

MARY J. FORBES



THE DOCTOR'S
SURPRISE
FAMILY

Cherish

Mary Forbes

The Doctor's Surprise Family

«HarperCollins»

Forbes M. J.

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When Kat O'Brien saw the rain-soaked stranger pull up on his motorcycle, her instincts went on red-alert. Except he was no stranger. He was Dane Rainhart, hometown war hero...and Kat's girlhood crush. Now the single mother was more intrigued than ever by this sexy, powerful man who was already bonding with her son. After being wounded in the line of duty, Dane needed a place to mend—and hide away from the world. Instead, the haunted military doctor was falling for the much-too-attractive widow and her boy. Perhaps it was time they both faced the past and took a second chance at happiness—together!

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Turning to him, Kat smiled. “I have to go. See you tonight?”

He didn't budge. And then, before he could consider the impact, he said, “Only if you let me restore the boat free of charge, but with one condition.”

Slowly, her eyes seized his. “I will not sleep with you, Dane.”

A jolt hit his gut at the image of her warming his bed.

Maybe not today. He smiled grimly.

“Wouldn't think of it.”

Liar!

Dear Reader,

I invite you into the life of Kat O'Brien, the third sister in my HOME TO FIREWOOD ISLAND miniseries. In The Doctor's Surprise Family, Kat perseveres no matter what life tosses out. Suddenly, however, she is falling for a wounded serviceman full of sorrow and secrets whose only goal is to hide from the world. It seems, then, these two are polar opposites.... But Kat will not give up! She is determined to coax this war hero toward a future filled with family and love.

For further details of the first two books of my HOME TO FIREWOOD ISLAND miniseries —Their Secret Child plus And Baby Makes Four—join me at www.MaryJForbes.com.

Warmest wishes,

Mary

P.S. While The Doctor's Surprise Family only hints at a possible experience of war, my greatest hope is that all who serve their country find peace and love waiting at home.

The Doctor's Surprise Family

Mary J. Forbes



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MARY J. FORBES

Her rural prairie roots granted Mary J. Forbes a deep love of nature and small towns, a love that's often reflected in the settings of her books. Today, she lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest where she also teaches school, nurtures her garden and walks or jogs in any weather. Readers can contact Mary at www.maryjforbes.com.

For A, E and S—

Treasures of our hearts

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Chapter One

How long are you going to sit on that motorcycle, pal?

Peering through the rain-splattered front window of her big, rectangular kitchen, Kat O'Brien wondered if the guy even breathed. At least fifteen minutes had gone by and he hadn't moved. Not a muscle, not a gloved fingertip. No, draped in a yellow slicker, he sat still as a stone carving on the leather seat of the big black bike parked in her circular driveway...staring ahead at the surrounding evergreens, leafless birch and maples and verdant winter undergrowth. Perhaps the hammering February sleet had frozen his body in place and it merely waited for a gust of wind to topple it and the bike to the ground.

God forbid, Kat thought.

Well, she couldn't stand here all afternoon ogling the fellow. If he'd come as a potential guest to her bed-and-breakfast, he'd knock on the door when he was ready. Or if he had gotten lost, sooner or later he'd crank the machine and boot it back to the village proper, a mile up Shore Road.

Restless, she returned to making cookies on the large wooden worktable, the one her late husband had constructed when he was alive, when his big laugh and voice boomed throughout the Victorian he inherited from his grandparents before he married Kat.

Again, she glanced toward the window. Seldom was she leery about her guests, and those she instinctively had gut-twinges about, she didn't book. However, the majority of her customers were annual returnees, folks loving the peace and quiet, the bit of wilderness offered within the hills and forests of Firewood Island. But this stranger had driven slowly up the lane to park and stare at God-knew-what.

Come on, mister, she thought for the tenth time. Make up your mind.

A shiver scurried along her arms. She told herself if his intentions were unsavory, he would not have ridden up on a guttural Harley-Davidson. Yet, she wasn't a fool. She always kept her doors locked, and she never questioned her instincts.

Currently, both her rental cabins stood empty. It was, after all, the last Tuesday of February. With fewer vacationers during the winter season in Washington's Puget Sound, she was thankful that at least one man—Dane Rainhart, who'd been her older sister's boyfriend twenty years ago—had booked the smaller cabin last week. He was due to arrive tomorrow for a three-month sabbatical, though from what Kat didn't know.

After putting the third cookie sheet in the oven, she set a candle centerpiece on the ten-seater rectangular oak table that had been in the O'Brien family for eighty years.

Should she stand on the veranda, yell out to gain the guy's attention? Go tap his shoulder or his wet, glossy helmet?

Pressing her lips together to hold back a chuckle, she pictured her eleven-year-old son, Blake, rapping on the helmet.... Yo, dude. Anybody home in there? Good thing school was in session for another hour.

Well, hopefully, before the school bus arrived, the man would come to his senses.

Sighing, she slanted another look toward the country-paned front window. Biker-man hadn't budged. Rain gear and big black boots aside, he had to be chilled to the bone.

"Okay, mister," she muttered. "Enough already."

She checked the oven clock—ten minutes left—and headed for the mudroom to grab her red quilted vest off a hook and the orange umbrella out of the stone crock next to the boot shelf. Striding from the kitchen, Kat hurried across the living room to the front entry.

"Either you come in," she grumbled, stepping outside, "or find yourself another driveway to view."

She slammed the door. Not a muscle moved on his body.

Was he dead?

Certainly, he had to be cold. Heck, he had to be frozen.

The veranda's downspouts gushed water into a pair of stocky wooden barrels. The American flag her late husband, Shaun, had hung when they first opened the B and B, drooped like a drenched sheet from its pole-to-pillar attachment.

Flipping up the umbrella, Kat jogged down the six wide steps and strode toward the motorcycle. Under her shoes the lane's gravel lay slick with sleet, while her umbrella vibrated under the onslaught of snow and rain. Relentless since yesterday, the inclement weather chilled the air and vaporized her breath.

"Hi," she said, approaching the man's right side. "Lost your way?"

For the first time, he stirred, turning his head slowly in her direction. Her breath staggered. His irises were the electric-blue of the summer delphiniums she grew in the corners of the porch steps, and his lashes...the rain had clumped them into long dark spears. At first glance, she assumed he was a California beach-bum—his skin sported a deep bronze color. But looking into his cold eyes, she realized the last place he'd want to be was on some beach.

She lifted her free hand, gathered her wits. "I think you made a wrong turn down my road."

His gaze traveled past her shoulder, to the oval sign next to the flag, the wooden sign she'd painted with a border of ivy and delicate white flowers circling scripted gold lettering that read, The Country Cabin.

"I don't think so." The last word cracked before his eyes settled on her again. "You Kat O'Brien?"

"I am." She offered a smile and tried not to stare at how the slick plastic bill of his helmet caught the rain, trickling water onto his cheek in a jagged line following a scar on his whiskery jaw.

Unhurriedly, he removed the helmet and she saw that his neatly trimmed hair was the tarnished-gold color of a harvested grain field.

"I'm Dane Rainhart." His voice was deep, rough. "I'm a day early."

Kat blinked. Dane...Rainhart? When she'd accepted his booking eight days ago, heard his name, a mental picture of a tall, gangly teenager emerged. Seventeen years old, frequenting her mother's house with a bunch of high school kids, looking to hook up with Kat's older sister Lee.

Good grief. When had that boy changed into this man—this hollow-cheeked, stone-faced man?

Stepping back, Kat reined in her flustered senses. Once, eons before, she'd had a little crush on her sister's boyfriend.

Little, Kat? Try huge. At night you used to squirm in bed thinking about him. And, all right. Since his call she'd reminisced about those days. Childhood memories, nothing more. Nothing.

Dane Rainhart had been a silly schoolgirl fantasy before she grew up, attended college and married the love of her life. Simply put, Rainhart's request to rent one of her cabins meant one thing only: a steady three-month income.

Wrapping herself in a cloak of no nonsense, she said, "Why don't you put your bike in the carport and come inside?" Then she headed around the side of the house, pointed to the empty spot next to her old red Honda Civic and waited as her guest walked the motorcycle into the stall. Watching him kick out the stand while his rain gear covered the cement floor in mini-pools of water, she realized he stood much taller than he had in her memories.

He set the helmet on the bike's seat, tugged off the wet slicker and draped it over the handlebars. From the carport's entrance, Kat had a crystal view. This was the boy—man—who, more than two decades before, had gazed at her sister with a yearning equal to Kat's own at thirteen, looking at him.

Stripped of the rain gear, he wore a bomber jacket and black leather pants as pliable as bread dough. Did he have any idea how those two garments outlined his shoulders, biceps, thighs...?

Don't look further!

She forced her gaze up, but already the tightening had begun deep in her abdomen, and she recognized its source. Dane Rainhart, her teenaged heartthrob, had grown into a powerful, sexy man.

And she'd been a widow for four years, a widow unable to describe the ache of missing her husband.

The man beside the Harley simply brought that loss home.

Across twenty feet of carport, Dane studied the woman silhouetted in the entryway. Her orange umbrella and red vest threw splashes of vibrant color onto the dreary afternoon. Of average height and with a runner's frame, she could pass for a young girl—until a closer check confirmed the slight swell under the vest and the curve of denim at her hips.

She took a step back into the rain. "Come," she said. "We'll get you registered."

"Is it okay that I'm early?" He had worried the cabin wouldn't be available.

"It's fine." Then, as if she had access to his mind, "Your cabin's ready."

With a nod, he followed her through a side door to the back of the house where a cedar deck extended across half its length. Beyond a sketch of lawn and flower garden were two log cabins sheltered within the forest. The larger one stood to the left. A structure a third its size, which Dane assumed would be his for the next twelve weeks, stood to the right.

He couldn't wait to vanish behind its walls.

At the rear door of the house, the woman collapsed her umbrella, shook off the excess water. The nylon covering gone, he noticed her hair was thick and straight as a mare's mane. Curving an inch below her pale jaw, the dark locks framed her face in the same way wooden ovals once framed his granny's ancestral portraits.

"Don't worry about taking off your boots," she said as they entered a spotless mudroom. "Just wipe your feet on the mat."

After setting the umbrella to dry in a tall crock, she led him into an expansive country kitchen. Immediately, his mouth salivated at the aroma and sight of dozens of cookies cooling on tea towels spread across a green worktable with pots dangling overhead.

"Do you like oatmeal raisin cookies?" she asked, passing by the treats.

"Don't mind 'em." He couldn't recall the last time he'd tasted a homemade cookie. Hell, make that homemade anything.

She paused, her brown eyes amused. "Grab a couple, if you want. My son loves them, says they're better than chocolate chip. And that's something coming from a prepubescent boy."

"Thanks." Dane took a cookie between his gloved fingers, savored its scent, then pulled open a panel of his coat and slid the treat into his shirt pocket.

She has a kid. His gaze tracked her to a door opposite the dining area, where she disappeared into another room. Of course, she does, fool. Why wouldn't she?

Because the possibility hadn't crossed his mind when he booked the cabin. He'd thought the owner or owners were older, with kids out of home or, at the very youngest, in high school. He hadn't expected the girl-next-door as a landlord, and he sure as hell hadn't expected preteens to live within a baseball pitch of where he'd be setting his boots on a mat.

Speaking of which... He glanced over his shoulder. There hadn't been a single male article—boots or shoes, coat or ballcap, fishing pole or golf club—in that mudroom. All Dane saw were a couple of smaller jackets and a pink pair of those rubbery shoes women wore to garden.

Was she separated? Divorced? Widowed?

Why do you give a damn, Dane? You're here to hide and lick your wounds, remember?

She stuck her head around the doorjamb. "Dane?"

Ignoring her familiar use of his name, he crossed the kitchen and entered a small neat office with a beat-up desk, two metal filing cabinets and a window viewing the circular driveway. Posters of her cabins and the main house, along with maps of the village of Burnt Bend and Firewood Island,

decorated one wall. His gaze fell to a photo on her desk of a barrel-chested man in a fisherman's hat, laughing at the camera, bear paw hand resting on the shoulder of a tow-haired preschooler. Husband and son?

Behind the desk, Kat O'Brien smiled. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Should I?" And then, because he'd grown up on the island, he added, "Did we go to school together?"

"I'm Lee Tait's sister. You used to come to my mother's house when you were in high school."

Dane studied the woman across the desk, his memories scrambling back and back. And then it hit. Except...this woman couldn't be the dark-eyed sprite once nagging her sister to be included in their group. Could she? "You're...Kaitlin?"

"Kat," she corrected. "When I turned sixteen, I wanted a name that sounded fun, so I resigned Kaitlin to the..." her fingers made air quotes "...official drawer."

When he said nothing, when he could only stare, her smile slipped. Setting a pen on the registration book, she said, "I'll also need to include your driver's license on your registration form. Then I'll show you the cabin."

He felt those keen eyes observe his gloved hands as he wrote. Forcing himself to keep his head down, to not blurt, Be thankful you can't see the scars, he focused on his breathing. In his peripheral vision, he saw her turn momentarily to one of the metal cabinets.

"Your key," she said handing it over the instant he completed the information. Then, chin up, spine stiff, she led him out the door. "If you choose to eat with us," she said, locking up the office, "breakfast is at eight a.m. each morning, except Sunday when it's at nine. Lunch and dinner are your responsibility. However, I will set out refreshments and snacks at four p.m. on the dinner table." She nodded to the dining section where a long table, stationed in front of a wall-size, country-paned window, faced the circular drive. "You're also welcome to use the guest living room, back deck or sit on the porch gliders. The rest of the house is off-limits."

"Does the cabin have a kitchen?" he asked. Standing in her kitchen with its floor to ceiling cupboards, he noted the bow of her mouth, the way it tilted at the corners as though anticipating that fun she mentioned.

"Yes, both cabins are fully outfitted."

He glanced at her commercial Sub-Zero refrigerator, imagined the food inside, the ten summer guests seated around her table, chatting, laughing, asking each other questions. Though a stab of guilt pierced him, he was infinitely glad the current cold temperatures would give him an excuse to stay in the cottage and refrain from her listed amenities.

He headed for the mudroom, intent on leaving for the privacy of his cabin.

She followed. "I'll show you the way."

Before he could say, I know where it is. I booked the smaller cabin, remember? she zipped past him, grabbed the umbrella and was out the back door, her baked cookie scent swirling in his lungs.

Dane stepped onto the deck. Thankfully, a wet gust of wind eradicated her from his nostrils and he inhaled deep to ensure no trace remained. He did not want her image branded into his brain.

Yet he trailed her and that silly umbrella across the strip of wet lawn, up a flagstone path, to the log building sporting another rain-drenched flag, although smaller than the one welcoming visitors onto the veranda of her house.

Kaitlin O'Brien was a patriot.

He couldn't get inside the safety of the cabin fast enough.

Before he heard it all again. The roar of the improvised explosive device, an IED. The shattering glass. The deafening blast ripping metal, wood—bodies—into a trillion bits.

Before he heard Zaakir's screams, saw the flames destroying—

Stumbling on the first step leading up to the porch, Dane grabbed the newel post. The familiar knot in his throat had him swallowing. Not now. Not while she's watching.

“Dane?” She hurried back down the stairs. “You okay?”

“Must’ve slipped,” he lied.

She looked at the step he’d stubbed with his toe. “I’ll have someone put down some new weather stripping right away.”

Ashamed of his deception, he shook his head and took the steps two at a time. “No need. I’m just tired, is all.” Half turning, he looked back. She stayed on the stairs, her fine dark brows puzzled, the rain a wet curtain around her and the pumpkin umbrella. “It’s okay,” he assured. “And thank you for letting me in a day early.” He inserted the key, opened the door.

Guilt pressed hard, crushing his chest. Still, the up-bringing he’d had before he’d left the island for the military had him hesitating. He nodded politely. “Goodbye, Kaitlin.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He studied her for a moment. He should explain. He should tell her he was a loner. That life had changed him, Iraq had changed him, war had made him see things in ways she would never understand. He should present some guarantee he wasn’t completely crazy. To ease the uncertainty in her eyes.

You don’t need to fear me, he wanted to say. I’m not one of those types.

She hoisted the umbrella higher, took the lower step. “If you need anything...”

“I know where to find you.”

She offered a smile. “Enjoy your stay.”

As he watched her walk through the drenched woods, he wondered what she’d say if he told her joy was no longer part of his vocabulary.

Chapter Two

Two days later, the Do Not Disturb sign remained on the exterior doorknob of Dane Rainhart's cabin.

Kat could see her commercial yellow-and-white notice from the corner window by the enamel sink where she scrubbed egg from her son's plate. She had walked Blake to the end of her wooded lane ten minutes ago, then returned home the moment they heard the school bus rumbling along Shore Road.

Since his tenth birthday, Blake no longer appreciated his mother waiting in full view of the other bussed kids. Yet, he hadn't wanted to let go entirely of their ritual. Thus, they waited in the lane's bend, and when the bus approached, Kat turned back, out of sight. Sometimes, she caught herself blinking to dispel the sting of tears; soon even this small daily routine would disappear forever.

Nothing stays the same, she thought.

Boys grew into young men.

Husbands died before their time.

And former childhood infatuations became grim-faced loners.

The dishwasher loaded, she made a decision. This morning, she would knock on his door. Whether or not he welcomed the intrusion, she needed to change his bedsheets. Her guest rooms never went a day without clean bedding and a thorough sanitizing, but she had respected his privacy for two days because of the sign, because his motorcycle hadn't moved out of the carport.

However, the time to freshen up the cabin was at hand. Yes, he'd signed on for three months, but that didn't mean she would disregard her business. Sign or not, she'd give the place a scrubbing.

As she tidied her own house and worked in her office, she prepared herself mentally.

He's not the same as he was twenty years ago.

Neither are you, Kat.

At ten o'clock, she gathered sheets, towels, wash-cloths and two new soap bars from the storage room into a laundry basket. Slipping into her tall, green farm boots, she took a deep breath and stepped out onto the deck.

The air smelled of wet earth and rotted leaves. Gray clouds flecked the sky, though a mellow sun crept among the barren branches. Somewhere, a squirrel chattered and higher up the slope a crow cawed.

The cabin looked lifeless.

She strode up its stone path.

At the porch steps, she faltered. What had occupied him for two days, in four hundred square feet of floor space?

Not your concern. Pressing her lips together, she knocked on the door. And waited. Fifteen seconds, thirty. Another knock, louder this time. Fifteen more seconds.

She was about to lift her hand a third time when the door cracked open. Shadowed in the dim interior and the porch roof, he appeared grimmer than he had getting drenched on his Harley.

"Good morning," Kat said with forced cheer. Mercy. The man's potency hit like a hammer. The way he stood there, dressed in all black...sweatshirt, cargo pants, socks...

Tongue-tied, she nudged the basket higher.

His gaze dipped. "Thanks, but I do my own housekeeping."

"The rental price includes housekeeping." When he didn't slam the door shut, she took heart. "I'll be no more than ten minutes, and I won't be in your way." When he continued to block her access, she drew a long breath. "Look—why don't I leave these with you? When you're done, leave the dirty laundry in the basket on the porch and I'll pick it up later. And, oh," she nodded to the round flowered tin atop the clean linens, "the cookies are fresh and a bonus."

A glance, then his eyes lifted to her. An electric jolt hit Kat's abdomen. Smarten up, she told herself. You're not a teenager anymore and neither is he.

With gloved hands, he reached for the bundle in her arms. "Thanks."

Kat frowned. Gloves inside the house? "Is the heater not working?" Darn it, she did not need an added expense this time of year. "If there's a problem with it—"

"The heater's fine. Thanks for the linens and the cookies."

He moved to close the door.

"Is there anything you need me to—"

"No." The doorway narrowed to a slit. "You've done enough, Ms. O'Brien." And then she was alone again.

Kat shook her head. What an odd sort he'd become.

Several seconds passed. No sound came from within. Even the forest had gone silent. She went down the path to her house.

He wore gloves. And black clothes.

A chill skittered across her skin. Was he into drugs? Was he a thief, a mobster on the run? Why wasn't he staying with his parents on the other side of the island? Or at his sister's apartment in the village?

Dozens of possibilities rushed through Kat's mind—and none felt right. Behind that severe Clive Owen facade, Dane Rainhart exuded a soul-deep sadness. His eyes spoke of it whenever he thought she wasn't paying attention.

At her own door, Kat paused. Through the trees, the cabin appeared the cozy getaway she'd always envisioned. Today, the structure resembled isolation and loneliness, two impressions she recognized better than any since Shaun's death.

She went inside to continue her day, but her thoughts journeyed a thousand times to the cabin in the woods.

What made Dane Rainhart so unhappy? And why did she care?

And then there were the hot twinges deep in her core—those she didn't understand at all.

Not when she still dreamed of her late husband.

The following Tuesday morning, the privacy sign no longer hung on the cabin's doorknob. Did that mean he wasn't home? Or was it a message for her to visit?

Twice in the past week, she had exchanged his soiled bedding for a laundered stack, hoping at the same time to catch a glimpse of him. So far, nada.

Emboldened by the sign's absence, she tugged on a ratty blue cardigan hanging at the back door, and headed out.

Purple crocuses, daffodils and a medley of tulips—characteristic of Puget Sound's mild winters—colored the dark, damp flowerbeds bordering her tiny backyard. On a whim, Kat hurried back into the mudroom and grabbed a pair of pruning shears she kept handy.

She cut a handful of waxy-leafed flowers before slipping the shears into the cardigan's deep pocket and walking to the cabin. The day had dawned bright and clear, the temperature hovering around fifty-eight. March was entering like a lamb.

She knocked twice.

The door remained closed.

Her face warmed. What was she doing, bringing a man flowers, for God's sake? Maybe he had allergies. Or hated flowers.

Before she could change her mind, she tried the knob. The door fell open several inches.

"Hello?" she called softly. "It's me...Kat. I've brought you something..." No answer. "Dane?"

She nudged the door with a fingertip. The cabin lay empty. Crossing the threshold, she paused on the welcome mat to scan the great room/kitchenette.

Her guest was a neatnik. No shirt or jacket draped the jungle-green loveseat or the pair of big-cushioned chairs. No socks hid under the round coffee table in front of the river-rock fireplace. Beside her on the mat, footwear marched in military sync: the harness boots he'd worn on the bike, a pair of loafers and a pair of worn gray slippers.

Intrigued, she stepped out of her rubber boots. Didn't bikers leave cigarette butts and beer cans, girlie magazines and hunting brochures all over? Shouldn't clothes be strewn haphazardly across the furniture?

Why, Kat? Because Shaun used to toss his clothes around the house? A habit you hated, until that terrible moment when you'd give anything to have it back?

She scanned the rooms a second time. Tidy, neat. Everything had its place.

On the knotted-rag rug near the sofa, two big stones—where had they come from?—supported an array of books. Moving closer, Kat read titles on hiking, computers, philosophy and.... She tipped the lone magazine from its slot. Journal of the American Medical Association?

Something niggled in her mind. Something Lee mentioned years ago... Yes, that was it... Dane Rainhart had joined the service as a doctor. Kat hadn't kept track; by then she'd been married.

"Can I help you?"

At the sound of his deep voice, she jumped on the spot. "Oh!" Spinning, she pressed her hand against her throat where her heart bounded like a deer in hunting season.

He stood in the doorway, a powerful silhouette against the morning light.

Kat swallowed. "I—I didn't expect you."

"Obviously." Remaining on the threshold, he blocked her flight.

Her gaze darted past his shoulders, to the freedom of the outside world. What did she really know about this man? He'd rented her cabin, yet hadn't welcomed her attempt at housekeeping. In reality, he could be a man hiding from the law, a killer on the loose.

Yes, she had known him more than twenty years ago, but people change. Life alters. For better and worse.

Shaun's death proved that.

Looking at Dane Rainhart, she suspected he'd experienced worse as well. Had it changed him? Ignited anger? Prompted a vendetta mission?

Sadness, definitely. She recognized the emotion the moment he looked at her six days ago, amidst snow and rain.

Latching onto that recognition, she thrust out the flowers. "Something from my garden." When he continued to bar the doorway, she babbled on. "If you'd like, I could put them in a glass... On second thought," she tried to smile, "why don't I set them on the coffee table and let you deal with them however you wish." She laid the bundle down. "Okay, then. I'll just get out of your way." Avoiding eye contact, she barreled toward the door. One way or another, he would have to move.

"Kaitlin."

She stood close enough that if he wanted he could reach out—

"I'm sorry I intruded, Dane. It won't happen again." Then with a force that surprised her, "Please, let me pass." Come hell or high water, she was getting out of this cabin.

"Don't be afraid," he said quietly. "I won't hurt you."

Within his space, she could finally see his face, those indigo eyes full of regret, that shockingly sensuous mouth. He'd been where the wind danced in his hair; locks tufted at his hairline and along the crown of his head. "Who said I'm afraid?" she asked.

A smile quirked. "It's all over your face. Sometimes my height can intimidate."

She folded her arms against her stomach. As a teenager, he'd been lean and wiry. At thirty-eight, he carried twenty extra pounds of muscle and sinew, and towered at least ten inches above Kat. Yet, gut instinct said he wasn't a bad guy.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t know anything about flowers, but I’d hate for that nice bunch,” he nodded to the coffee table, “to wilt before the day is done. Would you show me what to do?”

Again his mouth tweaked, and a tremor of heat shot through her. What would it be like to have him kiss—

Lord, what was the matter with her? Turning on her heel, she hurried over, snatched up the bouquet and went to the kitchen sink. When he closed the door and removed his hiking boots, she pictured him setting the footwear on the mat, then slipping on the comfortable slippers.

She reached into the cupboard she’d stocked with chinaware, drew out a tall drinking glass, and filled the container with warm water.

“They’re very pretty.” He peered over her shoulder, igniting nerve endings she hadn’t realized she possessed.

Her fingers fumbled with the stems as she inserted them into the glass. Water sloshed onto the counter. She said, “You need to trim the ends each day and give them fresh warm water.”

“Trim the ends?”

“Yes. With a pair of scissors or a knife.”

She glanced over. He leaned against the counter, arms crossed. The fact he had yet to remove his gloves puzzled rather than worried Kat. Was it possible he had an aversion to germs, or psoriasis?

She stepped toward the utility drawer next to his hip—and saw the knife sheathed on his belt.

Whoa. How had she missed that? Eight inches in length, the thing was a dragon slayer.

Her gaze snapped to his. “Do you always carry knives?”

His irises darkened. “Only when I go into the wilderness.”

“Wilderness?” She glanced toward the window and the wooded hills on her five-acre property. “Dane, have you forgotten this island has an area of only twenty square miles? We have chipmunks, squirrels and coyotes. And some deer. Firewood is not the Rockies, Alaska or the Everglades.”

“No,” he said quietly. “I haven’t forgotten what’s on this island.”

Their eyes held. And again she felt something primal sizzle between them, a lightning she had never experienced.

Catching the tang of the outdoors emanating from his green flannel shirt, she took in the mud-stained hiking boots positioned at the door, before she sized up his black cargo pants. Specks of mud and grass clung to his shins. Where had he gone?

“Kaitlin?”

Her head jerked.

A jagged dimple materialized above his scarred jaw. “The flowers?” Amusement lingering in his eyes, he opened the drawer, dug out a pair of scissors, then laid the instrument gently on the counter next to her posies.

Kat released an uneven breath. “Okay,” she began. “Each day you snip off the ends.” Demonstrating, she cut a half-inch off a tulip stem. “With fresh water, they should last five to seven days, depending on where you place them and the temperature of the cabin.”

God, how she could babble.

“How about the eating nook?” He nodded to the booth alcove separating kitchenette from living room. “It gets the morning sun.”

She imagined him drinking his first coffee of the day there, perhaps reading one of his magazines or books. She imagined him glancing at the blooms. Thinking of her.

“I’ll leave the decision to you,” she said, heading to the door. When had a man’s proximity jumbled her senses to the point of making her jittery as a silly schoolgirl? Not since you were a schoolgirl, Kat, and he was mooning over Lee.

“Who owns the property with the boatshed and fish shack down by the shoreline?”

The question slammed her to a stop. “That’s... They were my husband’s. He ran a small fishing business. Salmon, mostly.”

Dane remained against the counter. Eyes locked on her, he waited. Kat pushed at her shaggy bangs. “He—Shaun drowned four years ago.”

Across the room, the man dwarfing the kitchenette stayed silent. Suddenly she was grateful for that silence, appreciated the way he allowed her to tell what she wanted, when she wanted.

She shoved into her clogs. “In case you’re wondering, the boat inside the shed didn’t cause his death.” Turning for the door, she added, “If you need anything...”

“I’ll call.”

Of course, he wouldn’t, but she lifted a quick hand anyway. “Bye.” Pushing open the door, she nearly stumbled into her mother on the other side.

“Goodness, Kat, get hold of yourself.” Charmaine Wilson tugged the hem of her mocha-hued jacket straight.

“Mom. What are you doing here?”

The older woman’s gaze landed on the man behind Kat. “I might ask you the same thing,” she countered.

“Can I help?” Dane stepped onto the porch.

“No,” Kat blurted, then flushed with embarrassment. “Everything’s fine. Mom, do you remember Dane Rainhart? He was Lee’s... One of her school friends.”

Charmaine’s pupils pinpointed. “Course, I remember. You’ve grown up some, Dane.”

Before he could respond, Kat snatched her mother’s arm and ushered her from the porch. “Why are you here?” she whispered.

Charmaine had a knack of showing up at the most awkward times. Yes, she’d retired from the hair salon, but that did not mean Kat was free whenever her mother had nothing to do. And this morning... Well. “I thought you were babysitting for Addie today.” Kat’s youngest sister had an eight-month-old son whom Charmaine cared for while Addie taught math part-time at Fire High.

“Alexander has a little cold,” the older woman explained, “so your sister called in a sub. Which brings us to why I’m here. I brought Blake home.”

Kat’s adrenaline spiked. “Why? Is he sick?”

“Seems he has the same bug as Alex.”

“Why didn’t the school call?”

“They did, but you weren’t answering.”

No, she was busy with her guest. Kat walked to the house.

In the comfort of her kitchen she called, “Blake?”

“Here,” came the hoarse reply from upstairs.

She hurried up the stairwell, down the hallway, to the first bedroom on the left. Her son lay on his side on top of the quilt.

“Hey, honey.” She walked over, sat on the bed, brushed a dark curly lock—so like his father’s—from his forehead. “Grams said you weren’t feeling well.”

“Throat hurts. The school said you weren’t home.” Accusation pinched the words.

“I was housekeeping at the cabin.” Warmth struck her skin. Liar. You were trying to get Dane Rainhart’s attention.

From the pillow, Blake gave her a one-eyed stare. “Thought the guy didn’t want housekeeping.”

As always, she had informed him about their guest. “The sign was down today.”

“Oh.”

Kat hated seeing her child in discomfort. “Want some chicken soup?”

“Kay.”

Rising, she removed his sneakers, then tugged his pajamas from under the pillow. “Get into these and I’ll be back with the soup.”

She was almost at the door when he asked, “Is that guy staying here forever?” Blake rose into a sitting position, feet on the floor. Over the course of the last year he’d grown to equal her height.

“No,” she said, “just until June first.”

“I saw him sneaking around in the forest last Friday.”

“Sneaking around?”

“Yeah, like he was creeping up on something. He had on one of those army coats like you see on the news? And these big boots like Dad used to wear—you know, with the laces? Anyway, it looked like he was playing G.I. Joe or something.”

Kat frowned. Not thirty minutes ago, Dane had stood in the doorway of the cabin dressed exactly as Blake described. With a hunting knife strapped to his waist.

And he’d arrived without a sound.

She forced a smile. “Grown men don’t play G.I. Joe, Blake.”

“This one does,” he said hoarsely.

Pushing aside this morning’s imposing image, Kat advised, “Get under the covers and stay warm. I’ll be right back.”

Downstairs, Charmaine stirred a pot of chicken broth at the stove. She said, “I stopped at my place for some homemade.”

“Thanks.” Already the comforting scent of soup suffused the room. Kat prepared a tray. Beyond the corner window above the sink, bits of the cabin peeked through the leafless trees. The porch was once again empty, the door firmly shut, the sign in place.

Charmaine glanced over. “He stayed outside for a long time, you know.”

She didn’t have to ask who.

“Looked like one of those plantation overseers you read about in history books, standing on the porch, arms crossed, feet planted. Gave me the willies the way he stared straight at the house.”

“He’s probably interested in people from his past,” Kat said, recalling her own endless curiosity concerning the man who was her father, the man whose name Charmaine refused to disclose—no matter how much Kat begged, cajoled and argued. She tamped back her bitterness with a sigh. The disagreement would go on forever. “Anyway, it’s been years since he’s been on the island.”

“Well,” Charmaine continued, “why isn’t he staying with his family? His parents must be wondering, and his sister, too.”

The senior Rainharts worked at the Burnt Bend Medical Clinic, their daughter was the local social worker.

“Why is he hiding out here?” Charmaine asked.

Hiding out. Was that it? Kat wondered as the office telephone rang. Grateful for an excuse to escape her mother, she hurried to pick up the receiver. “Country Cabin, Kat O’Brien speaking.”

“Is the boy all right, Kaitlin?”

Dane. Her breath caught. “He’s fine,” she said, wariness surfacing. “How did you...?”

“I saw your mother pick him up from the elementary school when I was on the trail across the road.”

The eight-mile hiking trail circling forest and parkland and, at one point, paralleling the school grounds. The trail Blake mentioned two minutes ago. “I see.”

“I needed to clear my head. Walking helps.” Pause. “Is there anything I can do?”

You can stop making me wonder about you. “No,” she said. “But thanks for asking.”

After hanging up, she sank into her desk chair. Now what? Both her son and her mother questioned Dane’s motives. Still, intuition told Kat different. He’d erected an invisible wall, one, she suspected, that shielded his pain from the world. After Shaun died, she’d erected a similar barricade. So. Should she ask Dane to leave—or let him stay?

She was still weighing her options when a knock sounded on the mudroom door.

Charmaine frowned as Kat walked through the kitchen, nerves jittery at the prospect of seeing him again. But when she opened the door, no one stood on the back deck and the morning sun remained as bright as it had fifteen minutes earlier.

She looked toward the cabin, hoping to see something, anything, but all remained silent amidst the forest. Where had he gone—and so fast?

Forget him, Kat. Right now Blake needs you.

She was about to shut the door when a folded notebook page tucked under a corner of the outside mat caught her eye. Her heart kicked. Bending slowly, she retrieved the page.

Thanks for the flowers, he'd written in a tall, narrow scrawl. You've given me a different memory.

No signature. But then, none was needed.

Kat raised her head, gazed into the woods.

A different memory.

Deep in her soul she knew that it wasn't the flowers, but her.

She was the memory, the difference. And, she sensed, neither held regret. Note secured in her shirt pocket, she turned back into the house wondering if he realized how often she would read his ten words before the day was done.

Chapter Three

The nightmare stampeded into Dane's sleep with a vengeance.

Reaching. He was reaching again. Reaching to no avail, even though his hands closed over thin shoulders, shielded terrified dark eyes. Everywhere hung the stench of smoldering flesh. His own and Zaakir's.

Still, he pretended. Lied. I'm here. I've got you. Help is coming. Except, wasn't he the help? Wasn't he the doctor?

He'd arrived too goddamned late. Again.

He wrenched upright. Struggled for air. Fought against smoke, against fire. Fought, fought, fought—No. No.

He was in bed. In the cabin he'd rented.

Gradually, his grip on the comforter eased. He was okay. It was just a dream.

His heartbeat leveled. The panting abated.

Another damn night shot. Two in the morning and he might as well rise and shine. Three, four hours sleep was his normal now.

Tossing back the quilt, he climbed naked from bed. Cool air struck his hot, damp skin like a blessing. He'd take a walk along the ocean, let the night wind sweep the mess from his brain.

Ten minutes later, dressed in a thick flannel shirt, jeans, army coat and hiking boots, he stepped out onto the cabin's porch.

As always at this hour, the first thing he noticed was the chilly punch of winter and the raw spice of ocean on the breeze, so different from the desert sand. Tonight, no moon or stars cluttered the sky. Instead, he stood surrounded by inky darkness. Beyond the steps, the flagstones vanished into the woods, and above them cut the roofline of the house where Kat and her son slept.

Flicking his flashlight, he went into the forest, found the rough, overgrown trail he had discovered his first evening here. The one meandering down the slope, toward the shoreline and ending at the fish-and-tackle shack and weathered boatshed amidst the conifers. He had wandered around the shed on several occasions, tried the locked double doors at both ends, peered into its three grimy windows.

From his initial inspection that first night, he knew the old fishing trawler or lobster boat was constructed of wood—a beautiful wood, given the right TLC—and might have been built in Maine.

Tonight, he shone his light once more against the gray walls, the deadbolt locks, the windows. Barely visible through the dirty panes, he noted the peeling name on the rear of the boat: Kat Lady.

A name her husband conceived? And had she docked the craft after his death?

Dane itched to get inside the building, to assess what could be done to make the vessel viable in the ways his grandfather had taught when Dane was a kid and rode the Sound with the old man. He'd been thinking about scraping and varnishing and remodeling the craft since he'd made his discovery. Three months would get the job done. A perfect time frame.

Okay, his bent was selfish. He couldn't help that. He needed a motive to get up every day, an objective to mull over at night, to dream about—and Kaitlin's old trawler fit the bill.

He didn't need to ask why she had locked the vessel away, why she hadn't sold this part of her late husband's life. Selling, he knew, would mean goodbye... forever. Something he'd had to do in an instant with his medical career, with Zaakir. And then there was his marriage—although that goodbye had happened in stages. Still, the sorrow and regret he'd felt when Phoebe left Iraq to live stateside had sometimes overwhelmed him. He'd let her down in so many ways. Sure, she'd remarried, but that didn't negate the fact he'd been a lousy husband.

The briny-scented wind filled his lungs as he skirted the light along the rear window frame. Had he been a less decent man, he would break the pane, reach in, unlatch the window. Except, he wasn't a burglar, or a destroyer of property. He was a healer. Or had been.

Damn it to hell. Quit letting those memories hound you. Quit letting them rule your life.

Wheeling around, he strode past the boatshed and down to the shore where a wooden pier thumbed forty feet into Admiralty Inlet. Against the planks his boots thudded like hollow shots as he walked to the end of the quay. An icy wind whipped drops of seawater against his face. He jacked his collar up to protect his ears. His hands found the carryall pockets of his jacket.

He shouldn't care about her boat. He shouldn't speculate about her reasons for leaving it to decay in that cavernous shed.

Tomorrow he'd knock on her door, ask if he could fix the vessel.

And if she tells you to go to hell?

If the shoe were on the other foot, wouldn't he be tempted to tell her exactly that?

Restless, Dane strode off the pier and headed for the cluster of boulders a short distance away. Settling on top of the largest rock, he gazed at the night sea tossing its whitecaps ashore.

He tried not to think of the way she'd looked when she brought him that armful of flowers, or why he'd left a note on her doorstep. He tried not to remember Iraq, and the reason he was no longer a doctor. That his hands, his surgeon's hands, were scarred and disfigured from a war which shattered the life he'd worked his guts out to attain. The life—when all was said and done—he'd loved more than his marriage. And he tried not to mull over his own skewed logic for ignoring his parents and sister.

In the end, he thought of them all. And when he finally returned to the cabin, his brain was in a worse muddle than before.

Until he spotted the flash and color of the bouquet on his table and recognized Kat O'Brien as the one quiet element in his mind.

His lifeline.

Three nights later, he heard the creak of a twig to the right of the porch where he sat in a wicker chair enjoying the evening quiet. Something stole through the forest. Ears straining for the slightest sound, Dane remained motionless, two traits he'd learned in Iraq when darkness closed in and rebels prowled villages, on the hunt for drugs brought along by medical teams.

These days on Firewood Island, night fell around five p.m., obliterating shadows and outlines and things that moved in the trees.

Several silent moments passed. Then...a soft crunch, as though someone stepped on a thick carpet of dead leaves.

Dane's body tensed. Had the person noticed him on the porch?

His gaze zeroed in on the large cabin in the trees across Kaitlin's backyard. Last night, Dane had observed lights in two windows. A second guest? He didn't care, as long as they kept to their side of the property and left him alone.

Without making a sound, he got to his feet—and waited. The rustling had stopped. Creeping down the steps, he went around to the side facing the wooded hill. His eyes narrowed against the forest's obscurity.

Someone panted softly.

Dane stepped into the block of light shining from the window of the eating nook.

"Holy crap," a boy's voice muttered, before the kid scrambled like a wild animal back up the slope.

Dane leaped toward the escapee, entering the trees like a predatory animal, silent, quick. Without a word, he sprang over moldering logs, and ducked grasping branches. Ten feet ahead the

kid dodged right and left. Suddenly, he turned and scrambled farther up the hill, and then—abruptly—twenty feet ahead, Dane saw arms, legs and branches whip like miniature windmills. Thunk.

“Ow!” the boy yelped. Gasping and wheezing and clutching his leg, he writhed on a wet bed of leaves.

Dane approached slowly.

“Please,” the boy whispered. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Easy, son.” Dane frowned at the slashed denim along the boy’s left leg. Crouching on one knee, he shrugged from his jacket and laid the garment across the boy’s chest. “Got a name?”

“Y-Yes sir. Blake.” The winded words came out Yea seer bake.

Kaitlin’s son?

The wheezing accelerated. Blake’s face altered, faded, and for an instant Zaakir stared up at Dane.

He swiped a hand across his eyes. He was losing it, and this kid was showing every sign of an asthma attack. “Where’s your inhaler, son?”

“Home.”

Sure, it was. Damn kid, creeping through the woods in the dark and forgetting his lifeline. Dane squashed the urge to give Blake a good shaking. Instead, he scooped the boy into his arms. “Hang on.” Careful of wayward limbs, he trotted through the trees, crossed Kaitlin’s back deck and, while the boy clung to his neck, yanked open the mudroom door.

“Inhaler,” he hollered, storming into the kitchen with Blake wheezing against his chest. “Now.”

Kat didn’t have time to think or ask questions.

The second Dane set her son next to the plate of hard-boiled eggs she’d been slicing for the spinach salad on her big worktable, Kat ran to the dining cabinet and grabbed the emergency inhaler.

“Darn it, Blake,” she said, shoving the tool into his hands. “What have I told you about keeping this with you at all times?” Heart pounding, she forced herself to watch calmly as he tilted back his head and put the instrument to his mouth. Still, she couldn’t help advising, “Breathe deep.”

He rolled his eyes.

She released a shaky sigh. Okay. Not as bad as she’d first thought when Dane banged into her house. Already the first healing puff had altered her child’s skin from pale and sweaty to pink and dry as added oxygen rushed into his blood.

Relieved, she turned to Dane. He stood in a white T-shirt, dog tags dangling from his neck, gloved hands clutching the end corners of the worktable. His dark eyes were fastened on Blake, his expression harsh. Kat’s stomach looped at the man’s scrutiny. Had she misread him after all? “What happened?”

“It was my fault,” Blake interjected before her guest could reply. “I was trying to look into Mr. Rainhart’s window and—and he caught me, and then I ran into the woods and fell and...” When he straightened his leg, she noticed the bloody damage for the first time.

Kat’s pulse bounced. “Oh, baby.” She bent over the torn skin. Deep and raw, the gash measured about four inches along her son’s bony shin.

Removing the desert jacket from Blake, Dane said, “He needs stitches. If you have gauze to wrap the wound, I can ready him for transport to the clinic.”

Ready him for transport? Disregarding the odd turn of phrase, Kat hurried to the cupboard with its stored First Aid supplies. Had Blake told her the truth, or had Dane Rainhart hurt her son somehow, perhaps frightened him into lying?

She nearly dropped the kit when she heard her son whimper. She hurried back as Dane gently straightened Blake’s leg. “Looks like that tree root did quite a number on you,” he said, inspecting the gash.

From what Kat could see “the tree root” had gouged the flesh just below the knee. Blake puffed his cheeks at the sight of his blood-soaked jeans. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Dane placed a gloved hand on the back of her son’s neck. “Lower your head down toward your knees. That’s it.” He waited a few moments. “Feeling better?”

“A little.” Blake raised his head. “I—I didn’t m-mean to spy on you. Honest.”

“That what you were doing?” Dane hauled the knife off his belt and Kat’s heart lurched—until she saw that he meant to trim away the jagged edges of denim from her son’s wound.

Blake gaped while Dane deftly cut a neat rectangular hole. “Kaitlin,” he said, “we’ll need some warm water, a pinch of mild soap and a washcloth.”

She rushed to get the materials. Behind her, Blake murmured, “I—I just wanna be a soldier when I grow up.” She couldn’t catch Dane’s response.

Moments later, she watched as he cleaned Blake’s wound with the gentlest of motions, dipping the cloth into the water and touching it around the torn flesh. When it came time to dress the gash he directed her to cut the gauze—not that way—bind it around the gash—to the left—snip the gossamer ends, and knot them correctly.

If he knew first aid, why wouldn’t he remove his gloves and do the procedure himself?

Shoving him from her mind, she hunted down her stash of Children’s Tylenol.

“Bring your car to the front door,” Dane told Kat after she observed her son swallow the painkiller. “I’ll carry the boy outside.”

“I can walk,” Blake assured. He jumped off the worktable onto his good leg and limped from the kitchen.

Two minutes later, Kat locked up the house. Driving down the lane, she caught sight of Dane in the Honda’s side mirror. Arms crossed, he stood on the bottom step of her veranda, a formidable, forbidding man watching her leave the property.

What do you really know about him, Kat?

He’d had medical training, that was a given. Had he become the military doctor her sister Lee alluded to years ago? Given the desert fatigues he wore, Dane Rainhart had clearly served his country in some capacity.

That being the case, the sadness, the aloofness, the loner attitude seemed to resemble post traumatic stress disorder. Last winter, Lee had pondered the symptoms during her brief relationship with Col. Oliver Coleman before he was killed in action in Iraq.

“You mad at Mr. Rainhart, Mom?” Blake’s question from the rear seat jerked Kat away from the memory.

“Not at all. Why?”

Worried brown eyes filled the rearview mirror. “I was scared at first, but then I realized he was only trying to help. He wasn’t mean or anything.”

“You shouldn’t have spied on him, Blake. Looking through people’s windows is an invasion of privacy and very wrong. You know better. What on earth made you do such a thing?”

“I dunno.” He hung his head; dark hair fell over his smooth brow. “I’m sorry.”

Kat turned out of their wooded lane and onto Shore Road leading into the village of Burnt Bend. “It’s Mr. Rainhart you need to apologize to.”

“I will,” the boy murmured.

The promise did nothing to loosen the knot in Kat’s stomach. Her son had never peered into the windows of her guests’ cabins. Why did he do so now?

She wondered what Dane thought of Blake. She wondered what he thought of her parenting skills. Then she wondered why his opinion was important enough for her to contemplate. The man was part of her past, not her future. Right now, she needed to concentrate on getting her son medical attention. Beyond that, nothing else mattered.

Yet, the feeling Dane Rainhart wasn’t finished with her continued to hover over Kat’s shoulder.

He sat on the cabin steps, watching for her headlights to play peek-a-boo through the lane's trees, to tell him she had returned home with the boy. The moment her car disappeared, he'd gone for a hard, fast hike through the hilly forest behind her property.

The kid's chest hadn't been crushed under the weight of metal. The wheezing was the result of asthma.

The knowledge had punctuated Dane's every step. Guided by the flashlight, he'd climbed across mossy stones, through thick undergrowth and dodged gnarly tree limbs until his chest heaved, and the whistling sound of her son's condition subsided.

Now he waited. Without light or warmth from the cabin.

He heard the grumble of a motor before headlights trickled through the forest. Seconds later, she pulled into the carport. Doors slammed. Voices, hers and the boy's, drifted softly on the night.

A brick of tension dropped from his body. They were home. The boy was okay. Still, he waited. Waited until the big house lay in darkness, except for an upstairs window.

Suddenly, the narrow, rectangular pane beside the mudroom door lit behind its lacy curtain.

Dane rose from the chair when he heard a latch click. Footsteps crossed the deck. Kaitlin? Or the boy, sneaking out again?

He went down the flagstone path.

She stood on the edge of the deck, wrapped in a pale shawl. Damn, she was lovely, like an elf come out to play under the stars.

"Kaitlin?" he queried softly and saw her body jerk.

"Good heavens, you're a quiet one."

He hadn't meant to startle her. Keeping to the delta of the path, he asked, "How's the boy?"

"Eight stitches. The doctor says he can go to school tomorrow, just no roughhousing on the playground."

Dane nodded.

A handful of seconds passed. She asked, "Are you a military doctor?"

"Not anymore."

"A doctor here, then? You seemed to know exactly what to do with Blake's injury."

He hesitated. "I was a trauma surgeon in Iraq. Served there since we went in. Left a year-and-a-half ago." He'd been in the Middle East almost six years. Too damned long to work in a place where you never knew if your next breath would be your last.

She remained silent, studying him as he studied her. Finally, she said, "I was coming to see you, but your lights were off."

"I like sitting on the porch in the dark. It's peaceful."

"I understand."

He imagined she did. She would need the peace following her husband's death.

She said, "I want to apologize for my son's behavior. It won't happen again."

"He's a typical kid. Don't worry about it."

"Being a kid is no excuse. He'll apologize after school tomorrow."

"All right."

As she turned to go, she paused. "Would you like to join us for dinner tomorrow? As a thank-you for helping Blake tonight."

"Help?" The way I helped Zaakir? Dane bit hard on his tongue to sever the memory. "It was my fault he got hurt," he murmured. "If I hadn't chased him—"

"We're all a little to blame," she replied reasonably. "However, if you'd rather not..."

"I'm surprised you'd trust me after tonight."

“Why wouldn’t I?” She stepped off the deck and crossed to him. “Dane, I don’t know your past, or what’s eating you. That’s your business. But from what I’ve seen so far, from what I remember, you’re all right. So if you like roast chicken with stuffing, dinner will be at six tomorrow.”

He could smell her on the night air, caught himself lifting his chin an inch to better draw in the scent. “You’d be wise to stay away from me,” he said.

She smiled. “Perhaps. Except I don’t scare easily.”

The night trapped them, a thick swathe of darkness in which he could imagine the heat of flesh slipping along flesh. His gaze seized her, beckoned her, told her a thousand stories.

“Be careful, Kaitlin. I’m not the man you remember.” Turning on his heel, he walked back into the shroud of night.

Chapter Four

A woodpecker rat-a-tatted somewhere in the pines outside his window. He jerked awake, not because of the bird, but because the sun stood well above the trees and the clock read 9:46 a.m.

He'd slept ten hours straight. When was the last time he'd overslept? Not since college when he'd been studying half the night for a physics exam.

His tangled brain took in the tiny bedroom with its one piece of knotty pine furniture housing his underwear and socks. Kaitlin. He was in her cottage.

And, he'd fallen asleep to wake hours later with—he glanced down—the worst arousal he'd had in two decades.

Scraping both hands down his stubbled cheeks, he drew in a sigh, then flung back the downy quilt and set his feet on the rug beside the bed. He needed a shower, a freezing shower.

Naked, he headed down the short hallway to the bathroom.

The kitchen phone rang. Who'd be phoning on the landline? Had to be her.

Down the hall he went and into the kitchen. A glance at the window; no boy peered back at him. Dane picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Good morning," she sang.

He cleared his rusty throat. "Mornin'."

Pause. "Oh, Dane. I woke you, didn't I?" If he'd needed a shower to cool down two minutes ago, that breathless Oh, Dane doubled the requirement. "I'm so sorry," she went on. "I'll let you get back to bed."

"No, no. Was up reading," he fibbed. He glanced toward the front door and its half-moon window draped with a frilly curtain that let in the light, but obscured prying eyes. Phone to his ear, he walked over, tried to peer through to the Victorian, and imagined her in that country kitchen with its big worktable.

She said, "I didn't mean to disturb you—"

Just thinking of her disturbed him. "Kaitlin?"

"Yes?"

"Stop apologizing."

Another pause, longer this time. Was she remembering his asinine remark last night? I'm not the man you remember. And where the hell had his grouchy tone come from? He'd been raised to respect and honor a woman, to treat her with decency. To do anything less was as foreign to him as giving birth. He just wasn't built that way.

"I wanted to make sure you were still coming to dinner tonight."

So, she had been recalling his words.

He headed for his bathroom. "I'll be there."

"Good. Um...Is there anything you need from town? Anything for your fridge? I'm doing a grocery run in about ten minutes."

"No thanks." The only thing he needed she couldn't give.

"Okay.... I'll see you tonight."

"I'll be there."

He waited for her to hang up. She didn't.

"Aren't you hanging up?" His voice scratched.

This time her hesitation stretched even longer. "Aren't you?" she replied softly.

Oh, hell. What could he say? I want to hang up but can't? I need to hang up before I grab a pair of jeans and go to your back door?

Where he'd kiss her the way he wanted to last night—

"I'm looking forward to seeing you again," she whispered into his ear, and pictures of her in the night bloomed across his brain.

"You're all I thought about before I went to sleep," he confessed.

"Me too, you." And then she released a long breath as if coming to a conclusion. "However, I'd rather be friends."

"I'm not interested in a relationship." Not the kind she deserved.

"That's good to know." Relief crept in. "Because it never would have worked. We're too different."

She was right, they were; but that didn't make the truth easier. "Says who?"

"Says me. You're too intense, too...dark."

"Dark?"

"You've got things inside you."

How could she know he had Zaakir inside him? Zaakir, who was never going to leave, who would haunt Dane until his dying breath.

Except, last night Dane had been free. For ten hours the ever-present guilt had lifted, flown. Until now, until he realized he hadn't thought of the boy since yesterday.

He needed to get off the phone. He couldn't hold her responsible for fixing him, and somehow he knew she'd want to do exactly that if she found out about the darkness that plagued him.

"I'll see you tonight," he repeated, because he had promised. Then he set the phone gently in its cradle.

He no longer needed a cold shower.

He'd been working on the Harley thirty minutes when he sensed Kaitlin's son enter the carport from the backyard. Crouched on a square of cardboard, Dane continued to sweep the battery terminals clean with the small steel brush that was part of his toolkit. Maybe if he ignored the kid, he'd go away again.

"Whatcha doin'?"

No such luck. The boy was here to socialize and Dane wasn't in the mood, and for damn sure not while he was checking out the bike's battery. Already memories of another kid and a different battery surged up; he worked to control his breathing, to pinch back the images.

Blake wandered to the cardboard. His sneakers were scuffed, but what Dane could see of the boy's blue jeans appeared clean. Go away, son. You could get hurt again.

"What's the matter with the battery?"

"Needs a checkup." He had yet to look the kid in the eye.

"My mom gets her car checked at the garage in town."

"Good for her."

His tone didn't deter the boy; he squatted on his haunches next to Dane. "Harley-Davidson motorcycles are the best, right?"

That's it, kid. Go for the power, the look, the sound.

Picking up his flashlight, Dane shone the beam against the clear box to check the fluid in each cell. His pulse rate accelerated. Didn't Blake realize battery fluid was acidic, what it could do to your skin? Damn it, didn't they teach anything in school? And where was Kaitlin? Did she know her son was in a place where he could get hurt?

"You need to back up," he told the boy, pointing to a spot at least six feet away.

"Why?"

"Batteries can be dangerous."

"Really? My dad once changed the battery in his pickup and he never said that."

"Ever heard of acid?"

"Uh-huh. We did an experiment in science last fall with acid."

“Know what it can do?”

“Sure. Can I sit on your bike when you’re done? I’ve never sat on a motorcycle before.”

As he spoke, the boy moved in the direction Dane had instructed. He breathed easier. “Don’t you have something to do?” he grumped. “Like help your mother?”

“Already did. I cleaned my room and collected the trash around the house.”

“Well, maybe there’s something else you could help her with, something she hasn’t thought of.”

“Nuh-uh. She said I could go outside ’cause it’s not raining. And anyway, I like talking to you.” The boy flushed and shot Dane a sheepish grin. “You know...about the Harley an’ stuff. When my dad was alive I was too little to know about motorcycles and anyway he didn’t have a Harley.”

Was the boy was looking for a stand-in daddy? Hell. Knees popping, Dane rose to his full height and gazed down at Kaitlin’s son for a long moment, so long the kid’s grin faded. One sneaker heel began bouncing up-down, up-down.

Ignoring the flare of sympathy in his chest, Dane said in a rough voice, “This isn’t going to work, Blake. I’m the kind of guy who likes his privacy and—”

“I thought I heard voices out here.” Kaitlin stepped into the carport, cutting off Dane’s next words.

“Mom!” The boy waved her over. “Come see Mr. Rainhart’s Harley. Cool, huh?”

“Yes, it is,” she replied, eyes on her son. “Did you apologize to Mr. Rainhart yet?”

The boy hung his head. “Oh, yeah. Sorry for looking in your window. It was a really bad thing to do.”

Dane stood on the other side of the cardboard square wishing Kaitlin would take her son and leave. Family conferences weren’t his thing. Still, he nodded. “No worries.” He looked directly at Kaitlin. “Look, I need to finish up here.”

His message put a small tight smile on her lips. “Let’s go, son. You promised to play with Danny this afternoon, remember?” She darted a look at Dane. “Danny’s Blake’s eight-year-old cousin.”

“Aw...Can’t we wait until Mr. R’s done fixing the Harley?”

“No,” Kaitlin said. “Aunty Lee is expecting you.”

“O-kay.” Shoulders hunched, feet dragging, Blake left the carport.

Kaitlin’s gaze flicked to the Harley. “My son won’t bother you again.” She turned to leave.

Dane stepped around the battery and was in front of her before she got to the door. “It’s not what it seems.”

“You don’t need to explain, Dane. Kids can be intimidating for someone who’s not used to all their questions.”

He let his head fall back on a weighty breath before he said, “It’s not that. I...I had a bad experience with a child.”

A puzzled expression crossed her features. “I don’t understand.”

His memories battled with the yearning to tell all. The memories won. He would not put the quagmire of his past, of Zaakir’s death, on her shoulders. She had enough in her life with an asthmatic son and trying to operate a business without a husband. Still, he couldn’t let her walk away without some kind of explanation.

“A child was hurt on my watch,” he said.

“And you blame yourself.” Her brown eyes, full of commiseration, held his for three thick seconds.

“I need to get back to work.” He strode to the motorbike.

“Dane...”

“Go, Kaitlin. Your son is waiting.”

When her footsteps ebbed, he crouched at his toolkit and with shaky fingers dug out a wrench. Concentrate on the bike. Don’t think of her. Don’t think at all.

Two hours later, when he took the Harley out on the road, her words trailed him like wisps of a ghost. You blame yourself.

Oh, yeah. She was dead-on there.

Carrying a canvas tote filled with fresh produce, Kat walked through the electronic doors of Dalton Foods on the corner of Main and Shore Road. A block up the street, in the library lot, she'd parked her car under the leafless elms. She would make a quick stop, pick up the book Ms. Brookley had called about this morning, then head home to prepare for tonight.

A smile flickered on her lips. She hoped Dane liked baked red potatoes, seasoned with basil and oregano, and shallots and mushrooms in cream sauce. She hoped he liked upside-down pineapple cake. Tonight's dinner would be beyond special, she rationalized, if for no other reason than to create other memories for him, to take away that emptiness she saw so often in his eyes.

"A child died on my watch."

Had the child died on the operating table? Had Dane—

"Kat," a male voice called as she reached the crosswalk to the Burnt Bend Library. "Got a minute?"

She turned to see a stocky man, face shielded by a worn ballcap and a foam cup of coffee in one hand, jog across the street that ran behind the shops edging the boardwalk of the village's tiny cove. Kat recognized him immediately. Colin Dirks, Shaun's cousin, from Bainbridge Island. They hadn't seen each other since Colin's fishing trawler capsized during a sudden squall. Since Shaun drowned in that squall and Colin lived. Kat couldn't help the spurt of anger. He'd been the one to coax Shaun away that weekend.

Oh, initially Colin had offered condolences, but then things changed. His calls and e-mails took another slant. Rather than asking about her and Blake, or talking about the man Colin claimed had been like a brother, he wanted to know when was she going to sell him the Kat Lady?

Never, she thought for the hundredth time as she observed him approach with his feigned concern.

"Here with your family, Colin?" she asked, certain he'd come alone to Firewood Island; certain, too, of the reason.

"Nope. They're home. I was just—" he glanced over his shoulder "—getting a mocha at Coffee Sense before I came to see you. But this is even better. Can I buy you a coffee?"

A snarky retort on her lips, she turned. But then she remembered that this man had been Shaun's childhood best friend. It wasn't as if Colin had planned the squall, or the capsizing of his trawler. And Shaun had gone on his own volition that weekend to pitch in when one of Colin's helpers had come down with the flu.

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