd think? So how on earth did they end up neighbours in the same New York building? And what happens when they're forced to acknowledge the sparks that fly between them aren't intense dislike – as previously thought – but intense chemistry? Will romance blossom in the Big Apple? For those who devour Sophie Kinsella in one sitting.

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Praise for Trish Wylie

‘Another fantastic novel by Trish Wylie which you will devour in a single sitting! Brimming with passion, emotion, romance and humour, and featuring a fantastic heroine and a gorgeous hero ... sheer perfection!’

—CataRomance on

O'Reilly's Bride

‘With its splendid cast of amiable characters, hilarious one-liners, heartwarming romance and powerful emotional intensity ... another triumph for the hugely talented Trish Wylie, one of the brightest stars of contemporary romance!’

—CataRomance on

Project: Parenthood

‘Absolutely wonderful! Trish Wylie’s spellbinding tale will tickle your funny bone and tug at your heartstrings. Featuring characters which leap off the pages, realistic dialogue, sweet romance, sizzling sex scenes, electrifying sexual tension and dramatic emotional intensity ... feel-good romance at its finest!’

—CataRomance on

White-Hot

About the Author

TRISH WYLIE worked on a long career of careers to get to the one she wanted from her late teens. She flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder while playing the promotions game, patted her manicured hands on the backs of musicians in the music business, smiled sweetly at awkward customers during the retail nightmare known as the run-up to Christmas, and has got completely lost in her car in every single town in Ireland while working as a sales rep. And it took all that character-building and a healthy sense of humour to get her dream job, she feels—where she spends her days in reindeer slippers, with her hair in whatever band she can find to keep it out of the way, make-up as vague and distant a memory as manicured nails, while she gets to create the kind of dream man she'd still like to believe is out there somewhere. If it turns out he is, she promises she'll let you know ... after she's been out for a new wardrobe, a manicure and a make-over ...

Also by Trish Wylie

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New York's Finest Rebel

Trish Wylie



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To my lovely editor Flo, fellow member
of the 'I heart Daniel Brannigan' fanclub.

CHAPTER ONE

'Every girl knows there are days for heels and days for flats. It could be a metaphor for life if you think about it. Let's all make today a heels day, shall we?'

SIREN red and dangerously high, they were the sexiest pair of heels Daniel Brannigan had ever seen. Silently cursing the amount of time it took to haul the cage doors into place, he watched them disappear upstairs.

He *really* wanted to meet the woman in those shoes.

Punching on the button until there was a jerk of upward movement, he tried to play catch-up in the slowest elevator ever invented. After the first of three endlessly monotonous trips, he knew the stairs were going to be his preferred mode of travel in the future. But until he had all of his worldly possessions—few that they were—carted from his truck to the fifth floor, he didn't have a choice.

A flash of red appeared in his peripheral vision.

Target acquired.

Turning in the small space, he assessed each detail as it came into sight. Thin straps circled dainty ankles, the angle of her small feet adding enough shape to her calves to remind him that he was overdue for some R & R. If she lived in the same apartment block he was moving into, it was a complication he could do without. But if the effect her shoes had on his libido was anything to go by, he reckoned it was worth the risk. He hadn't earned the nickname Danger Danny for nothing.

The elevator jarred to an unexpected halt, an elderly woman with a small dog in her arms scowling pointedly at the boxes piled around his feet. 'Going down?'

'Up,' he replied curtly. Rocking forward, he nudged the button with his elbow.

Don't disappear on me, babe.

The adrenaline rush of pursuit had always done it for him, as had the kind of woman it took to wear a skirt so short it made him stifle a groan when it came into view. Flared at mid-smooth-skinned-thigh, the flirty cheerleader number lovingly hugged the curve of her hips before dipping in at a narrow waist. He glanced at the fine-boned hand curled around handles of bags labelled with names that meant nothing to him, mouth curving into a smile at the lack of anything sparkling on her ring finger. On the floor below his, she turned to speak to someone in the hall. To his frustration it meant he couldn't see her face as the elevator creaked by. Instead he was left with an image of tumbling locks of long dark hair and the sound of sparkling feminine laughter.

Fighting with the cage again when the elevator stopped, he did what he had done on his previous trips and nudged a box forward to fill the gap. In the following moment of silence, footsteps sounded on the stairs. A trickle of awareness ran down his spine as he turned, gaze rising until he was looking into large dark eyes. Eyes that narrowed as his smile faded.

'Jorja,' he said dryly.

'Daniel,' she replied in the same tone before she tilted her head and arched a brow. 'Didn't occur to you anyone else might want to use the elevator today?'

'Stairs are good for cardio.'

'That would be a no, then.'

'Offering to help me move in? That's neighbourly of you.' He thrust the box in his arms at her, letting go before she had an opportunity to refuse.

There was a tinkle of breaking glass as it hit the floor between their feet.

'Oops.' She blinked.

Oops, his ass. The fact she'd obviously made interesting changes in wardrobe while he was overseas didn't make her any less irritating than she'd been for the last five and a half years. 'No welcome-home banner?' he asked.

'Wouldn't that suggest I'm happy you're here?'

‘You got a problem with me being here, you should have made it known when my application came up in front of the residents committee.’

‘What makes you think I didn’t?’

‘Clue was in the words *unanimous decision*.’ He shrugged. ‘What can I say? People like when a cop lives in the building. Makes them feel secure.’

She smiled a saccharine-sweet smile. ‘The elderly woman you ticked off two floors down is the head of the residents’ committee. I give it a week before she starts a petition to have you evicted.’

Daniel took a measured breath. He had never met another woman who had the same effect on his nerves as fingernails down a chalkboard. ‘Know your biggest problem, babe?’

‘Don’t call me babe.’

‘You underestimate my ability to be adorable when I set my mind to it. I can have the poodle lady baking cookies for me inside forty-eight hours.’

‘Bichon.’

‘What?’

‘The dog. It’s a Bichon frise.’

‘It got a name?’

‘Gershwin.’ She rolled her eyes when she realized what she was doing. ‘And I’m afraid that’s my quota for helpfulness all used up for the day.’

Bending over, he lifted the box at their feet, held it to his ear and gave it a brisk shake. ‘You owe me a half-dozen glasses.’

‘Sue me,’ she said as she turned on her heel.

As he followed her down the hall Daniel’s errant gaze lowered to watch the sway of her hips before he reminded himself who he was looking at. He had done some dumb things in his time but checking out Jorja Dawson was stupid on a whole new level. If she were the last woman left in the state of New York, he would take a vow of celibacy before getting involved with her. He even had a list of reasons why.

Casually tossing long locks of shining hair over her shoulder, she reached into her purse and turned to face him at the door to her apartment. ‘I don’t suppose you’re considering showing your face at Sunday lunch once you’ve unpacked? Your mother would appreciate it.’

Number six on his list: *Family involvement*.

He looked into her eyes. ‘Will you be there?’

‘Never miss it.’

‘Tell them I said hi.’

‘Are you saying you don’t go because I’m there?’

‘Don’t flatter yourself.’ He moved the box in his arms to dig into a pocket for his key. ‘If I rearranged my life around you I wouldn’t be moving into an apartment across the hall from you. But just so you know—’ he leaned closer and lowered his voice ‘—you’ll move before I do.’

‘You’ve never stayed anywhere longer than six months,’ she stated categorically. ‘And even then it was because the army sent you there.’

‘Navy,’ he corrected without missing a beat. ‘And if there’s one thing you should keep in mind about the Marines, it’s that we don’t give up ground.’

‘I’ve lived here for more than four years. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Then I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.’

Something he could have done without, frankly. Not that he was likely to tell her, but she was the main reason he’d debated taking the apartment. She was a spy who could report back to the rest of the Brannigan clan in weekly discussions over a roast and cheesecake from Junior’s. But as far as Daniel was concerned, if his family wanted to know how he was doing they could ask. When they did, he’d give them the same answer he had for the last eight years. With a few more recent additions to throw them off the trail.

He was fine, thanks. Sure it was good to be home. No, he hadn't had any problems settling back into his unit. Yes, if the Reserves called him up again he would go.

They didn't need to know more than that.

'You know *your* problem, Daniel?' She angled her head to the irritating angle she did best. 'You think your being here bugs me when to be honest I couldn't care less where you are, what you're doing or who you're doing it with.'

'Is that so?'

'Mmm-hmm.' She nodded. 'I'm not one of those women you can turn into a gibbering idiot with a smile. I just hope your ego can handle that.'

'Careful, Jo, I might take that as a challenge.'

There was a low burst of the same sparkling laughter he heard on the stairwell, making him wonder why it was he hadn't recognized it before. Most likely it was because she didn't laugh much when he was around. The second it looked as if she would, he'd say something to ruin her mood. He'd been good at that long before he'd started to put any effort into it.

'I had no idea you had a sense of humour,' she said with enough derogatory amusement to tempt him to rise to the bait.

Before he could, she opened the door to her apartment and stepped over the threshold. She turned, her gaze sliding over his body from head to toe and back up again; her laughter louder as she swung the door shut.

Daniel shook his head. *Damn, she bugged him.*

Damn, he bugged her.

Leaning back against the door, Jo took a long breath and frowned at the fact her heart rate was running a little faster than usual. If taking the stairs in heels had that much of an effect, she might have to consider taking a gym membership.

Granted, a small part of it could probably be chalked up to frustration at her inability to hold a conversation with him without it turning into a verbal sparring match. But she hadn't been sparring alone. To say they brought out the worst in each other would be the understatement of the century.

Heading across the open-plan living area to her bedroom, she resisted the urge to hunt out fluffy slippers and a pair of pyjamas. If he drove her into ice-cream-eating attire on his first day there wasn't a hope she could survive the next three months. When her cell phone rang an hour later, she checked the name on the screen before answering.

'I still can't believe you've done this to me.'

A smile sounded in Olivia's voice. 'Which part? Moving out, putting you in a bridesmaid dress or telling Danny about the apartment next door?'

'I think you know what I mean,' Jo smirked sarcastically. 'I need a new BFF; my ideal man could have moved into that apartment if you hadn't mentioned it to Mr Personality.'

'Since when have you been looking for an ideal man? And anyway, he won't be there long. Short lease, remember?'

'If he renews I'm making a little doll and sticking dozens of pins in it.' Leaving the mirror where she had been staging a personal fashion show in front of hyper-critical eyes, she headed for the kitchen. 'But just so you know, he's determined I'll move first.'

Since everyone who had ever lived in Manhattan knew what their apartment meant to a New Yorker, she didn't have to explain how ridiculous it was for Daniel to think she was going anywhere. The apartment she'd shared with Olivia—and from time to time still did with Jess—was a few hundred square feet of space she could call her own.

She hadn't worked her butt off to end up back in a place she'd sworn she would never find herself again.

'You saw him already? Is there blood in the hall?'

‘Not yet. But give it a few weeks and only one of us is leaving this building intact.’ Lifting the empty coffeepot, she sighed at the heavy beat coming from across the hall. ‘Can you hear that?’

She held the phone out at arm’s length for a moment.

‘My brother and classic rock go together like—’

‘Satan and eternal torture?’ Jo enquired.

‘Probably not the best time to mention he’s agreed to be in the wedding party, is it?’

‘I am *not* walking up the aisle with him.’

‘You can have Tyler.’

Good call. She loved Tyler Brannigan. *He* was fun to be around. ‘I thought he was determined he wasn’t wearing a monkey suit. How did you talk him into it?’

‘Danny? The same way we got him to his niece’s birthday party last month. Only this time Blake helped ...’

Meaning he’d lost a bet. Jo smiled a small smile at the idea of Liv’s new fiancé tag-teaming with the rest of the Brannigan brothers against one of their own on poker night. She spooned coffee granules into the percolator. *Go Blake.*

‘How did he look to you?’

The question made Jo blink, her voice threaded with suspicion. ‘Same as he always looks. Why?’

‘I take it you haven’t watched the news today.’

‘No.’ She stepped into the living room and pointed the remote at the TV screen. ‘What did I miss?’

‘Wait for it ...’

The report appeared almost instantaneously on the local news channel. Unable to hear what was said without racking the volume up to competitive levels, she read the feed across the bottom of the screen. It mentioned a yet-to-be-named Emergency Services Officer who might or might not have unhooked his safety harness to rescue a man on the Williamsburg Bridge. If it was who she thought it was Jo could have told them the answer. The camera attempted to focus on a speck of arm-waving humanity among the suspension cables at the exact moment another speck closed in on him. For a second they came dangerously close to falling; a collective gasp coming from the crowd of gawkers on the ground. At the last minute several more specks surrounded them and hauled them to safety.

A round of applause sounded on the screen as Jo shook her head. ‘You got to be kidding me.’

‘I know.’ Olivia sighed. ‘Mom is climbing the walls. It was tough enough for her when he was overseas ...’

‘Did you call him?’

‘He’s not picking up.’

Jo glared at the door. ‘I’ll call you back.’

In the hall, she banged her fist several times against wood before the music lowered and the door opened.

‘Call your mother,’ she demanded as she thrust her cell phone at him.

‘What’s wrong?’

Ignoring what could have almost been mistaken for concern in his deep voice, she turned her hand around, hit speed-dial and lifted the phone to her ear.

‘You’re an inconsiderate asshat,’ she muttered.

The second his mother picked up she thrust the phone at him again, snatching her hand back when warm fingers brushed against hers.

‘No, it’s me. I’m fine. Someone would have called you if I wasn’t. You know that.’ He took a step back and closed the door in Jo’s face.

Back in her apartment, she froze and swore under her breath at the fact he had her cell phone. Her life was in that little rectangle of technology. Hadn’t stopped to think that one through, had

she? Marching back to the kitchen, she lifted the apartment phone, checked the Post-it note on the crowded refrigerator door and dialled his sister's new number.

'He's talking to your mother now.'

'What did you do?' Liv asked.

'Told him exactly what I thought of him.'

'To his face?'

Picking up where she'd left off, Jo hit the switch on the percolator. 'I've never had a problem saying what I think to his face. You *know* that.'

There was a firm knock against wood.

'Hang on.' When she opened the door and her gaze met narrowed blue eyes, she took the phone from him, replacing it with the one in her hand. 'Your sister.'

Lifting the receiver to his ear, he stepped across the threshold. 'Hey, sis, what's up?'

Jo blinked. How had he ended up in her apartment? Swinging the door shut, she turned and went back to the kitchen. If he thought it was becoming a regular occurrence, he could forget it. She wanted to spend time with him as much as she loved the idea of having her fingernails pulled out. Glancing briefly at the room that seemed smaller with him in it, she frowned when he looked at her from the corner of his eye.

His gaze swept over her body, lingering for longer than necessary on her feet. What was *that*?

Jo resisted the urge to look down at what she was wearing. There was nothing wrong with her outfit. If anything, it covered more than the one she was wearing last time he saw her. Personally she loved how the high-waist black pants made her legs seem longer, especially when accompanied by a pair of deep purple, skyscraper-heeled Louboutins. Five feet six inches didn't exactly make her small. But considering the number of models towering over her like Amazons on regular occasions during working hours, she appreciated every additional illusionary inch of height. She shook her head a minute amount. Why should she care what he thought? What he knew about fashion wouldn't fill a thimble. His jeans were a prime example.

Judging by the way they were worn at the knees and around the pockets on his—

She sharply averted her gaze. If he caught her looking at his rear she would never hear the end of it.

The man already had an ego the size of Texas.

'It's my job,' he said with a note of impatience as he paced around the room. 'The line didn't reach ... There wasn't time ... I knew they had my back. You done, 'cos I'm pretty sure your friend has three more calls to make ...'

Unrepentant, Jo grabbed her favourite mug and set it on the counter. She hoped Liv gave him hell, especially when he had just confirmed his stupidity. What kind of idiot unhooked his safety harness that high up? Hadn't he heard of a little thing called gravity?

Turning as the coffee bubbled, she leaned her hip against the counter and folded her arms, studying him while he paced. His jaw tensed, broad chest lifting and lowering beneath a faded Giants T-Shirt. He looked ... weary? No, weary wasn't the right word. Tired, maybe—as if he hadn't slept much lately. Not that she cared about that either, but since Liv asked how he looked, apparently she felt the need to study him more closely than usual and once she'd gotten started ...

Okay, so if injected with a truth serum she supposed she would admit there were understandable reasons women tended to trip over their feet when he smiled. Vivid blue eyes, shortly cropped dark blond hair, the hint of shadow on his strong jaw ... Add them to the ease with which his long, lean, muscular frame covered the ground and there wasn't a single gal in Manhattan who wouldn't volunteer their phone number.

Not that they'd hold his interest for long.

'Well, you can stop. I'm fine. Don't you have a wedding to plan? Said I would, didn't I?' His gaze slid across the room. 'She'll call you back.'

Before he hung up, Jo was across the apartment and had swung the door open with a smile. But instead of his taking the hint, a large hand closed it, his palm flattening on the wood by her head. His body loomed over hers. If they'd been outside he would have blocked out the sun.

'We obviously need to talk,' he said flatly.

No, they didn't. Jo gritted her teeth together, rapidly losing what was left of her patience. She was contemplating grinding a stiletto heel into one of his boots when he took a short breath and added, 'Butting your pretty little nose into other people's business might be okay with other folks. It's not with me.'

'Try answering your phone and I won't have to.' She arched a brow. 'Is the fact your family might think you have a death wish so very difficult for you to grasp?'

'I don't have a death wish.'

'Unhooking your harness is standard procedure, is it?'

'Go stand on the chair.'

She faltered. 'What?'

'You heard me.'

When she didn't move, he circled her wrist with a thumb and forefinger. The jolt of heat that travelled swiftly up her arm made her drop her chin and frown as he led her across the room. Now he was *touching* her? He never touched her. If anything it had always felt as if there were a quarantine zone around her.

'What do you think you're doing?' she asked.

'Staging a demonstration ...'

Her eyes widened when he released her wrist, set his hands on her waist and hoisted her onto an overstuffed chair. 'Where do you get off—? Don't stand on my furniture!'

Feet spread shoulder-width apart on the deep cushions of the sofa, he tested the springs with a couple of small bounces before jerking his chin at her. 'Jump.'

'What?'

'Jump.'

That was it, she'd had enough. She wasn't the remotest bit interested in playing games. What was he—*five*?

But when she attempted to get down off the chair, a long arm snapped around her waist and she was launched into mid-air. The next thing she knew, she was slammed into what felt like a wall of heat, a sharp gasp hauled through her parted lips. She jerked her chin up and stared into his eyes, the tips of their noses almost touching. What. The. Hell?

'You see ...' he said in a mesmerizing rumble '... it's all about balance ...'

Surreally, his intense gaze examined her face in a way that suggested he'd never looked at her before. But what was more disconcerting was how it felt as if there weren't anywhere they weren't touching. The sensation of her breasts crushed against his chest made it difficult to breathe, the contact sending an erotic jolt through her abdomen. How could she be attracted to him when she disliked him so much?

When she was lowered—unbearably slowly—along the length of his large body, Jo had no choice but to grasp wide shoulders until her feet hit the cushions. She swayed as she let go. For a moment she even felt light-headed.

'I knew what I was doing.' Stepping down, he lifted her onto the floor as if she weighed nothing.

Taking an immediate step back, Jo dropped her arms to her sides. Her gaze lowered to his chest. She should be angry, ticked off beyond belief he had the gall to touch her and—worse still—have an effect on her body. She liked her world right-side-up, *thank you very much*, and if he knew what he had done to her ...

Folding her arms over heavy breasts, she lifted her chin again. 'The giant footprints you've left on my sofa make us even for the half-dozen glasses.'

‘If you’ve got nothing better to do with your time than talk about me to my family, try taking up a hobby.’

A small cough of disbelief left her lips. ‘I have plenty of things to fill my time.’

‘Dating obviously isn’t one of them,’ he said dryly.

‘Meaning *what*, exactly?’

‘Meaning I may have forgotten why it is you’ve stayed single for so long, but after an hour it’s starting to come back to me.’ He folded his arms in a mirror of her stance. ‘Ever consider being nice from time to time might improve the odds of getting laid?’

‘Since when has my sex life been remotely in the region of any of your business?’

‘If I had to guess, I’d say around about the same time my relationship with my family became yours.’

Reaching for the kind of strength that had gotten her through worse things than an argument in the past, Jo smiled sweetly. ‘Try not to let the door hit your ass on the way out.’

‘That’s the best you’ve got?’ he asked with a lift of his brows. ‘You’re obviously out of practice.’ He nodded firmly. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll soon get you combat-ready again.’

Jo sighed heavily and headed for the door. She didn’t look at him as he crossed the room. But for some completely unknown reason, just before he left, she heard herself ask, ‘Don’t you ever get tired of this?’

Where had *that* come from?

Daniel stopped, turned his head and studied her with an intense gaze. ‘Quitting on me, babe?’

She frowned when the softly spoken question did something weird to her chest. ‘Don’t call me babe.’

When he didn’t move, the air seemed to thicken in the space between them. Stupid hormones—even if she was in the market for a relationship he was the last man—

‘You want to negotiate a truce?’

She didn’t know what had possessed her to ask the question in the first place and now he was asking if she wanted them to be *friends*? She stifled a burst of laughter. ‘Did I give the impression I was waving a white flag? I’m talking about you, not me. You look tired, Daniel.’ She pouted. ‘Is the energy required pretending to be a nice guy to everyone else finally wearing you down?’

His eyes darkened. ‘Questioning my stamina, babe?’

The ‘babe’ thing was really starting to get to her.

Taking a step closer, he leaned his face close enough for her to feel the warmth of his breath on her cheeks.

‘*Bad idea*,’ he warned.

Ignoring the flutter of her pulse, Jo stiffened her spine. Since childhood she’d had a code she lived by; one she still found hard to break, even for the tiny handful of people she allowed to occupy an equally tiny corner of her heart. Show any sign of weakness and it was the beginning of the end. The masks she wore were the reason she had survived a time in her life when she was invisible. At the beginning of her career they gave the impression professional criticism never stung. So while her heart thudded erratically, she donned a mask of Zen-like calm. ‘Am I supposed to be intimidated by that?’

He smiled dangerously in reply. ‘Keep challenging me and this is going to get real interesting, real quick.’

‘Seriously, you’re hilarious. I never knew that about you.’ Raising a hand, she patted him in the centre of his broad chest. ‘Now be a good boy and treat yourself to an early night. Can’t have those good looks fading, now, can we?’ She flattened her palm and pushed him back to make enough room to open the door. ‘What would we use to fool members of the opposite sex into thinking we’re a catch if we had to rely on our personality?’

‘You tell me.’

Moving her hand from his chest, she wrapped her fingers around a muscled upper arm and encouraged him to step through the door with another push. When he was standing in the hall and looking at her with a hint of a smile on his face, she leaned her shoulder against the door frame and angled her chin. Her eyes narrowed. It felt as if he knew something she didn't.

She *hated* when he did that.

'Admit it: you missed this.'

Lifting her gaze upwards, she studied the air and took a deep breath. 'Nope, can't say I did.'

'Without me around there's no one to set you straight when you need it.'

'You say that as if you know me well enough to know what I need.' She shook her head. 'You don't know me, Daniel. You're afraid to get to know me.'

'Really,' he said dryly.

'Yes, really, because if you did you might have to admit you were wrong about me and we both know you don't like to admit you're wrong about anything.' She glanced up and down the hall as if searching for eavesdroppers before lowering her voice. 'Worse still, you might discover you *like* me. And we can't have that, can we?'

Rocking forward, he lowered his voice to the same level. 'I don't think there's any danger of that.'

Jo searched his too-blue eyes, suddenly questioning if he even remembered how the war between them began. Looking back, she realized she didn't; what was it that made him so much more difficult to get along with than every other member of his family? Everyone got to a point where they started to try and make sense of their life. She was at peace with a lot of the things she couldn't change. But since Daniel was the only person she'd ever been immature around in her entire life, she couldn't help but wonder why. Apparently he wasn't the only one in need of a good night's rest.

She rolled her eyes at the momentary weakness. 'Whatever you tell yourself to help you sleep at night.'

'I sleep just fine,' he said tightly. 'You don't need to worry about me.'

'I wasn't—'

'Just do us both a favour and stay out of my business. If you don't, I might start poking my nose into yours.'

'I have nothing to hide,' she lied. 'Do you?'

'Don't push me, babe.'

She managed to stop the words *or what?* leaving her lips, but it wasn't solely the need to strive for maturity. There was something else going on; she could *feel* it. It was more than the chill in his gaze, more than the rigid set of his shoulders or the unmistakable edge of warning in his deep voice. What *was* it?

As if he could read the question in her eyes, Daniel frowned and turned his profile to her. A muscle tensed on his jaw, suggesting he was grinding his teeth together. But even if she had the right to ask what was wrong, before she had the chance, he turned away. When she ended up staring at his door again, she blinked and shook her head.

Well, Day One had been great.

She couldn't *wait* for Day Two.

CHAPTER TWO

'Is it just me or does coffee taste better when they make those little love hearts in the foam? It's funny the things that can make a difference in how we feel.'

JORJA DAWSON had breasts. Considering he was a man and she was a woman, part of Daniel's brain had to have always known that. Fortunately, in the past, they had never been pressed against his chest in a way that made them difficult to ignore.

It was the kind of intel he could have done without.

Judging by the way the tips of those breasts were beaded against the material of her tight-fitting top before she hid them beneath folded arms, the spark of sexual awareness had been mutual. She should just be thankful he had an honourable streak. If she ever found out he'd been as aware of her as she was of him, she would have a brand-new weapon at her disposal. One that, were she foolish enough to use it, would leave him no choice but to launch a counterattack with heavy artillery until she offered her unconditional surrender.

In terms of fallout, it would be similar to pulling the pin on a grenade he couldn't toss to a safe distance.

Number two on his list: *sister's best friend*.

Since every guy on the planet who didn't have long-term plans knew to avoid that minefield, it wouldn't matter if she wore nothing but lacy underwear to go with the shoes he would have been happy for her to wear to bed. She could have pole-danced for him and he would still resist the urge to kiss her.

'Whatever you tell yourself to help you sleep at night.'

When the echoed words led directly to the memory of the unspoken questions in her eyes, he pushed his body harder in the last block of a five mile run. She'd hit a nerve but there was no way she could know he wasn't sleeping. Or that he was sick of waking up bathed in a cold sweat, his throat raw from yelling. It had to stop before he did something stupid in work again or was forced to look for another apartment. He would damn well *make* it stop.

But distracting himself from the problem with thoughts of Jorja Dawson's breasts wasn't the way to go about it.

Slowing his pace to a walk, he shouldered his way into a busy coffee shop and pushed back the hood on his sweatshirt. After placing his order, he looked around while he waited for it to arrive, his gaze discovering a woman sitting alone by the windows. It was exactly what he needed: *another woman*.

Questioning if he was forming a fetish, he started his assessment with her shoes—a pair of simple black patent heels with open toes—before he moved up the legs crossed elegantly beneath the table to a fitted skirt that hugged her like a second skin. *Nice*. Continuing upwards, he was rewarded with a glimpse of curved breast between the lapels of a crisp white blouse as she turned in her seat. Then his gaze took in the smooth twist of dark hair at the nape of her neck in the kind of up-do that begged to be unpinned so she could shake her hair loose. She was even wearing a pair of small, rectangular-framed reading glasses to complete the fantasy.

But when she turned again, he shook his head. Used to be a time he was better at sensing the presence of the enemy.

She looked up at him when he stopped for a paper napkin at the condiment station beside her. 'Are you kidding me?'

'I can't buy a cup of coffee now?'

'You can buy it somewhere else.'

'This is the closest coffee shop.'

‘You can have the one two blocks down. This one is mine.’ She returned her attention to her computer screen. ‘It’s my work space every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning.’

‘I must have missed the notice on the door,’ Daniel said as he pulled out the chair facing her and sat down. He smirked when she scowled at him. ‘Good morning.’

After an attempt to continue what she was doing while he looked through the window at the steady build of people headed to their offices, she sighed. ‘You’re going to be here every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, aren’t you?’

‘Not a morning person, I take it.’

‘This is your plan?’ She arched a brow when he looked at her. ‘You’re going to be there every time I turn around until you wear me down and I move? Wow ... that’s ...’

‘Effective?’

‘I was going to say adolescent. I can’t tell you how reassuring it is to know the city is in the hands of such a mature example of the New York Police Department.’

When her fingers began to move across the keyboard again, Daniel realized he didn’t have the faintest idea what she did for a living. He wondered why. Hadn’t needed to know was the simple answer. Though it did kind of beg the question of why it was he needed to know *now*.

Know your enemy and know yourself and you could fight a hundred battles, as the saying went. With that in mind he took a short breath. ‘So what is it you do anyway?’

She didn’t look up from the screen. ‘It’s the first time you’ve been tempted to ask that question?’

‘I don’t have a newspaper to pass the time.’

‘They’re on a stand by the door.’

‘It’s an internet thing, isn’t it?’

Long lashes lifted behind her glasses. ‘Meaning?’

‘You’re one of those people who reports their every move every five minutes so the universe can know how much time they spend doing laundry.’

‘Yes, that’s the only thing people use the internet for these days.’ She reached for her coffee. ‘It’s because working online isn’t a physical job, right? Anyone who isn’t lifting heavy objects or doing something with their hands instantly earns a low ranking on your Neanderthal scale of the survival of the fittest.’

‘You might want to slow down on the caffeine intake. I think you’re close to the legal limit already.’

Setting the cup down, she breathed deep and went back to work. ‘I write a blog.’

‘You can earn a living doing that?’

‘Among other things,’ she replied.

‘What’s it about?’

‘Don’t you have somewhere you need to be?’

‘Nope.’

‘Fine, then. I can play the “get to know me better” game until you get bored and leave. It shouldn’t take long with your attention span.’ Lifting her coffee again, she leaned back in her chair and looked him straight in the eye. ‘I work for a fashion magazine and as part of my job I write a daily blog on the latest trends and the kind of things twenty-something women might find interesting.’

‘You’re as deep as a shallow puddle, aren’t you?’

‘Not everything is about the meaning of life. Sometimes it’s more about living it. For some people that means finding joy in the little things.’

‘Like spending money on the kind of clothes that will put them in debt?’

‘Like wearing things that make them feel good.’ She shrugged a narrow shoulder. ‘I assume it’s how someone like you feels when they wear their uniform of choice.’

‘I don’t wear a uniform as a fashion statement.’

‘You’re saying you don’t feel good when you wear it?’

‘It’s a matter of pride in what I do.’

‘And doesn’t that make you feel good about yourself?’

She was smart, but *that* he’d known. Trouble was she wasn’t entirely right. ‘It’s not as simple as that.’

When her head tilted at an obviously curious angle, he lounged back in his chair. Since she’d given him the opening with the topic of conversation, he openly checked her out. ‘I take it the librarian look is in vogue now.’

‘It’s better than the mugger ensemble you’re wearing.’

Lowering his chin, he ran a large palm over the faded U.S.M.C. lettering on his chest. ‘I’ve had this since basic training. It has sentimental value.’

‘Wouldn’t that suggest you have a heart?’

‘Bit difficult to walk around without one.’

‘As difficult as it is to survive without sleep?’

Daniel stared at her without blinking.

‘Thin walls ...’ she said in a soft tone that smacked too much of sympathy for his liking before she shrugged. ‘Try falling asleep without the television on, you might get more benefit from the traditional eight hours—especially if you’re watching something with that much yelling in it. What was it—horror flick of the week?’

‘You’re worried about me again? That’s sweet.’ Feeling sick to his stomach at how close he’d been to humiliation, he got to his feet. ‘Now I know you spend your nights with a glass pressed to the wall I’ll try and find something on the nature channel with whale song in it.’ When his trip to the door was halted by the brush of cool fingers against his hand, he looked down at her. ‘What?’

Dropping her arm, she avoided his gaze and shook her head. ‘Forget it.’

‘You got something to say, spit it out.’ He checked his watch. ‘I have an appointment with my boss in an hour.’

The statement lifted her chin again. ‘Because of what happened yesterday?’

‘Hardly the first time I’ve had my ass hauled across the coals for breaking the rules.’

‘You saved a man’s life.’ She shrugged her shoulders and looked away. ‘I’m sure that counts for something.’

She was reassuring him?

‘Not that you don’t deserve it for doing something so asinine,’ she added. ‘You could have placed other members of your team in danger.’

That was more like it. It was also pretty much exactly what he expected to have yelled at him in an hour. ‘We all do what we gotta do when the situation calls for it.’ He lowered his voice. ‘You should know that better than most.’

She looked up at him from the corner of her eye. ‘And there you go thinking you know me again.’

‘Did it ever occur to you that you don’t make it easy for people to do that?’

‘People who want to make an effort.’

‘And how many tests do they have to pass before you talk to them like they have an IQ higher than a rock?’

‘Stupid is as stupid does,’ she replied with a smile.

‘I take it back. If you’re quoting *Forrest Gump* at me you obviously need more caffeine.’ He placed an apologetic look on his face. ‘I’d get you some before I leave but I’m not allowed to buy coffee here.’

‘You’re the most irritating person I’ve ever met.’

‘See you later, babe.’ ‘Not if I see you first.’

‘Still rusty.’

He shook his head. ‘Keep practising.’

'How's the challenge coming along?'

'Hmm?' Jo blinked at her erstwhile roomie, a second night of interrupted sleep catching up with her.

He must have moved his bed after the conversation in the coffee shop. The yelling had been further away but, like the first time, when it came it was torture. She doubted anyone could hear a human being in that much pain and not feel the effect of it emotionally.

'The challenge the magazine gave you?' Jess prompted. 'The one where you wear outfits from the centre pages to discover if different images change how people see you? I'm assuming that's why you look like a French onion seller today. Not that the beret doesn't work for you.'

Yes, she liked the beret. It was the kind of thing she'd have chosen herself, especially when it had a little touch of France to it. But since she wasn't supposed to wear anything the magazine hadn't chosen for her ...

Lowering her chin, she idly rearranged the crumbs on her plate with the prongs of her fork. Wasn't as if he would tell her what had caused the nightmare if she asked him, was it? That part of not pushing the subject she got. Where it began to get weird started with the fact she hadn't felt the need to talk it through with his sister. His family cared about him. If he was struggling with something that happened when he was overseas they would want to help in any way possible. Not that he would make it easy. Trouble was she couldn't forget how the colour drained from his face when he'd thought she knew.

It felt as if the man she had known and disliked so much hadn't come home and someone new had taken his place. Someone she could empathize with and wanted to get to know better.

It was just plain *weird*.

'Earth to Jo ...'

'It's going fine,' she replied as she speared another piece of cake with her fork and popped it into her mouth. 'Mmm, this one ...'

When she risked a brief glance across the table at the only person who knew when she was hiding something, Jo was relieved to find amusement sparkling in Liv's eyes.

'You said that about the last two.'

Jo angled her head. 'Remind me again why we're doing this with you instead of Blake?'

'Because he's more interested in the honeymoon than the cake we have at our reception.'

Fair enough. She reached for a second sample of chocolate cake. 'I lied, it's still this one.'

'You know chocolate is a substitute for sex,' Jess commented. 'It's an endorphins thing.'

'It's more than that,' Jo replied. 'You never have to worry if chocolate will call ... it never stands you up ... and it doesn't mind keeping you company during a rom-com on a Friday night.' She sighed contentedly as she reached for another sample. 'Chocolate is *better* than sex.'

Jess snorted. 'The hell it is.'

'She's young,' Liv nodded sagely. 'She'll learn.'

'If she tried having it occasionally she'd learn a lot quicker.'

'She scares them off.'

Jo waggled her fork in the air. *'Still in the room ...'*

It wasn't her fault guys found her intimidating. With the kind of life experience that went beyond her twenty-four years, she was self-sufficient and hard-working with her focus fixed firmly on her career. If there was overtime available, she took it. Holidays people with family commitments didn't want to work, she volunteered. But regardless of her career, she was also very open about the fact she wasn't interested in getting involved, even if she wasn't prepared to explain why. Put everything together it was difficult for guys to envisage her needing them for more than one thing. Though in fairness there were plenty of them who wouldn't see that as a problem.

There was a short debate on the merits of vanilla cream before Jess asked, 'How's our new neighbour?'

'In order to be "our" new neighbour wouldn't you need to be there more than once a week?' Jo smiled sweetly.

'You need reinforcements, you just have to yell.'

'You *like* Daniel.'

'Everyone but you likes Danny.' Jess shrugged. 'He is what he is and doesn't make any excuses for it. There's a lot to be said for that.'

'There's nothing hidden with him,' Liv agreed. 'When we were kids his bluntness got him into trouble, but honestly? We all kind of relied on it.'

Jo was beginning to wonder if anyone knew Daniel as well as they thought they did but she didn't say so out loud. She couldn't. Not without telling them there were *some* things he kept hidden.

'You could try taking the high road,' Jess suggested.

'I get nosebleeds.' Jo frowned.

The chocolate cake was gone and how had they got from the subject of her sex life to Daniel in the space of two minutes anyway? Apart from spending time with the friends it felt as if she hadn't seen much of lately, part of the appeal of the cake tasting had been the opportunity to take a break from him.

'You make a decision on the cake yet?' she asked.

'I'm swaying towards different layers of these three.' Liv pointed her fork at the emptiest plates.

'What's next on the list?'

'Flowers.'

The conversation swayed back towards wedding plans as they left the bakery and made their way past the public library to the nearest subway station. Jess glanced at the steps in front of the large Grecian columns where several men in helmets and bulletproof vests were gathered around one of the stone lions.

'Isn't that Danny?'

Oh, *come on*.

Reluctantly—as Olivia and Jess headed towards him and she lagged a step behind—Jo had to admit the uniform was sexy in a badass/mess-with-me-and-die kind of way. But then she'd always known Daniel had an edge to him. While he could attract women with a smile, he could make grown men cower with just a look. She had seen that look once. When was it? Tyler's thirtieth, which his younger brother deigned to make an appearance at? Yes, she thought that was it. A giant with a brain the size of a pea was foolish enough to manhandle his girlfriend within Daniel's line of sight. All it had taken was that *look* and a quietly spoken '*show the lady some respect*' and he'd backed down with a string of mumbled apologies. When it was over Daniel had simply continued what he was doing as if nothing had happened.

Jo wondered why it had taken seeing him in uniform for her to remember she'd been impressed by that.

'Ladies.' He nodded once in greeting.

Gathering herself together, she stepped forward and gave the answer everyone expected. 'Officer Moron.'

'Really?' he questioned with a deadpan expression. 'When I'm holding a gun?'

'What can I say?' She shrugged. 'Guess I must like living on the edge.'

While she cocked her head in challenge, he shot a brief downward glance at what she was wearing. It lasted less than a heartbeat, was immediately followed by a cursory blink and then his intense gaze locked with hers, leaving her feeling suddenly ... exposed. Whether it was because she'd never noticed him looking at her before or because she was more aware of when he did, she didn't know. But neither option sat well with her. Particularly when she suspected the momentary sense of vulnerability she'd experienced stemmed from the sensation he knew she was remembering things she'd chosen to forget.

Jess chuckled at the interaction. 'Hey, Danny.'

He turned on the charm with the flick of an invisible switch. 'Hey, gorgeous.'

Jo inwardly rolled her eyes at her friend's reaction to his infamous smile before allowing her gaze to roam over the crowd. If she focused on something else, with any luck, she could try and pretend he wasn't there. All she needed was something to take her mind off—

Her stomach dropped to the soles of her strappy heels. 'I've got to go.'

'I thought we were going to look at flowers?'

Looking into Liv's eyes, she used the tone that translated into a hidden message. 'I'll call you later.'

'Okay.'

She didn't look at Daniel as she left, but Jo could sense his gaze on her as she merged into the crowd. How it made her feel helped explain the secret she kept from his sister. Only someone with a shadowy secret of their own could understand what it meant to bring it into the cold light of day. Gaze fixed on the figure she could see moving into the park, she shut down emotionally in preparation.

It was the only way she could deal with it.

The dream began a handful of hours before dawn. New faces—a different scenario—but the outcome was always the same. As he jerked back into reality, pulse racing and heart pounding, Daniel wondered why he was surprised at the latest additions. There was nothing the damn thing loved more than new material.

At times he swore he could hear scaly little demon hands being rubbed together with glee.

Grabbing the sweatpants on the end of his rack, he hauled them on and swore when he stubbed his toe on a box on his way to the kitchen. As he reached for a light switch he froze. The second he yanked open the door to the hall she jumped and dropped her keys.

'Damn it, Daniel!' Jo exclaimed.

Leaning a shoulder against the door frame, he folded his arms across his chest. 'Late night or early start?'

It was a question that didn't require an answer; the outfit she had been wearing outside the library said it all. With considerable effort, he dragged his gaze away from the perfect rear poured into tight black trousers that ended halfway down her calves.

'Who made you the hall monitor?' Keys in hand, she stood up tall and turned to face him.

'I'm a light sleeper.'

A brief frown crossed her face before her gaze landed squarely in the centre of his naked chest. The former should have bugged him more than the latter, especially when it was dangerously close to the kind of look that had forced him to move apartments over the years. Instead he was more bothered by the jolt of electricity travelling through his body from the point of impact. The fact she continued staring didn't help. If anything it aided the flow of blood that rushed to his groin in response.

'Isn't it usually the guy who sneaks home after the deed is done?' he asked as if bringing up the subject of her sex life again would distract his misbehaving body. When her gaze lifted sharply, he changed the subject. 'Didn't occur to you that having a cop for a neighbour might involve him greeting you with his service weapon if he hears you creeping around in the dark?'

'The lights are on,' she argued.

'It's the middle of the night.'

'I don't have to answer to you.'

'Do you have any idea how much paperwork I'll have to fill out if I accidentally shoot you?'

She arched a brow. '*Accidentally?*'

'That's what I'll call it.'

A lump appeared in her cheek as her gaze searched the air. 'That's twice in twenty-four hours you've threatened to shoot me. I wonder if that's enough for a restraining order. Remind me to ask your sister.'

'He tossed you out of his apartment, didn't he?'

'What is it with this sudden obsession with my sex life?' She looked into his eyes. 'If I didn't know any better I might think it's been a while for you.'

Longer than he cared to admit, but it wasn't as if he could share a bed with a woman for long. He could guarantee his complete and undivided attention while he was there; took a great deal of pride in that fact. But when it came to leaving them satisfied, there was just as much emphasis on the word *leaving*. Preferably before he was dumb enough to fall asleep and risk making a fool of himself.

'Worried I might be lonely, babe?'

She scowled. 'Don't call me babe.'

'If the shoe fits ...'

'You know by saying that you're saying you think—?'

'You don't have to like someone to think they're hot.'

'I ... You ...' When her mouth formed words that didn't appear she clamped it shut, took a short breath through her nose and snapped, 'What are you doing?'

Damned if he knew but the fact it had flustered her worked for him. 'Isn't he a little old for you?'

Something unreadable crossed her eyes before she blinked and lifted her chin. 'Who are we talking about?'

'The guy you were with in Bryant Park.'

'What guy?'

Nice try, but Daniel had never been known to give up that easily. 'The one you argued with before you dragged him into the subway station.'

'You were spying on me?'

'You think when I'm dressed like that I'm supposed to ignore what's happening around me?'

She sighed heavily and turned away. 'I don't have the energy for this.'

'It's Wednesday. We'll pick it up in the coffee shop.'

'No, we won't.'

As her door opened he saw her shoulders slump as if she'd been putting considerable effort into disguising how exhausted she was and the proximity to home allowed her to relax. Most folks were the same at the end of a long day but Daniel knew it was more than that. If he hadn't, he would have got it when she glanced over her shoulder.

Long lashes lifted and for a split second what he could see in her eyes made him frown. He recognized it because he'd seen it in the eyes of men in combat and guys who'd been on the job as a cop for too long. Given no other choice he might have admitted he had been avoiding looking for it in his own eyes in the mirror of late.

If a person's eyes were really the windows to the soul, part of hers was close to giving up the fight.

He took a step forward before he realized he was doing it, compelled by the need to say something, but unable to find the words. With the men he had worked with they were never needed. There was a silent understanding, an empathy born from shared experiences. A nod of acknowledgement could say as much as a hundred words. Cracking jokes or discussing something inane was more welcome. But someone as full of life as Jo shouldn't—

When her door closed with a low click, Daniel made a snap decision. It wasn't as if he had much choice. If she was in trouble and his family knew he hadn't done something, they would make the roasting he got from his captain look like a weekend barbecue. Taking a long breath, he stepped back and closed the door. In order to prepare for battle he was going to need a few more hours of—hopefully uninterrupted—sleep.

Come daylight he was venturing into enemy territory.

CHAPTER THREE

'We all know a new outfit can lift our spirits. But how often do we look at the person wearing one and wonder if it's a hint of something bigger happening inside?'

'COME on, Jack, pick up.'

Jo rubbed her fingertips across her forehead to ease the first indications of a massive headache. Touching the screen to turn the phone off, she set it down on the table beside her computer. She was going to have to go over there. It was the only way she could be certain where he was.

Sighing heavily, she reached for her coffee cup only to frown at how light it was. If she was going to get a day's work done in half the time she was going to need a constant supply of caffeine.

'That his name, is it?'

The sound of a familiar deep voice snapped her gaze to another coffee cup being held out towards her. She blinked at the large hand holding it. 'Eavesdrop much?'

'Let's call it an occupational hazard.' Daniel rocked his hand a little. 'You want this or not?'

Her gaze lifted, lingering for a moment on his chest when she remembered what it had looked like naked: taut tanned skin over muscle and a six-pack to make a girl drool. Frowning at the memory, she moved further up until she was looking into too-blue eyes and asked, 'Why are you buying me coffee?'

'You looked like you could do with it,' he replied.

'You don't even know how I take it.'

'Since you're a regular, I surmised the guy behind the counter would. Turns out I was right.'

Jo's gaze lowered to the temptation as she weighed up the risk involved with accepting it. Not that he would wait for an invitation to join her, but apart from the fact she wasn't in the mood to get into a verbal sparring match with him—

'Your loss.' He shrugged. Setting it down on the opposite side of the table, he pulled out the empty chair and sat down.

'There are other tables in here, you know.'

Daniel didn't say anything, his steady gaze fixed on hers as he took the lid off his cup.

'We're not picking up where we left off last night, if that's what you're thinking,' she said.

'Technically it was this morning.'

'I've stayed out of your business.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'How about you return the favour and stay out of mine?' She smiled sweetly, determined not to look at the abandoned coffee on the table in front of him.

Daniel brought his cup to his face and took a deep breath. 'Nothing quite like a cup of Joe to kick-start the morning ...'

While her eyes narrowed at the innuendo, he lifted his other arm and tapped the lid of the abandoned coffee cup with a long forefinger. 'Sure you don't want this? Seems a shame for it to go to waste ...'

'What do you want?'

'Suspicious, aren't we?'

'I've met you.'

'And still not a morning person.' He inclined his head towards the cup. 'Another shot of caffeine might help.'

Jo fought the need to growl. She wanted that coffee so badly she could taste it on her tongue. Despite her strong-willed determination to stop it happening, her gaze lowered to watch the tip of his forefinger trace an almost absent-minded circle around the edge of the plastic lid. It was one of the most sensual things she had ever seen, adding a new dimension to the temptation, which had nothing

to do with caffeine. For a moment her imagination even wondered what the movement would feel like against her skin ...

Reaching out, she waggled her fingers. 'Give.'

His hand moved, fingers curling around the cup to draw it back towards him. 'How much trouble are you in?'

Her gaze snapped up again. 'What?'

'Answer the question.'

'Why would you even care if I was in trouble?' She arched a brow. 'I'd have thought the idea of my body lying in an alley somewhere would have made your day.'

'Is there a chance that might happen?'

'Not like it would be the first time.'

'That's not funny.'

'No, but I have dozens of jokes from that period of my life if you need them.' Angling her chin, she pulled one at random from the air. 'You know the best part about dating a homeless chick? You can drop her off wherever you want.'

Daniel didn't laugh. 'Do you owe him money?'

'Owe who money?'

'Jack.'

'No.'

'Then what's going on?'

A short burst of laughter left her lips. 'I'm supposed to confide in you because you bought me a cup of coffee?'

'If you're in some kind of trouble, tell me now and—'

'You'll help?' The words came out more sharply than she intended and, when they did, she felt a need to soften them by adding, 'You can't, and even if you could you'd be the last person I'd go to for help.'

Great, now he was never going to leave it alone.

She might as well have dangled a scented cloth under the nose of a bloodhound.

'I'm aware of that,' he said flatly.

'Then why are you doing this?'

When she thought about it, she realized it was simply what he did. All she was to him was another citizen of the city of New York. One he probably felt pressured to help because of her connection to his family. She shook her head. She didn't need this, least of all from him.

'Tell me what's going on.'

The tone of his deep voice inflicted more damage than anything he'd said or done in five and a half years to get to her and she hated him for it. Mostly because the rough rumble was accompanied by a softening of the blue in his eyes, which made it feel as if he understood. As always when there was the slightest danger someone might see through one of her masks, Jo fought fire with fire. 'I'll tell you what's going on when you tell me why it is you can't sleep.'

To his credit he disguised his reaction better than he had before. But the second the softer hue of his eyes became an ice-cold blue, Jo regretted what she'd said. She shouldn't have thrown it in his face. Not to get at him. It was *low*.

'What makes you think I'm not sleeping?'

Jo wavered on an indecisive tightrope between familiar ground and freefalling into the unknown. 'You were awake in the middle of the night. And you still look tired.'

'I work shifts. And it's not always easy to adjust,' he replied without missing a beat. Stretching a long arm across the table, he set the coffee beside her computer. '*Your turn.*'

It would have been if he'd told her the truth.

'You've been a cop for, what, eight years now?'

'More or less.' He nodded. 'And can have your every move reported back to me if I have to. Your point?'

'How long does it take to adjust?'

'I was overseas seven months. I've been back one.'

'What happened when you were over there?'

'We got shot at.' Lifting his cup to his mouth, he took a drink without breaking eye contact. 'Avoid the subject all you want, but we both know if I want to find out what you're hiding I can do it without your co-operation. I'll start with Liv.'

It was an empty threat. Jo reached for the coffee he had given her. 'Your sister won't tell you anything.'

'Meaning she knows what it is.'

'Meaning she wouldn't betray a confidence.'

A corner of his mouth tugged upwards. 'You know my family. They'll organize an intervention if they think something is wrong. If you've never been on the receiving end of one I can tell you they're a barrel of laughs. Nothing beats a little quality family time when it's five against one. And I did say I'd *start* with Liv ...'

'What makes you think you're not the only one who doesn't know?' she asked.

'If I am you've just made it easier for me.'

The message blood was thicker than water was clear. But she wasn't so far removed they wouldn't rally to her aid if she needed help. Jo had known that for years. They were all cut from a cloth threaded with loyalty, honour, integrity and at least a dozen other positive attributes she'd had absolutely no experience of in a family until she met the Brannigans. To Jo, they were everything a family should be. It was part of the reason she'd never understood why Daniel didn't appreciate them more. But the comment he made about family interventions explained a lot. It was an insight into why he was fighting his demons alone.

She lifted the coffee cup to her lips. 'When you speak to them you should mention the problems you're having adjusting to shift patterns. Your brothers might be able to offer some words of advice.'

'Maybe you should just tell me what's going on before this starts to get ugly,' he smirked in reply.

'We could do this all day.'

'Next round's on you. I take mine black.'

She sighed. 'You're not going to back down, are you?'

'Not my thing.'

'Which brings us back to why you need to know. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think you've answered that yet.'

When he didn't reply, she set her coffee down and went back to work, answering some of the comments on her blog while he reached across to the next table and lifted an abandoned newspaper. They sat in silence for a while until Jo could feel a tingle along the back of her neck. Without lifting her chin, she looked up from beneath her fringe to discover him studying her intently. 'What?'

'Were the glasses a fashion accessory?'

She focused on the screen again. 'I get headaches if I work at the computer for too long.'

'So where are they?'

'I left them in the apartment.'

'Other things on your mind ...' he surmised.

'I can make the print bigger on the screen if you're so concerned about my eyesight.'

There was another moment of silence, then 'Just out of curiosity, what look is it you're aiming for today?'

'It's called Gothic chic.'

At least that was what the magazine had called it. Of all the outfits she had worn during the challenge it was the most outlandish. But since she'd awoken with a need to face the world with a little more bravado and it was the kind of outfit that required confidence to carry it off ...

'Might want to remember vampires aren't supposed to walk in direct sunlight before you step outside,' he said.

'Are you going to tell me to avoid holy water, garlic and crosses too?'

He nodded. 'And teenage cheerleaders with wooden stakes ...'

Turning in her chair, Jo stretched her legs and pouted. 'You don't like the boots?' she asked as she looked at him. 'They're my favourite part.'

Daniel leaned to the side to examine them, a small frown appearing between his brows. 'You can walk in those things?'

'Women don't wear boots like these for comfort.'

Bending forward, she reached down and ran her hands over the shining leather, tucking her thumbs under the edge at her thigh and tugging as she lifted her foot off the ground. Her hair fell over her shoulder as she turned her head and smiled the kind of small, meaningful smile she'd never aimed at him before. 'Didn't we talk about how people wear things because of the way they make them feel?'

The glint of danger in his eyes was obviously intended to make her stop what she was doing before she was any deeper in trouble. *Foolish man*. He really didn't know her at all.

Daniel gritted his teeth together as she repeated the motion with her hands on her other leg and tossed her hair over her shoulder as she sat up. When she smiled across the room, his gaze followed her line of vision to the barista who was smiling back at her.

The one who had known how she took her coffee.

The second his gaze shifted, Daniel glared at him. But the guy who immediately went scurrying back to his coffee beans wasn't the source of his annoyance. Neither was the fact his plan to purposefully avoid looking at her feet as he approached the table had backfired on him, though, with hindsight, forewarned might have been forearmed. What got to him was how well her diversionary tactic had worked.

There wasn't a male cell in his body that hadn't reacted to those boots and the strip of bare skin below another sinful short skirt. He had spent every moment since he'd sat down with her consciously stopping himself from looking at the straining buttons on her black blouse and once again she'd got him with footwear. But if she thought it would distract him from his target for long, she was mistaken.

He was a Marine, for crying out loud; the phrase 'courage under fire' was as good as tattooed on his ass.

Watching with hooded eyes, he saw her slide her computer to one side before resting her elbow on the table. Setting her chin in her palm, she leaned forward, feigned innocence with a flutter of long lashes and asked, 'Something wrong?'

'You done?' he questioned dryly.

'Done with what?' Amusement danced in her eyes. 'You might need to elaborate.'

If he didn't know what she was doing, he might have been tempted to play along. But if he did, Daniel knew what would happen. He would play to win.

'Tell me what's going on.'

When she rolled her eyes, he set his forearms on the table and leaned closer, his gaze locked on hers while he waited. Up close she did have pretty spectacular eyes. A little large for her face maybe, but they were so deep a brown it was difficult to tell where the irises began.

He'd never noticed that before.

After studying him for a long moment, she lowered her voice. 'What if I told you it was private?'

'I'd tell you I won't share it with anyone else,' he replied in the same low tone.

'Why should I believe you?'

'A man is nothing without his word.'

‘Tell me why you need to know.’

He wondered when she thought he’d handed over control of the negotiation. Dragging his gaze from mesmerizing eyes, he considered what to tell her. She was right; they could do this all day. Until one of them bent a little nothing would ever change. Of course knowing that meant he had to ask himself if he *wanted* their relationship to change. But since it felt as if it already was ...

‘I recognized what I saw in your eyes before you closed the door this morning.’ He looked into them again as he spoke. ‘I’ve seen it before.’

‘What did you see?’ she asked in a whisper, forcing him to lean closer to hear her.

‘Resignation.’

She stared at him and then blinked as if trying to bring him into focus. ‘If you knew me as well as you like to think you do, you’d know ...’

‘I’d know?’ he prompted as she frowned.

‘Why I don’t want to talk about it.’ Dropping her palm from her chin, she leaned back and swiped a strand of hair behind her ear. ‘People keep secrets for a reason.’

When she reached for her computer, Daniel felt the lost opportunity as keenly as he sensed she wasn’t just talking about herself. But if she knew the reason he wasn’t sleeping, why hadn’t she pushed the advantage? Lifting his coffee cup, he looked out of the window and questioned what he would have done if their places had been switched. The exact same thing was the honest answer. It was what he was doing already. He knew there was something wrong and was giving her an opportunity to tell him. In turn, she was refusing to open up.

Number four on his list: *nothing in common*.

So much for that one ...

‘You want another coffee?’ she asked.

He looked at her cup from the corner of his eye. ‘What did you do, inhale it?’

‘Figured if you were planning on digging in, I may as well top up on supplies.’

Since sitting still for any amount of time inevitably led to reminders of his sleep deprivation, Daniel shook his head. ‘Think I’ll head down to the station and look through mugshots for Jack before my shift starts.’

Jo sighed heavily as he stood up. ‘Dig all you want. I’m telling you now there’s only one way you’ll find out and that avenue isn’t and never will be open to you.’

‘And there you go challenging me again ...’

Taking a step forward, he set his coffee cup hand on the table by her computer and the other on the back of her chair. As her chin lifted he leaned down, smiling the same kind of small, meaningful smile she’d aimed at him when she’d pulled her little stunt with the boots.

‘When I want something, nothing gets in my way,’ he told her in a deliberately low, intimate tone. ‘Make it difficult for me, I’ll want it more and work twice as hard to get it. So feel free to keep doing what you’re doing, but don’t say you weren’t warned.’

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