



# KILLER

*Date*

A NOVELLA SPIN-OFF FROM THE  
DEADLY ENCOUNTERS SERIES

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# ZIA WESTFIELD

# Killer Date

## *Zia Westfield*

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## Other Books by Zia :

### The Deadly Encounters Series

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**Killer Secrets** : <https://amzn.to/2KBDn3u>

Book 2

**Killer Lies** : <https://amzn.to/2Z7mXnB>

Book 3

**Killer Deceptions** : <https://amzn.to/31FrcYX>

*Bewitching the Wolf*: (A Short Story) Part of the 'Mystic Desire' Anthology with Black Velvet Seductions Publishing : <https://amzn.to/322Ziq3>

## Killer Date

### Harry and Melissa's Story

By Zia Westfield

#### Chapter One

Melissa breathed a sigh of relief when the car's headlights illuminated the Carville city limits sign through the rain falling on her windshield. Almost home. Her errand to pick up a pot-bellied pig in need of a new home had eaten up most of her afternoon. She still had thirty more minutes before she'd reach her house, but the end was in sight. She couldn't wait to turn off the country music station that had accompanied her the whole trip. It'd been either that or listen to Ralph, the pig's, non-stop squealing. He hadn't taken kindly to being put into a cage for the haul back to Carville.

Then again it wasn't so bad, she thought, as a well-known singer blasted out lyrics about cheating men. Melissa joined in on the chorus and from the back Ralph's squeals and snorts added some punch. The song finished with the singer swearing off men and Melissa agreed. "They're not worth our time," she said to the radio.

Unfortunately, that got her thinking about her last disastrous relationship. Keith had seemed perfect for her. He worked a steady job, liked animals, and shared similar opinions and tastes with her. They'd dated a handful of times and she'd felt ready to take their relationship to the next level.

She shivered, recalling how close she'd come to making the biggest mistake of her life.

They'd been at her place because his place had just been painted. Melissa squeezed the steering wheel tight. If she was going to relive the memories, she might as well face the fact that she'd been a fool. How could she have missed the signs? She had two brothers who were cops. They would have pegged Keith for a sleazeball when she hadn't had a clue.

If it hadn't been for the...the guy who had shown up at her house the night of her big date with Keith, she would've fallen into bed with him and become another notch on his bedpost. Worst case she might've married the creep never knowing he had another family.

She scrunched her nose in distaste. "Nah," she said. Looking into the rearview mirror she caught sight of Ralph, his snout pressed up against the travel cage she'd brought for him to travel in. "The guy would've had to have had a death wish to go the marriage route once he met my brothers."

Ralph snorted in agreement.

And that was the problem. She'd been fed up with her brothers vetting her dates, so she hadn't told them about Keith and she hadn't told Keith about her brothers.

So, she'd finally gotten up the nerve to invite Keith to her place. She'd set out some wine glasses and had slipped into the short blue kimono that she'd bought herself to go with the sexy blue lingerie she'd worn underneath. Keith hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her.

And then the doorbell had rung. She'd been of two minds over whether to open it, but the ringer had been insistent. When she'd opened the door, the man on her porch had introduced himself as a friend of her brothers. Worried that something had happened to one of her brothers, she'd let him in. Instead, once he'd entered the guy had zeroed in on Keith like a ballistic missile.

There couldn't have been a bigger contrast. Keith was sharply dressed in pressed slacks, his suit jacket hung over a chair, his tie loosened and hair mussed like something out of a men's magazine spread on up-and-coming business shakers. The stranger wore jeans, a leather jacket and badly needed a shave. His hair was curly and wild and he had eyelashes women spent ages to create, shielding a pair of bedroom brown eyes.

And right then she'd known that everything was going to fall apart.

It had started to go downhill when the stranger went to shake Keith's hand, and casually mentioned that he'd seen Keith's wife at the country club and asked how the kids were. Keith had tried to bluster his way out of it, but she'd heard enough. When she offered to have him meet her two brothers who happened to be Carville police detectives, he couldn't run out fast enough.

Her stranger had picked up one of the untouched glasses of wine and had downed it. "Waste of good wine," he said with a grin. "I'm free the rest of the evening." He'd wagged his eyebrows and smiled wider.

"Out!" she'd ordered, pointing towards the door.

He'd looked like a puppy who'd been kicked. Before he'd left, he'd looked her directly in the eye, his brown eyes twinkling. "You can thank me another day. How about dinner on Friday?"

She'd slammed the door in his face. She hadn't even gotten his name and she was too embarrassed to admit to her brothers what had happened or to ask who the guy was. Better to bury the whole sorry episode and forget about her very tarnished guardian angel.

The stranger's scruffy image rose before her and she groaned, the sound drowned out by the radio jingle that was playing. For some reason, Keith barely rippled across her memories while the stranger slid in and out of her dreams with regularity. A new song about lonely hearts started and she reached over to switch off the music. Ralph gave a squeal of disgust. "You and me, buddy," she said.

He probably missed his owner. But, after one fall too many, Mrs. Weber's family had wanted her to enter a nursing home. She'd refused because it would have left her mini potbellied pig without a home, as none of her family could take the animal. Melissa had heard about it through the rescue grapevine. She often fostered pets or took in rescues until a permanent home could be found. She was certain she could find someone willing to offer Ralph a forever home. She had promised Mrs. Weber she would do so and she intended to keep that promise.

The elderly woman had been reluctant to say goodbye to Ralph, which was why the trip had taken longer than Melissa had planned. She'd hoped to get home before the weather got too bad. The weather front had clearly moved faster than the meteorologists had predicted. Rain had been falling for the last twenty minutes at least.

A crack of thunder boomed overhead and she jerked the wheel, her heart pounding. The heavens opened up and rain started pouring down as if someone had flipped a switch to deluge. Melissa eased up on the gas pedal even more. The road around Wheeler Lake was full of curves, eventually spilling out onto the mountain road that led down into Carville.

More thunder crackled overhead and her shoulders tensed as she made the next curve. She couldn't wait to be back home under the covers reading a good romance or mystery novel.

Something shot out from a side road up ahead and then bright lights were shining directly at her. "Idiot! Put your low beams on," Melissa muttered, as she squinted against the glare.

The car weaved back and forth, making her nerves jump. Forest bordered both sides of the road, which allowed little room for maneuvering. Before she could come up with a plan, the car barreled into her lane and aimed straight at her vehicle.

Melissa swerved to the right. "Ralph," she screamed, as she hung onto the wheel, trying to keep her SUV on the road.

She heard a loud crunch of metal and the squeal of a frightened pig. She slammed forward against the seatbelt at the same time her airbag deployed.

The SUV shuddered to a halt.

Melissa's heart pounded in her chest as she coughed from the dust released with the airbag. Her fingers were glued to the steering wheel. A squeal from the back brought her out of her daze. "Ralph! Are you okay?"

She tried twisting in her seat to look behind her, but the seatbelt was locked in place, allowing her little forward movement and the airbag was filling up the rest of the space. She scrambled out of her seatbelt, a sob catching in her throat, and shoved the airbag away. Turning in her seat, she saw the cage tilted against the side of the SUV, but the ties she'd used to secure it had kept it from tumbling over. Ralph scabbled to the edge of the cage and stuck his snout through.

He let out several normal-sounding grunts and squeals, which reassured her. He was likely upset but okay.

She clambered out of her car. Rain battered her, blurring her vision. She wiped the drops out of her eyes and focused on the back of her vehicle with dismay.

The other driver had clipped her badly. The wheel alignment had been damaged too much for her to get back on the road. Thank goodness it hadn't been worse. Ralph wouldn't have survived a more direct hit.

Anger battled with concern for the other driver. The accident had left her car half on and half off the road. The other vehicle, a dark SUV similar to hers, had managed to straddle the road so that it blocked both lanes. Steam or smoke, she couldn't tell which, was streaming from the engine. It spurred her to reach for the driver's door. It was locked so she banged on the window. While she could see the outline of someone inside, she couldn't make out any features.

She saw some movement and then the door lock released. She didn't wait for the person to open the door. Keeping an eye on the steam coming from the hood, she yanked open the door. Outside, the smell of rain was mixed with a faint burnt rubber odor. But as she poked her head into the driver's side the stale smell of fast food permeated the interior. She wrinkled her nose and peered at the driver.

The man leaned his head against the airbag, facing away from her. He groaned.

Melissa bit back the words of anger she wanted to hurl and instead asked, "Where are you hurt? I'm going to call an ambulance, but I think we need to move fast. There's smoke coming out of your engine."

She pulled out her iPhone and hit the home button. On the bottom left corner of the screen, she hit the Emergency button, all the while keeping an eye on the car's hood.

"911. What is your emergency?"

"I'm on Wheeler Lake Road. There's been an accident." She expected a response and got none. "Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?" She stared at the phone in frustration, noting the "No Service" message at the top of the screen. She'd try again in a few minutes, but she needed to get the man out of the car and evaluate the situation.

The man slowly lifted himself and leaned back against the seat. Melissa turned on her phone's light and flashed at it on the man's face.

Thunder boomed in rhythm to her heart, as she took in the curly hair, the blue-black stubble, and the long eyelashes that fluttered open to showcase a pair of dark brown eyes that stared back at her in confusion rather than mischief.

"You!" she said.



Harry Fontana winced as he blinked to focus. Everything seemed to be swimming. The voice he'd heard say, "You," sounded familiar, but the face was about as clear as if he'd been viewing it in a mirror smeared with Vaseline—one big blur.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, aware that he ached and not in a good way. When he opened his eyes, at least he wasn't seeing double. That was a plus as far as he was concerned.

"Are you hurt? I called emergency services, but I'm not sure enough of my message got through."

He turned his head and once more gazed at the woman. He knew her, but his brain seemed to be slow at connecting the dots. She'd been part of a case. "The cheating spouse," he mumbled. "You were the backup homewrecker."

He'd been hired by the wife of Keith Foster to find out if her husband was cheating on her. Turned out he was not only two-timing her with his personal assistant, he was three-timing them both with Melissa. He'd recognized Melissa's name and knowing her brothers, he'd been quick to nip that relationship in the bud by visiting her place. Man, she'd looked a treat in that short blue kimono. Harry smiled at the memory.

"The homewrecker?" she screeched, making his head pound and wiping the smile off of his face. "Never mind. Can you move?" She spoke with more frost in her tone this time.

Harry thought about it. He didn't really want to move—not yet, anyway. Except a little voice in his head was urging him to get moving. Like it or not, he always listened to that voice.

He fumbled to release his seatbelt with his right hand only to have pain shoot from his arm to every pain sensor in his body. He tried to hold back the groan clawing its way up his throat.

“Let me,” Melissa said. She leaned over him and water dripped from her hair. She reached across his body and he got a good whiff of something strawberry. She retreated before he could make a fool of himself and start sniffing her neck.

Damn, he felt bruised and beaten. The pain in his right arm had cured him of any temporary amnesia. He recalled every detail of the incident that had led him into this mess. It should have been a simple surveillance. Tail the subject. Take some photos and determine if he'd found the embezzler. What he'd got instead was a bullet in the arm and a dead subject. He'd captured the shooting on film. Those photos just might be his bargaining chip if the bad guys caught up to him before he could get to the police.

Melissa tugged on his good arm. “There's smoke coming from your engine. You've got to get out.” Though she tried to keep her voice calm, he caught the thread of panic underneath.

“Hang on,” he said and bent down, gritting his teeth against the stabbing sensation shooting through every single nerve in his body to pick his camera up off the passenger side floor board.”

“Are you insane? You have to get out of there!” Urgency punctuated every word and if that wasn't enough, he heard a loud hiss.

His own warning system was blaring, “Danger!” He knew damn well he should be focused on getting his butt out of there. But sometimes, you had to weigh the odds. He was betting he had a few more seconds to spare to get the evidence he needed to give to the police. The one thing he knew for sure was that the bastards who were after him weren't going to give up until they'd eliminated him as a threat or until they were in jail.

He ignored her and the hiss. Using his left hand, he opened the compartment for the SD card. Their odds of survival went up as long as he had the card. He ejected the card and stuffed it into the top left pocket of his black leather jacket. “Now, let's get a move on.” He clambered out of his SUV and into the downpour, and would have sunk to the wet ground if

it hadn't been for Melissa holding him up. She kept a steady hold on him as she walked him several yards away from the scene.

"Where's your car?" he asked. They needed to find cover fast or they were sitting ducks.

"My car? Do you even remember what happened?" She pointed back towards his vehicle with its partially squashed front end and he saw that her SUV was halfway off the road with the rear back tire flat and the metal around it crumpled in. Neither vehicle was viable.

Damn.

He wasn't sure he'd lost the guys who'd been following him and who'd put the hole in his arm. But he knew for sure he and Melissa were too exposed out here. He scanned the surroundings for a place to hide.

"Wait here," she said suddenly, and then ran back towards the cars.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing? Get back here!" He swiveled around, nearly losing his balance, searching for signs of his pursuers. So far, none. But his car continued to smoke. The woman was crazy.

Rain battered him as if he wasn't battered enough. He wiped his eyes and forced his body to move so that he could pull her back to safety. He'd only taken a few steps forward when she emerged with a wiggling armful of something.

She ran back towards him and halted a foot away. The thing in her arms moved. It wasn't a baby. And if it was a dog, it was the ugliest canine he'd ever seen. Then the thing turned his head and snorted.

"Holy—Is that a pig? You've got to be kidding me! Who travels with a pig?"

Melissa gave him a look of disgust.

"What? Seriously? It's a pig!"

“Meet Ralph,” she said, with a sweet soft look that women usually reserved for small human bundles. Not for four-legged creatures with hooves that said oink.

Before he could dredge up an adequate response, she shoved the wriggling creature into his arms.

“We should set up emergency flares. If someone comes around the bend, they could have an accident.” Worry and determination threaded her words. She spun around so fast that he almost didn’t react fast enough to snag her arm with his injured arm, which had him cursing against the pain.

Flares. The blasted woman wanted to announce their position to the world. She might have the best intentions, but he could guarantee the persons searching for him didn’t.

And what was up with running back to a car that was smoking? Did she think she was Super Girl? He didn’t have to wait for the bad guys. Melissa Carmichael was going to do him in with her recklessness.

“Forget about it,” he ground out. He squeezed the pig harder than he intended and it let out a loud squeal. His arm was on fire and his head felt like a jackhammer had taken up residence. He pushed the pig back into her arms.

He opened his mouth to tell her that they couldn’t keep the pig and then closed it. The way she was cuddling the swine, she’d sooner dump Harry on the side of the road than the pig. He’d think he’d walked into the middle of sitcom, if matters weren’t so deadly.

A flash of light further up the road sliced through the rain, catching his attention and making his innards twist. “We’ve got company.” He spoke fast, his gaze zeroing on a trail through the trees.

“That must be the police or ambulance,” she said, relief clear on her face. She hugged the pig closer to her chest and then slipped him inside the lining of her jacket, so that only his head peeped out.

He hated to break her bubble, but she'd have better luck winning the lottery. "You called less than ten minutes ago. No way any of the emergency services could get out here in that length of time."

"Oh, well, at least we can wave the person over and ask for a ride." Her forehead was scrunched up and that damn pig was looking at him with distinct disapproval.

He scowled back. "Not a good plan. Those are probably the same guys that got the drop on me and caused this—" he waved his hand towards the scene of the accident, "—this mess."

Her eyebrows climbed in what he assumed was disbelief. "What in the world are you talking about?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the trees. "I'll explain while we get going. The short, succinct version is that those guys want me dead. You're with me. That makes you a target, too. Oh, and the pig. I mean, Ralph. No witnesses, you know."

She squeaked or maybe it was Ralph. He wasn't sure. He'd managed to maneuver her to the edge of the trees. Progress. Thunder crashed overhead, deadening any additional sound. That wasn't a bad thing. It would make it harder for the bad guys to track them.

"Stop that!" She dug her heels in bringing them to a halt.

He ground his teeth, striving for patience.

"What are you talking about?" Fear sounded in her voice, but he was afraid it was fear of him.

He reined in the impulse to simply drag her into the forest with him. For one thing, with a bum arm, he wouldn't get far. For another, she needed to understand the danger they were in.

He pointed his thumb towards the oncoming vehicle, aware of how little time they had. "I was on a job. Think of it as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The guy I was following got popped. The bad guys realized I was there and decided I'd be better off

dead, too.” He thought about the pain radiating up and down his arm and the car crash. “They’re zero for two at the moment, but they’re not going to stop until they succeed. As long as you and the pig are with me, you’re fair game.”

“His name is Ralph and this is crazy.” Her gaze darted towards the vehicle that was gaining ground and he could see her wavering.

He’d heard that desperation had a taste and he finally understood. It tasted chalky with a side of acid to make it smooth enough to travel up and down the esophagus. “Your brothers would want you to listen to me. I’m not crazy or delusional.” The car was going to be on them very soon.

She gave him a narrowed look—the kind of look a woman gives a man that makes him check if he put on clean jockey shorts. The kind of look that told a man he was on a clock and had better make his case or find his butt kicked to the curb.

“Do you even know my brothers? Really?” Her voice dripped with suspicion.

Relief coursed through him. He’d been expecting a hard fastball, maybe a curve. Instead, he’d gotten a softball that he could answer truthfully. “Hell, yeah, I do. We play ball together.”

“What’s your name?” There was challenge in her voice, but her expression was wavering, as if she couldn’t make up her mind whether to trust him.

That made him blink. Hells-bells, the woman didn’t even know his name.

“I’m Harry. Harry Fontana.” He wanted to check and see how close the car was but he didn’t move his gaze from hers. He needed her to trust him. If she stayed at the scene, she’d be in danger. “Look, what if we go in the woods and see who pulls up. If it’s a nice family—”

“—we’ll say hello. And if what I’m saying is true,” he paused and looked her directly in the eyes, “then we get the hell out of Dodge.”

Despite the rain, the rumble of a motor carried to his ears. He didn't glance away, holding her gaze. She was the first to look away, dropping her scrutiny to the shivering, snuffling pig in her arms.

She raised her head, glanced over her shoulder to the approaching vehicle and nodded. "I'm trusting you because you have a connection to my brothers. But if you're playing me—" she turned back and narrowed her eyes as she faced him—"my brothers will track you down to the ends of the Earth and rip you to pieces, that's assuming I've left them any pieces to work with." With those parting words, she moved swiftly towards the woods.

Harry watched her walk away, back straight, chin up, demonstrating a great deal of dignity considering the rain pouring down on them and the pig tucked in her jacket. Damn. He loved a feisty woman.

The roar of a large engine yanked him out of fantasy and back to reality fast. He chased after her moving into the dense tree cover. She marched forward, shoving branches out of her way with a force that said more than words she was not a happy camper.

But at least she was alive.

Harry caught up to her and motioned to a set of trees that would give them a view of the arriving vehicle. He'd been telling the truth. If a Good Samaritan stopped, he'd be the first to lead her to safety—Ralph, too. But his gut, while not as refined as Uncle Sho's, was twisting into a pretzel. Not a good sign.

A dark van with tinted windows and no markings on its mud-splattered side pulled up. Both he and Melissa were hidden behind the trunk of a tree, peering around the side to observe the action. She hadn't taken too kindly when he'd chosen to park himself next to her rather than take up a post at the tree she'd pointed to. She'd frowned, which might've carried some weight if Ralph hadn't been making weird grunting noises and she had to keep shushing him. Like it or not, he, Melissa and the pig were sticking together until they got out of this mess.

The van door slid open and a man in a navy coat got out. He held a semi-automatic weapon in his hand and ran towards Harry's vehicle. Another man wearing a trucker's cap came around the opposite side of the van a gun in his hand.

Beside him, Melissa stiffened. "My wallet's in my bag. They'll know who I am. Where I live." She glanced back at him, her pupils wide with apprehension.

It was bad luck about the wallet. He'd wanted to keep Melissa's identity a secret, but that wasn't going to happen. "What about your phone?"

"In my pocket, but the signal is bad." She reached out and clutched his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't believe you."

"He's gone," the first man yelled back. Then he cautiously approached Melissa's SUV, his weapon up and aimed at the interior.

She sucked in a breath.

Harry huddled next to her his eye never straying from the two gunmen. He memorized their features and descriptions. When he and Melissa got out of this mess, he'd make sure they did plenty of time for scaring her.

"Nobody's in this car either. Where they hell did they go?" The man kicked Melissa's car tire. He moved closer to the driver's side and peered into the window. "There's a woman's bag on the seat."

"Is the car locked?" Harry asked in a low voice.

Melissa started to shake her head only to stop. "I don't know. I closed the door after I got Ralph. My key fob is in my pocket. It might lock automatically. I'm not sure."

They both turned to view the scene on the road. Melissa tensed up beside him as the guy in the navy coat tried the door handle. When the door didn't open, her relief was palpable.

That relief was short-lived when the man fired into the vehicle, causing Melissa to jump, and then turn her head away, though she kept her protective hold on the pig who was



still grunting. She had to be scared as the shots continued, but she didn't make a sound, which raised her in Harry's admiration. He wanted to reassure her, but what could he say? They were in a tight spot and he wasn't exactly brimming with solutions.

The firing stopped and the man was reaching into the car. He emerged with Melissa's bag.

A soft moan escaped Melissa's lips. She'd come up for air in time to see her bag raised up like a prize trophy. The guy in the trucker's cap joined the first man as he pawed through her bag's contents

Harry saw that the tires of both vehicles had been flattened by all the shots. There was no point in hanging around. They needed to put distance between themselves and the two trigger-happy dudes on the road.

Harry leaned close to Melissa, her scent seeping into his pores as he spoke. "We need to go."

Melissa nodded at the same time the pig let out an ear-piercingly loud scream that nearly knocked Harry to his knees.

### Chapter Three

"Hush, Ralph." Melissa jiggled the pot-bellied pig in her arms, trying to calm him down and calm the palpitations of her heart.

"Keep him quiet, will you?" Harry peered around the tree and up towards the road.

She rocked Ralph like a baby and crooned that it would be okay, and sent dark looks at Harry who didn't see them since his attention was focused on the bad guys. She looked in the same direction. The guy holding her bag had her wallet in his hand and seemed to be pulling what little cash she had out of it. Jerk.

The guy in the trucker cap was swiveling around with his gun ready to fire. “What the hell was that?”

Melissa shivered as she continued to soothe Ralph, who was making raspy grunting sounds. Harry turned, leaning his back against the trunk. His face appeared pale and there were fine lines near his eyes. His right arm hung at his side. There was something funny about that arm. She was about to question him when she heard her name.

Her heart dropped to her toes and she peered at the road. The guy must have found her driver’s license. She squeezed her eyes tight, trying to bring order to her chaotic thoughts and telling herself to hold it together.

Harry turned his head, his shaggy hair plastered to his head and water running in rivulets down his face. “We’ve got to get out of here. Let’s head downslope towards the lake. We might find a cabin to take shelter in or a boat that we can use.”

Melissa shook her head, feeling the water run down her face. “It would be stupid to go out on the water in weather like this.”

His hand shot out and snagged hers. His head whipped around. “We may not have a choice. They’re heading this way. Move, now!”

Melissa didn’t even think of resisting. Harry’s urgency didn’t allow for vacillation. She wasn’t ready to attempt escaping a pair of murderous thugs on her own. Besides, she couldn’t leave Harry to fend for himself when he seemed to be shaken up from the accident. It was getting dark and hard to see, but he appeared pale to her.

She needed his experience and training to evade the bad guys. That thought made her look up and she nearly choked when she saw them coming towards the woods with flashlights.

Harry gestured with his good arm to a fallen tree. “Get over that downed tree and hide in that clump of brush. Make sure to run in a zigzag and stay low as much as you can.

It'll make you less of a target. When you reach the brush, count to thirty. If I don't arrive by then, keep heading towards the lake. Try to find a signal and call for help."

She had to squint through the rain to make out the tree he was referring to. It was about the length of a football field away. Another boom sounded from above, making her jump.

"There's no time to waste," he said, before once again glancing over his shoulder towards the road.

Melissa looked too, and saw the men at the edge of the woods. Though her heart was racing, she paused, aware of Ralph pressed against her chest, aware of the rain dripping through the foliage and plopping onto their heads and shoulders, and aware of the grim-faced features of her companion. "What are you doing to do? I can't leave you."

He turned back to her, the twinkle she'd come to associate with him was gone from his gaze. For some reason, a serious Harry rattled her.

"Never mind. Go." He gave her a little push. "I'll be right behind you. Don't worry."

She bit down on her lip to keep from saying that of course she would worry. Now that she had decided to throw her lot in with him, she wasn't about to let him do something suicidal so that she could escape. She nodded and took off at a run, remembering his instructions to zig and zag and keep her head low. She would've liked to go faster, but with cradling Ralph to her chest and the darkening sky, she couldn't afford to take a header into a tree.

She pushed her way through the branches and bushes, feeling them snag at her jacket and hair. Her jeans were soaked. At least her boots were waterproof and seemed to be living up to their name because her feet were still dry. But nearly every exposed inch of her felt oversaturated with water.

She was uncomfortable and scared and trusting in a stranger—possibly, a lunatic.

No, that wasn't fair. When Harry had told her his name, she'd recalled her brothers joking about someone named Harry, who'd played a prank on her brother, Matt. When her older brother Sam had mentioned Harry's name, there had been a combination of exasperation and respect in his tone.

Based on her limited acquaintance with Harry Fontana, she was pretty sure, he was the same Harry. He might be a joker, but he wasn't a lunatic.

Beneath her coat she heard Ralph's snuffling and knew that he wasn't enjoying the ride, but it sure was a lot better than letting him go. She wasn't sure he'd survive in the elements. He'd been hand raised by humans since he was a piglet and at six months, he was not much more than a baby. She hoped he could hang in there until they found a place of safety and she could put him down.

She tripped on a root and nearly went face first into the muddy ground. At the last minute her hand grabbed onto a branch, and she righted herself. The bark cut into her palm and a sob left her. The shadows were lengthening and the forest was closing in around her. She looked back and saw flashlights bouncing among the trees, but she couldn't tell how far away they were. And where was Harry? Fear gave her the impetus to get moving.

Ralph squealed loudly, probably because he'd felt her lose her grip on him. "It's okay. It's okay," she repeated over and over, even though she knew it wasn't okay at all. She wanted to look back and see if Harry followed, but lightning lit up the sky.

She ducked, worried about being a target and started moving again. The lightning had shown her clearly that the area Harry had pointed her towards was up ahead. She had to reach those bushes and she could regroup and check back on Harry.

As she ran, she tried to listen for sounds of pursuit, but between Ralph's grunting, her own breathing and the rain, she simply wasn't catching anything else. She prayed that Harry was behind her. He had to be.

The fallen tree loomed before her, a long thick log that blocked the path in front of her. It had fallen at an angle, making it impossible for her to step over it. She was going to have to climb over it, which was going to be awkward with Ralph.

She heard a shout and turned to look back. She saw movement, but it had gotten too dark to see clearly. Harry's warning to keep going sounded in her ear. Grabbing a branch that stuck out from the log, she used it to help her climb onto the top of the log and over. Her boots sank into mud on the other side and she grimaced.

Pulling her feet free, she plunged forward. The brush that Harry had indicated was a short distance away. She slipped between two bushes and crouched down. She peeked through the branches back the way she'd come and saw lights bobbing around, but no sign of Harry. She was wet, cold, and miserable, not to mention scared out of her wits. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and hit the Home button. The good news was she had eighty percent battery left. The bad news was the No Service seemed to be alternating with one bar. She doubted that she could get a phone call through, but she'd heard that text messages could get through with one bar sometimes.

Harry had told her to count to thirty. Her fingers were cold and wet. She wiped them on her jeans and used her finger to unlock her iPhone. Quickly she brought up her Messages and in the group chat box she shared with her brothers she typed as fast as her thumbs would allow while holding Ralph:

She hit Send and groaned when the tiny arrow showed, indicating it hadn't sent yet. Had thirty seconds passed? Where was Harry?

She was chilled to the bone in her wet clothes and Ralph was wriggling, making it difficult to maintain her hold on him. He squealed and grunted, his displeasure with the traveling accommodations clear. She jiggled him like a small child, and squinted through the darkness for signs that anyone had found her.

“Come on, Ralph. Be a good fella and stay still,” she whispered, as her nerves ate away at her ability to stay calm.

She heard a shout and hurriedly stuffed her phone back in her pocket. Branches snapped and feet pounded a distance away, to her left. Harry had told her to get moving after counting to thirty. That time was well past.

She froze in indecision. She could run, but what if it were Harry and she drew more attention to him?

What if it were one of the men that was chasing them and she walked right into an ambush?

That thought got her moving. She whirled and tried to stay low as she pushed through the bushes, ducking her head when twigs caught in her hair. She wanted to make herself as small a target as possible, but with Ralph in her arms, it was difficult. Thunder rumbled overhead, but it sounded farther away. The ground was muddy and she slipped a few times.

In the middle of the forest, it was as if all light had been leached from the surroundings. She had no idea where she was going or if she was even headed in the right direction.

Her chest heaving, she stopped near a large tree to catch her breath and orient herself. She looked behind her at the path she had carved through the trees for signs of pursuit. She caught flashes of light and some muted shouts about a football field length away.

Where was Harry? Was he okay? And, if he was okay, why wasn't he there with her?

Not that she needed him. She was fine on her own. But he'd dragged her into this nightmare. Surely, he bore some responsibility in getting her out of it.

While she felt better for her reasoning, it didn't change the fact that she was alone in the woods being chased by bad people with guns who wanted to kill her. Uncertainty and fear battered her as she worried that something had happened to her only ally.

"I guess it's just you and me, Ralph," she said in a low voice. Her and a pig. A nightmare? A farce? She bit down on her lip to keep from crying.

She looked around her and realized she was lost. Her family often teased her about her sense of direction. She always replied that as long as she had Google maps or her car navigation system, she could find her way anywhere.

She stared around her in dismay. Which way should she go?

She chose a direction and hunching herself against the cold, trudged forward.

A hand snaked around her, yanking her back against a hard chest. A palm slammed against her mouth, trapping her scream in her throat, as she struggled to hang on to Ralph.

## Chapter Four

Harry barely avoided a kick to the shins, but the elbow in the ribs made contact and his bad arm sent a sharp jab of pain straight to his brain. "Hold still," he hissed. "It's me. Harry."

The struggling ceased and he slowly released his hand.

She spun on him, forcing him to back up a step and nearly trip over a root. He put up his one good hand in a sign of surrender.

"Take it easy," he whispered. He pushed the wet hair off his forehead and gazed at the woman staring furiously at him. He imagined daggers shooting from her eyes into his skin.

"Where have you been? I thought..." She paused and seemed to be regrouping herself. "I thought they might have gotten you," she said softly

Harry put his hand up to his heart. "You were worried? I'm touched. I didn't think you cared."

"I don't." As if to make her point, Melissa continued walking in the direction she'd been headed before he'd caught her.

Harry leaned against the tree trunk and sighed. "Keep going that way and you'll walk right into our friends," he said just above a whisper.

That got her attention. She froze and slowly turned. "This way is to the lake." Her voice didn't carry a lot of conviction.

Harry pushed off the trunk and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The lake is that way. I led the guys a merry chase that should have them chasing their tails for a while. The way you were heading would have crossed their paths eventually."

She squeezed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, she said, "Thank you." She started walking and brushed past him, this time walking towards the lake.

He sucked in a breath and rubbed his chest. Something had just happened. He didn't have time to waste, but he also couldn't breathe right. With water dripping down her face and clutching a pig, Melissa Carmichael looked as beautiful as any fairy-tale princess.

Since Harry didn't believe in fairy tales, he sure as hell didn't believe in love at first sight.

It had to be loss of blood. What else would explain his desire to play Prince Charming?

He shook his head and followed after her. He was better off focusing on how they were going to stay alive and get out of this mess. He'd lost his phone when he'd been shot. He'd managed to get into his car, but he'd been without communication, and with the two bad guys on his heels, he hadn't exactly been able to stop and call for help.



It was one thing when he was the only one in jeopardy, but now Melissa was caught up in the situation. Her brothers would tear him limb from limb if anything happened to her. But they wouldn't have to.

He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her because of him.

With every step, he felt the burn in his arm and clenched his jaw in response. He tried to focus on the sights and sounds around them to keep his mind off the pain. Rain continued to pour down on them, though the thunder had moved off. He'd led their pursuers in another direction and had doubled-back to look for Melissa.

He hadn't expected her to be where he'd told her to wait since it had taken him longer than he'd expected to shake off the guys with guns. His heart had been in his throat when he'd headed in the direction he'd expected her to be and hadn't found her.

He'd ended up backtracking and listening for Ralph's grunts. He'd almost missed her.

He hadn't meant to scare her, but he hadn't wanted her to scream. Though he didn't think the guys were nearby, there was no reason to make it easy for them.

Up ahead, Melissa halted. She looked back and gestured for him to hurry. He picked up his pace until he stood beside her. "What is it?" Could the guys have gotten this far already?

She pointed. "Look. There's a cabin over there. It's dark. Do you think anyone is there?"

Harry peered past her and saw the darker outline of a building in a small clearing less than a hundred yards away. "It's too late for deer season and too early for fishing season. Cabins are usually shut up around this time of year." He put a hand on her arm to keep her back in case she got the bright idea to walk out in the open before he had a chance to check the place over.

The cabin and its surroundings appeared tended to, so he doubted it was an abandoned property. The question was whether anyone was there now.

She leaned towards him. "I don't think there's anyone inside. I know it's a bad thing, but do you think we could take shelter there? I'd really like to get out of these wet clothes and warm up." She pressed closer to him. "I'm not complaining. If it's a choice of living versus being cold, I'll take being cold."

"Yeah, I figured you would." He came to a decision. He needed his arm treated and they both needed to dry off. Besides offering shelter, the cabin might provide a weapon or allow Melissa to reach the authorities. "Let's see if we can get inside."

"Really?" Her voice rose in relief. She grabbed his arm and tugged. "Come on."

"The arm!" he managed to grit out. "Let go of the arm." Bolts of pain were searing his senses. He focused on breathing slowly through his nose, waiting for the pain to subside.

"What's wrong with your arm?" she asked, planting herself in front of him. "And don't lie to me. I've seen the way it's hanging loose at your side."

"Hey," he said, letting his offense show. "When have I lied to you?"

She waved a hand in front of her face. "That's beside the point. I have brothers. They practically cut off a finger and it's just a scratch."

"If I show you, will you kiss it and make it better?" he asked hopefully.

"Not on your life. So spill. Did you hurt it in the accident? If it's broken we need to immobilize it." She wasn't budging and she wasn't going to be deflected by his teasing.

He rubbed at his face with his good hand before letting it drop to his side. "It's not broken." He waved towards the cabin. "Let's get inside and I'll tell you. In fact, I'll show you because I'm going to need your help."

He appeared weary all of a sudden and his voice rang with honesty. Slowly, she nodded. "Okay, I'm holding you to that." She pivoted and stared at the cabin. "How can we get inside? Should we break a window?"

“Check around the door, sometimes people hide a key.” He headed for the front stoop.

“In this day and age?” Skepticism colored her voice.

He shrugged or at least one half of him shrugged. “You’d be surprised. There are a lot of people who think it won’t happen to them or that there’s not anything worth stealing.” He bent down and examined around the steps to the cabin.

Melissa gently pushed him aside. “Let me. I have two arms and hands that work, but you’ll have to hold Ralph.”

His mouth dropped open and he shook his head. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not,” she said, letting her annoyance show. She unzipped her jacket and lifted a squealing Ralph out. She pushed him into Harry’s good arm.

He looked from her to the pig and back. “Is he housetrained?”

“Yes, but we don’t have a pad for the cabin. It might be a good idea to let him do his business, but hang on to his collar. He’s upset and frightened. He might take off.”

“Right. And that would be a bad thing,” he said as he tucked Ralph under his arm like a football.

“Yes, it would,” she said crisply and turned around to hunt for a hidden key. She hoped there was one because she really didn’t want to break into the place. She ran her hands around the frame of the door and then checked around the front stoop. She moved a rock, but there was nothing underneath.

She paused in her search to look over at Harry, who was bent over, holding Ralph’s collar, while the pig snuffled back and forth along the ground. She almost took pity on him, but they needed to get inside. She had no desire to stay out in the dark with the rain pouring down on them and the bad guys hunting them.

“Found anything?” Harry said in a low voice. “Hey, watch that!”

She assumed he was talking to the pig. “Nothing yet. I’m going to check the back door. If I don’t come up with anything we’ll have to break in.”

“We should just break in now,” he grumbled.

She ignored him, preferring to find a key. Though it was still breaking and entering, it didn’t seem quite so felonious.

She hugged her jacket closer to her body and trudged around the side of the cabin. It was dark, but she was afraid to use her cell phone light. She didn’t want to attract the attention of the bad guys and she also didn’t want to drain her battery. Who knew how long this nightmare would last? She needed to conserve her phone as much as possible.

Maybe there would be a charger inside. That would be a bit of luck. And even some canned food. She was hungry. She was certain Ralph was starving. Pigs liked to eat. She wasn’t so certain about Harry. But her brothers could pack the food away, so she imagined his stomach was empty, too.

She hurried around to the back of the cabin. There was a larger back porch with three steps to the door. A large plastic box occupied the space to the right of the door. This side looked more promising. She began exploring all the nooks and crannies she could find.

“Anything?” He asked from right behind her.

Melissa startled and let out a soft gasp. Her hand flew to her chest. “Don’t scare me like that.” She saw that he was holding Ralph once again under his arm. “Do you think I can turn my phone light on quickly? There’s a plastic box here that I want to check out.”

“I’ll do it. You would be amazed at what critters can find their way into a closed container.” He moved up beside her and pressed Ralph back into her hands.

“What about your arm?” she asked, even as her mind conjured up images of snakes and spiders, and she shuddered.

“It’s fine. I only want to make sure nothing dangerous is inside. I’ll let you do the searching.”

“All right.” She passed him her phone, turning on the light before handing it to him. He carefully lifted the lid and leaned it against the cabin wall. He shone the light around and she saw the neatly piled stacks of wood. Using his good hand, he rummaged around.

“Do you see anything?” From her vantage point, all looked good.

“Nope. Have had it,” he said. He turned off the light and gave her back her phone.

He took Ralph back with only a minimum of grumbles. She pocketed her phone and then began feeling around the logs.

“There’s a log here that feels different when I touch it. It’s got a plastic texture to it. I’m wondering if it’s one of those hollowed out logs that lets you hide things inside.”

“Do whatever, but hurry it up, would you?” He sounded a cross between irritated and desperate.

She scowled at him, but doubted that he could see her expression in the darkness, and then decided to chalk it up to the pain in his arm. She pulled out her phone and quickly found the flashlight button. Turning it on, she spied the fake log immediately. She turned it over and saw a circle about the size of a quarter with a groove in the center. She turned off the light and tucked her phone away. A quarter would be more effective, but she didn’t have one and she wanted in the house. Using her nail, she turned the circle clockwise. It moved easily and popped out into her hand. She gave the log a little shake and heard the sound of something clinking inside. She placed her palm over the open hole and flipped it over. A key, fell into her hand.

“Got it!” she cried. She held it aloft for him to see.

“Fantastic. Let’s get inside so I can give you back the pig.”

Ralph’s squeals and grunts spurred her forward. Her fingers were cold and stiff, so it took her several fumbled tries before she got the key into the lock. The key turned smoothly and the door opened.

“We’re in,” she said softly, as if someone inside might hear them.

Harry climbed the steps and pushed Ralph into her arms. "I'll go in first. Let me use the light app on your phone. I want to check the place out first." His voice had hardened in seriousness.

She juggled Ralph into a secure position and then reached into her pocket for her phone. She got the light app working and handed her phone to him. "We'll have to use it sparingly or we'll use up the battery."

He grunted, sounding remarkably like Ralph and took the phone. He stepped into the dark interior with only the tiny light marking his progress. Ralph wiggled and expressed his displeasure at being held, but she kept her grip firm. Though she tried to listen for sounds from inside the cabin, it was impossible to hear anything over Ralph and the gusts of wind that were growing increasingly violent.

When Harry popped his head out the door, she felt her muscles relax. She hadn't realized how tense she had been. "Is everything okay?"

She couldn't see his face clearly, but from the little she made out, he appeared weary.

"All clear. Come on inside." He beckoned her forward. "And cross your fingers that those two creeps don't stumble on this place."

That made her stomach drop. She took a deep breath and decided to focus on getting warm. Though she thought it had been dark out in the woods, that darkness hadn't prepared her for the blackness that hit her when she entered the cabin. Harry had turned off the light, probably to save the battery. She only took a few steps inside before she stopped, her vision nearly gone.

"I can't see a thing. Can you turn the light back on?" The nervousness in her voice made her cringe, except she was nervous. She was living a nightmare that continued to batter her with fear and violence.

"Okay, close the door and stay where you are," Harry ordered. "I saw two lanterns on a shelf. I'm going to see if they work. We can't afford to use your phone light for long."

The bobbing of her phone light gave her a place to focus. She caught glimpses of a kitchen table and then some shelves on the wall. She breathed with relief when she saw the tiny light flash on each of the lanterns.

She frowned, realizing suddenly that he only had one hand to take the lanterns down and he was using that hand to hold the phone. “Do you need me to help? I can see enough to make it over to you.”

There was a loud grunt that sounded negative. She stepped hesitantly forward. The phone light was pointed up at the ceiling, which made her think he was gripping it between his teeth. She wasn’t in much of a position to complain, but she wrinkled her nose at the thought.

She heard some fumbling and then there was a thud and Harry swore. Her heart picked up a beat. “Please tell me you did not drop my phone.”

Harry sighed. “I won’t tell you that because I’d be lying. Hang on.”

Her forehead scrunched in worry. Her phone might be the only link to civilization and safety they had. It had to be fine. Even if the screen cracked, the phone would function. She’d seen plenty of people work their phones with a busted screen. She refused to think that it was a loss. They couldn’t have that much bad luck.

There was a clicking sound and then a soft glow lit up the area across from her. She saw Harry standing next to the lantern, which was sitting on a shaky looking card table. He was busy looking at a second lantern.

Melissa pushed away from the door, remembering at the last moment to lock it. They didn’t want the bad guys walking in on them. With that chore taken care of she moved swiftly towards the light, where a second light had now joined the first.

“As you can see,” Harry said, “the cabin’s layout is straightforward. It’s one big room with a bedroom and bathroom over there. I had a quick glimpse before. The bathroom is the door on the left and the bedroom is the one on the right. I recommend we drag the blankets

out here and stay warm together. I'll try to get a fire going in the fireplace. We'll keep the shutters closed on the front windows. We should crack open a couple on the backside in case the fireplace smokes."

"Right," Melissa agreed, her mind grappling with all that was happening. It was good to be out of the rain and wind, but she was still cold. She took in the beat-up sofa and armchair that faced a scarred coffee table and a stone fireplace. It was certainly rustic and masculine with no feminine touches. There was even a massive fish hanging over the mantle and two deer heads over the bedroom and bathroom doors."

She blanched at the thought of the deer heads. While hunting might be a part of rural life and she knew the deer population was kept in check through hunting, she spent too much time rescuing animals to be comfortable around animal trophies. "Be glad they aren't pigs heads," she whispered to Ralph, earning a surprised chuckle from Harry.

Ralph squealed and she decided it was a good time to put him down. While he explored his surroundings, she could get busy. It didn't suit her to sit back and let other people do the work.

"Tell you what," she said, "I'll bring the logs in from outside. Why don't you check the bathroom for a first aid kit? We'll probably want to boil some hot water, too. Also, make sure Ralph doesn't run outside when I open the door."

His clothes rustled as he closed the distance between them. "Now wait a minute. You've got that backwards. I'll go out to get the wood. You watch the piglet and check for bandages." He eyed Ralph with something akin to nervousness, which was silly since he towered over the animal and outweighed him, too.

"You only have one arm," she protested. "It makes sense for me to do the heavy lifting." As soon as the words left her mouth she knew she'd said the wrong thing. There was nothing like telling a man he couldn't do something to have him stand up and prove he could.



Harry gave her a look before he stooped to pick her phone off the floor. He studied it a moment, then passed it to her. "Sorry about dropping it. It looks fine but check it out. See if you can contact someone on the outside. While you do that, I'll collect the wood we need." His gusty sigh filled the cabin, reaching her ears even above Ralph's snorting. "Stick to the priorities." He held up his hand and ticked off with his fingers. "Heat. Help. First Aid. Food. Lastly, I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"Okay," she agreed. "You see about the heat. I'm going to try for some help." He nodded and moved away. She opened her phone and checked the bars. No Service. Even so, she pulled up her favorites list and speed dialed her brother Sam, holding her breath as she prayed for a connection. Nothing. She squeezed her eyes shut to hold back tears of frustration. A shuffling sound at her feet made her look down to see Ralph rooting around the floor.

The poor fellow was hungry. They were all tired. And they had two maniacs after them. How much worse could it get?

## Chapter Five

Harry dropped the last batch of logs by the fireplace and paused to catch his breath. He'd lost some blood and it was catching up to him. "This should tide us over for now. Do me a favor. Close that door and lock it. It'll keep the wind and rain out and maybe the bad guys if they find this place."

They'd need to bring in more wood if they needed to keep the fire going all night. Right now, they needed to get dry, and the side benefit of more light would be useful. He didn't know how long the batteries in the lanterns would last. The shutters blocking the windows would keep the light from being seen on the front side of the cabin. He was praying that the chimney wasn't clogged up. In case, though, he intended to crack the

shutters on the back side. In this weather, there was a chance the bad guys would go back to their van and give up. Or at least wait the weather out. Harry didn't care about the reason. As long as the two thugs weren't breathing down their necks, they had a chance of getting out of this mess alive.

"Do you think they're still out there?" Melissa called out.

"If they're smart, they'll wait until morning. As soon as someone finds our cars and the van they'll call it in. Those guys can't afford to be picked up by the police."

He heard her return from closing and locking the door and she knelt down beside him taking the log he held in his good hand away from him. "Please go sit down before you keel over. You look pale. If you pass out on me, I don't know what I'll do."

He frowned. "I'm not going to pass out," he said, reaching to take another log.

She lightly slapped his hand away. "You're right. You're not going to pass out because you are going to go sit on that sofa and rest, while I take care of this fire." She gave him a steely look that zinged straight to his heart with its directness. "Or do you think I'm not capable of making a fire."

Now that was a loaded question and Harry knew when he was beaten. "I'm sure you can make the best, brightest, biggest fire," he mumbled. He then pointed to the sofa. "I'm going to sit over there." He made it to the sofa and sank down on the soft cushion, watching her movements.

She moved efficiently and with confidence. Clearly, it wasn't her first time making a campfire.

"You do that well," he said, never one to skimp on praise when it was due.

She shrugged. "We went camping a lot as kids. Plus, I spent a lot of years as a Girl Scout. How about you?"

“Fishing. My dad and uncle love to fish, so we’d go to various lakes and rent places that looked like this. Some were worse, actually. I grill a mean bass.” He leaned forward, wincing at the pain that shot up his arm. “That looks pretty good.”

She wiped her hands together to rid them of the dust. “We need some kind of kindling. I’ll check the kitchen.”

“I’ll help,” he offered, but she waved him back onto the sofa.

“You stay there. You have lines on your face that shouldn’t be there and I can see the rip in your jacket and the dark stain.” Her expression was serious and uncompromising. “I’ll follow your rules. Heat, help, first aid, food and then I want to know what happened. And I want to know everything.”

She paused by the sofa and took her phone out. “Here, this should keep you busy.” She touched a few buttons and handed it to him. “It’s completely unlocked now. I’m trusting you not to go poking around my personal life. But see if you can contact anyone or send a text. We need help soon.”

“No fun if I can’t poke around,” he said, half-jokingly, wanting to lighten the mood. He hated seeing the worry in her blue eyes. He took the phone but she held on to it, giving him a narrowed look. “I promise to only use it to contact help.”

She let go. “See that you do,” she said with a stern look.

“Thanks,” he said, meekly.

While she searched the kitchen, he checked the signal, and cursed when he saw there was none. It was a damn good thing he hadn’t broken the phone when he’d dropped it earlier. He should have accepted her help and not been so pig-headed about it. He looked over at Ralph, who was rooting around the armchair. “Guess you’re not the only one who can be stubborn.”

Just in case, he pulled up the number pad and tried tapping 9-1-1. Nothing happened. He tried one more time, but if the network was down because of the storm, the

call wouldn't go through. The phone battery was down to fifty-two percent. He turned off the phone and laid it on the coffee table next to the lantern.

He rubbed his face with his hand. He couldn't let anything happen to Melissa. Though none of it had been planned, she'd ended up on the road and in his path at the wrong time.

Not that the accident had been her fault. But damn, of all people, to run into—Melissa Carmichael.

"I found some old newspaper," Melissa called out.

"Great. There's a box of matches on the mantle." He stood up and reached for the box. He held it out to her as she walked over a smile on her face and a newspaper in her hand.

He nodded towards the kitchen, where the second lantern sat on the table. "When we get the fire going, let's turn off the lanterns, so we can conserve the batteries."

She waved him back to the sofa. "Were you able to contact anyone?" She knelt down by the fireplace and stuffed the newspaper in strategic places.

"No. There's still no signal. It could be that lines are down from the storm. It could also be this location. There's no way to know right now."

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and nodded. "At least we can get warm. I swear the chill has parked itself in my bones and I feel like I'll never get it out." She grabbed the matchbox, lit a match and then set it on top of some of the newspaper.

The flames immediately licked at the newspaper and a small flame took hold.

Melissa let out a little cry. "That's a wonderful sight. Will the logs catch, do you think?"

"They damn well better," Harry growled.

Melissa laughed and held out her hands towards the fire for a moment. "That feels so good," she murmured.

It also looked good, he thought. The flames added a glow around Melissa. There was a Madonna-like sensation with the firelight bathing her face. She made him think of honesty, purity and gentleness, qualities he didn't associate with himself.

He wouldn't call himself dishonest, but the nature of his work meant he rubbed up against liars and thieves on a daily basis. His job also required him to use subterfuge at times.

A part of him yearned to be touched by the goodness that radiated from Melissa as if it would cleanse him.

He closed his eyes and groaned. He was turning into an idiot. In his experience, no one was ever truly pure.

And if that made him cynical, so be it.

Melissa's head whipped around. "Are you okay? It's time to take a look at that wound and I want to hear what happened and why those men are after you—and now me!"

She stood and wiped her hands together, wrinkling her nose. "We're going to need some hot water and supplies." She tilted her head towards the bathroom. "I'm going to check in there for a first-aid kit. If you can get your jacket off, do so. If it's too painful, wait for me."

While Melissa took a lantern and went off in search of supplies, Harry got off the sofa and slowly shrugged out of the left side of his jacket. Since he couldn't use his right arm, it was awkward, took time and some hopping around that managed to jar his right side. He gritted his teeth and continued until the left side of his jacket was off. Then, using his left arm he pulled on the sleeve as he worked his injured arm out.

He was sweating by the time he was free of the jacket. But, at least he'd done it on his own.

Feeling like a dishrag after that short burst of exercise, he flopped back down on the sofa and stretched his legs towards the fire. His jeans were damp and sticking to his legs and he grimaced in discomfort. It would have been smart to strip out of their clothes.

Or it would've been smart if they didn't need to be ready to leave the cabin at a moment's notice. Harry wasn't sure how easily he'd be able to dress with one arm useless. The image of Melissa helping him into his clothes sent blood heating through his veins. An even more interesting image of him helping her out of hers, set the heat higher and he shifted in his seat.

Melissa emerged from the bathroom holding a first-aid kit aloft with a wide grin on her face. "Found something. It took me a while, but I found it in the end. Why anyone would bury a first-aid kit in the back of a cabinet makes no sense."

She stopped in front of him and gazed at him critically before nodding. "Good work. You got the jacket off. I'm sure it wasn't easy."

"I'm not helpless," he grumbled.

"Nope," she agreed. "You aren't." She sat down on the sofa next to him and opened the kit and examined the items. "So you won't mind me doing what needs to be done to your arm." She pulled out white gauze, scissors, and bandages and placed them on the coffee table. She took out a small plastic bottle and put that on the table and followed it up with a tube of ointment.

He eyed everything with resignation. He needed to be patched up at least enough to stop the bleeding that he was certain was continuing even now.

"Alright, I'm going to heat some water and look for some towels I can use." She got to her feet and moved towards the kitchen.

"Melissa," he said, halting her. "Thanks."

She smiled and it reached all the way to her blue eyes. "Wait until after I treat you." Her smile widened further and her gaze twinkled at him causing the blood in his veins to

heat once again. “I should warn you that I usually practice my medical skills on stray animals.” She winked and walked away.

Harry let out a soft chuckle. “Lucky animals,” he said under his breath.

Right on cue, as if he’d been summoned, Ralph rounded the corner of the sofa and snuffled around Harry’s feet. He stopped, gazed up at Harry and started making little squealing sounds as he wriggled his butt.

Somewhere in the heavens, someone was having a good belly life. Who in the hell went on the run with a pig? The little porker was kind of cute if you got over the fact that he wouldn’t shut up and always seemed to be under foot. “Whoa, buddy. Keep it down.” He brought his brows downward and spoke sternly.

Ralph squealed some more and shook his butt.

“Everything okay in there?” Melissa called from the kitchen area. He heard cabinets being opened and closed and the rattling of some pots.

“Fine,” he said. “Ralph and I are getting acquainted.”

“He’s really sweet,” she said. “I’m sure he’s confused, poor thing. His previous owner spoiled him, so being out like this in unfamiliar territory must be terrifying.”

“Right,” Harry said, trying to wrap his head around the conversation. Personally, he was a dog man. You knew where you stood with dogs. His mom and sister were into cats. His dad had put his foot down at one dog and two cats. But cats and dogs were as exotic as it got in the Fontana household.

He wondered what his father would say to a pig. His Uncle Sho would probably chuckle and tell him to find meaning in the experience.

He eyed Ralph some more. “Sit.” To his shock, the piglet plopped its butt on the floor.

“Well what do you know.” He sat up and winced, but wanted to see what else the little beastie could do. “Lie down.” Nothing. “Beg.” He got some grunting noise, but not

much else. “High five!” He leaned forward and held his hand out. Ralph got on all fours again and surprised Harry by lifting up his tiny hoof. Harry let out a hoot and touched his knuckles to the hoof. “Way to go, bro.”

Satisfied, he sat back on the couch, the energy drained from him. For a few minutes, he’d forgotten his bloody arm and the mess they were in.

He turned his head and discovered Melissa standing just behind the couch.

“Male bonding?” She spoke lightly, and her tones soothed the tension in his muscles. Ralph immediately scampered to her and butted against her legs.

“Something like that,” he said. “Did you find everything you needed?” As soon as he finished speaking, wind howled beating at the shutters. Ralph let out a high squeal and bumped against Melissa.

She held up a pile of items that she proceeded to transfer to the coffee table. She bent down and picked up Ralph and snuggled him for a moment. “Sweetie, you need to be a good boy. Let me take care of Harry and then I’ll feed you.” She placed a kiss on its snout and placed him on the armchair. He rooted around the chair and then like a dog, made two circles and lay down.

“This can’t be happening to me,” Harry said, shaking his head.

Melissa put her hands on her hips and narrowed her gaze on him. “Why do men always whine?” She pointed a finger at Ralph. “He lost his home today and instead of being settled comfortably at my place, he’s running away from men who wouldn’t mind shooting him or me, for that matter.”

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it; her words caused an image of his sister Nina telling him to get over himself to pop into his mind. He ran his hand through his hair looking for the right words to say. Nina had been right at that time and Melissa was right now. “I’m sorry,” he said with a dose of humility. “You’re right. You and Ralph are victims in all this. I’m sorry for putting you in this situation.”



She frowned and then sighed. “You’re a victim, too. The important thing is that we work as a team and get out of this mess.”

“A team,” Harry repeated, giving Ralph a sideways glance as he tried to imagine siccing Ralph on the bad guys. Melissa pulled him away from those thoughts when she began speaking.

“I found this metal grate that I thought we could put on the logs,” she said, pointing to the grate she’d placed on the table. “We can put the pot on it to heat the water. I’m not certain about putting the pot directly on the logs.” She touched the double-handled iron-cast pot she’d found. “There were a bunch of towels in a cabinet. They look like kitchen towels. They’re the best I could find.”

“Do we have water?” Harry asked.

Melissa nodded. “I’m letting the water run in the kitchen to clear it before I fill the pot. It should be okay to use soon. I’ll put a bowl down for Ralph, too. I’m sure he’s thirsty as well as hungry.” She held her hands out and sighed. “I’m going to wash up. I don’t want to touch you after having touched Ralph.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, silently vowing to do whatever it took to keep Melissa safe.

## Chapter 6

They were both sweating by the time they got Harry’s outerwear off. His long sleeve shirt had been stuck to his skin in places due to the dried blood. It’d taken time for her to dampen the shirt and slowly peel it away. Now he was down to his T-shirt with the right sleeve rolled up like some kind of bad boy.

The firelight played along his features and caressed his skin. He wasn’t particularly tall or thin. He had a stockier build that was solid muscle from what she could see and feel. Melissa sat on the couch beside him and held his arm up to see the wound. It looked nasty,

but there was so much blood smeared along his arm that combined with the dried blood and low lighting, she couldn't see well enough to determine how bad he'd been shot.

She shivered at that thought and bit down on her lip. If she needed proof that the two men with guns meant business, well, here it was. The entire time she had been with Harry he hadn't once complained about his injury.

She took another of the towels, dipped it into the water she had heated on the fire, and dabbed away at the blood, trying to clean the wound as much as she could to reveal what she was dealing with.

"So, am I going to live?" Harry asked, wry humor infusing his voice.

Melissa continued wiping away the blood and grimaced when fresh blood began leaking from a groove that the bullet had sliced across his upper arm. "You'll live, provided we outwit the bad guys and get you to a doctor for some stitches and antibiotics." She sighed and pressed the towel carefully against the wound.

"Ow," Harry said and turned his head to look at his arm. "That doesn't look too bad."

Melissa rolled her eyes. "You need stitches." She put a bite into her words. "You're lucky the bullet cut across your arm and isn't stuck in it. We'd have had a heck of a time trying to dig a bullet out of it with the butter knife I found."

Harry continued to study his arm. "I was lucky the guy's a bad shot."

Melissa lifted the towel and was satisfied to see that the blood flow had slowed to a trickle. "There are some butterfly bandages in the first-aid kit. I think I can use those, but I'm not sure how effective they will be."

"It'll be fine. Thanks." He leaned his head against the sofa and closed his eyes.

She thought he looked pale. The loss of blood wasn't good. If they could make contact with the authorities and get medical attention they should be fine.

. She shook her head and got busy bandaging the wound as best she could. She used several butterfly bandages to pull the skin together. Harry didn't say a word, though she

thought his mouth tightened and his jaw clenched. She wiped the sweat from her brow and forced herself to keep going. Finally, she took the length of gauze and wrapped it around his arm with enough pressure to stop the bleeding. She tied it off and sat back in relief.

“All done,” she said in a whisper, all her energy gone for the moment.

Harry opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her. “I owe you one. What do you say to dinner Friday night?”

Melissa chuckled. “You don’t give up, do you? Tell you what, if we get out of this mess alive and you aren’t laid up in a hospital bed, you’re on.”

Harry grinned. “No way can I ignore a challenge like that.”

For some reason Melissa’s heart lightened. There was something about Harry that made her believe he would get them out of this situation. On the heels of that thought, she shook her head at herself. Harry had one arm and was bleeding. Depending on him was foolish. She’d never been a damsel-in-distress kind of girl, waiting for a man to come save her. She didn’t intend to start now, though teaming up with Harry made sense, which meant that she would step up when she could.

Harry moved a loose strand of hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “What’s the matter? You went from smiling to frowning in the blink of an eye.”

His fingers lingered, trailing along the curve of her ear, sending shivers along her spine. The man was wounded and still managed to ooze sex appeal. He wore his five o’clock shadow better than a GQ model. Women paid money for lashes like his.

The fire crackled and outside the storm lashed at the cottage. She couldn’t look away from him. The air between them seemed to change, making it hard for her to think. This wasn’t like her. She was practical, clear-headed, with a soft spot for underdogs.

That must be it! She seized on the idea. Harry was the underdog here, which was why her feelings were topsy-turvy and her brain was having trouble making connections. It was a situational thing.

Even so, she felt the heat rising to her face and knew it wasn't from the fire. She stood abruptly, causing the gauze and other supplies to fall from her lap to the floor. "Darn it," she muttered.

Harry struggled to sit up. "Melissa, are you okay?"

"Fine," she snapped, then closed her eyes to get her emotions under control. It wasn't his fault that she was suddenly having feelings of attraction to him. It was temporary. Situational. She opened her eyes and stared down at him. His brows were pulled forward in concern. "I'm fine," she repeated. "I'd better clean this up. You should rest."

Ralph snorted and his head popped up from the short nap he'd been taking. He stood on the chair and made loud grunts.

"Does he come with volume control?" Harry asked, wincing when Ralph let out a particularly noisy squeal.

"He's hungry," Melissa explained. "When I was searching through the cabinets, I found some oatmeal and raisins. It'll have to do for now." She hurriedly packed the first-aid kit and closed it. She bundled the bloody towels into a pile and carried them to a spot in the kitchen. If time allowed she would try to wash out the blood and dry the towels by the fire. She hated to leave the owners with the mess. It would be frightening to come upon.

She washed her hands at the sink, using the small bar of soap she'd discovered in a cabinet. The water was freezing cold and her fingers were frozen and red by the time she finished. She found the package of dry oatmeal and put about half a cup into a metal bowl. Next, she took out the pack of raisins she'd found and added a small amount to the oatmeal.

Picking up the bowl she walked towards Ralph and shook it lightly. "Here you go, Ralph. Dinner." She spoke in a sing-song voice and didn't look at Harry to catch his expression.

Ralph scrambled off the chair, landing with a thud on the floor. His hooves slid on the wood floor as he rushed to her. She placed the bowl down next to the water bowl. He

stuck his snout into the oatmeal and snuffles of pleasure sounded forth. When he got down to the bottom of the bowl he began pushing it along the floor in an attempt to get every last bit. He came up for air, his snout covered in dry oatmeal dust and one raisin was stuck to his fuzzy cheek.

Harry laughed. "Try breathing and it'll last longer."

Melissa smiled. She picked up the bowl and took it to the kitchen. She ran some water into a tin cup for Harry so that he could replace some of the fluids he was losing through blood loss. They had to find rescue soon. She leaned on the counter and took a moment to get a grip on her emotions. No good would come from falling apart. She had to deal in the now. She grabbed the leftover raisins and carrying her offerings to the living area, she deposited them onto the coffee table.

His eyebrow quirked. "What's this? Dinner?" He glanced at her and then Ralph. "Don't I get oatmeal?"

Melissa chuckled and was aware of the pleased look that came to his eyes. She appreciated that he was trying to ease the tension of the situation. "Think of it as an appetizer. Eat some of the raisins. They have iron in them, which you need since you're losing blood. Here's some water, too. You also need to drink." She picked up the cup and handed it to him. He downed the water in one gulp and gave the cup back to her. "Would you like more?"

He shook his head. "I'm good. So what else is on the menu?"

Melissa motioned towards the kitchen. "I found some cans of pork and beans. If that meets with your approval, I'll get that heating on the fire."

"Pork and beans? Ralph will never speak to us again."

Laughter bubbled up from deep in her belly until she couldn't hold it in any longer. She knew she was laughing more than she should, but she couldn't seem to stop. Tears

pricked at her eyes. She brought her hands up to her face and brushed them away as she got herself under control. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said in a gruff voice. "It's good to laugh, to find humor where you can." He paused, searching her face. "I owe you an apology for dragging you into this mess. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Maybe a little emotional, but okay." She realized that she liked the fact that he accepted her as she was. If she was having trouble handling the situation, he wasn't going to call her out on it. He took life the way it came and strived to handle it as he could. He probably hadn't expected to be stuck in an isolated cabin with a semi-hysterical woman and a pig, but there it was. She glanced over at Ralph, who was content now that his belly was full.

While the mini-burst of emotion had helped relieve some of the pressure building inside her, her body felt tight all over. She stretched her neck and shoulders to work out the knots and tension that had taken up residence. Then she reached into her pocket for her phone to check the time. It was just after ten. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since the accident on the road and their run through the forest. The storm still battered at the cottage. She checked the service and was disappointed to see there was still none. She put her phone away and realized that Harry was observing her, without a trace of the humor she'd come to expect.

"The storm has probably pulled the network down," he said. "The storm should be gone by morning. We need to be ready to leave when it's clear enough."

Melissa tucked her hands into her jeans pockets. "Do we head back to the road or towards the lake?"

Harry sat up and reached for the raisins, popping them into his mouth. He appeared to be thinking. "The lake. For all we know, they'll have gotten reinforcements. I have a sense of where we are. It'll be a hike, but we can reach civilization."

Melissa pulled her hands out of her pockets and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why are these men shooting at you? And don’t try to feed me a bunch of bull. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

“Hey, now,” Harry said indignantly, “why would you think I’d lie to you?”

Melissa sighed and plopped down next to him. “Sorry. That didn’t come out right.” She turned slightly so that she could face him. “Sometimes my dad and older brothers like to gloss over the bad stuff. I know they want to keep the ugliness of their job separate from their home life. And then there are people like Keith and others, who lie for reasons much less noble.” She made a face. “But I’m not a porcelain doll. I won’t break. Those guys were shooting real bullets. Please don’t hide the truth or try to sugarcoat it.”

He held up his pinkie finger. “Pinkie swear.”

She bit down on her lip to keep from laughing once again. “Seriously?” She couldn’t believe he was using a childhood form of promise.

He spoke solemnly. “I have it on good authority from my niece Lily that pinkie swears are the bestest and can never be broken.”

She chuckled at the mental image of him with a little girl demanding that he pinkie swear with her. “How old is your niece?”

“Four going on forty,” he replied promptly. “She’s going to be hell on wheels one day. She’s a whiz with numbers and she has my sister’s ability to see right to the heart of a matter.”

Pride dripped from his voice and for the first time, she saw beyond the wisecracking private investigator to the man beneath.

Being with Harry was chipping away at the wall that she’d erected around her heart. She’d started building that wall when she’d had enough of her boss stringing her along about a raise and promotion that he’d given her subordinate, who’d apparently been keeping his sheets warm, the position Melissa had earned. Then there had been the debacle with

Keith, which Harry'd had a front row seat for. With her rescue animals, she could be herself. When it came to people, she no longer trusted as easily in what they said.

So did she trust Harry to keep the promise he'd made?

"What was the last promise you made to Lily?" she asked and saw his eyes widen in surprise at the question.

He frowned thoughtfully as he lowered his hand. "I promised that I would help her get in to see her best friend Billy who was in the Children's Hospital for cancer treatment."

She pushed her hair behind her ear thinking about what he'd said. Children that young weren't generally allowed in hospitals and she was sure that for a young boy getting cancer treatment the rules were pretty strict. "What happened?"

"I thought about smuggling her in inside a laundry bag." He paused and then broke out laughing. "You should see the horror on your face." He continued to chuckle, his eyes crinkling at the corner. "I'm just kidding."

Melissa blew out a breath. "You're lucky you're wounded or I'd give you something to think about." She poked her knuckle hard into her palm and twisted, mimicking the noogies she had given her brothers when they'd gotten on her nerves. He raised one hand to his heart in mock horror, his grin never leaving his face. She couldn't help but smile back. "Seriously, what did you do?" She was certain that he'd managed it. There was something about Harry that made her think he could accomplish anything he set his mind to.

Harry gave a slight shrug. "Nothing much. I talked to the doctors and nurses and Billy's parents. I pointed out that it would do his heart more good to see his friend than for them to tell him what Lily was saying. They finally agreed. They put Billy in a glass room and Lily was all suited up and masked on the other side, just in case. We bought them mini-white boards and construction paper and blocks, and for two hours they drew and built and created all kinds of things on each side of the glass."



“How is Billy?” she asked, her heart full of emotion for two children she’d never met and for a man who’d cared enough about his niece to make the meeting happen.

Harry smiled. “Billy responded to the treatment and he’s home. He still has more tests ahead, but they’re hopeful.”

“And Lily has her best friend back,” Melissa whispered, deciding that Harry could be counted on to keep his pinkie swear promise. “All right,” she agreed. “Pinkie swear.” She held her pinkie up and waited for him to hook his pinkie around hers and as soon as he did, the touch went electric, zinging through her nerve endings.

“Well,” she said, cringing inwardly at the slightly breathless quality of her voice.

Harry grinned. “I swear to tell you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“This is not a court of law,” she said dryly.

“I know,” Harry said. “Because if it was, I couldn’t do this to seal the deal.” He moved forward, his features blocking out the firelight.

She put her arm on his shoulder, her fingers curling around the muscles. She couldn’t seem to decide if she should push him away or pull him towards her.

Harry waited, his gaze asking for permission, she knew.

She brought her lips closer, aware of the tiny voice in her head telling her that it was too soon, that she didn’t know him, and that their lives were in danger. And it was precisely because their lives were in danger and she didn’t know what tomorrow would bring that she closed the gap between them.

Harry had wanted to kiss Melissa Carmichael ever since he'd seen her in that short kimono, showing off those gorgeous legs. If her brothers knew the lustful thoughts that had been floating in his head, they'd be using him as the basketball in their next pickup game.

But as she pressed her lips against his, he tossed thoughts of her brothers into a mental wastebasket and focused on the moment. He brought his good hand up to tunnel through her wavy hair and to anchor her head in place. Her scent surrounded him, making him think of fresh air and sunshine.

He slanted his head and her mouth opened, allowing his tongue to slip in and take the kiss deeper. His tongue dueled with hers. She tasted as good as he'd imagined. Better.

The heat from the fire rivaled the blaze burning inside him. Whatever blood he still had inside him had all pooled in his groin, causing his erection to push against his zipper. This wasn't the time, nor the place.

But Melissa was definitely the right woman.

He groaned as their circumstances crashed through the delicious haze he'd allowed himself to sink into.

Melissa released her grip on his shirt and jumped back as if she'd been scalded. "Your arm! Did I hurt you?" She brought her hand up to her lips and stared at him.

Harry half chuckled, half groaned. "The arm is no different." Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling and she looked absolutely beautiful to him. "I wish we really were on a date and you had invited me in after and this was the beginning of something special." There was raw honesty in his voice and he meant every word.

Melissa's cheeks pinkened further. Slowly, she lowered her hand. "This has been the strangest day." She put more space between them and folded her hands on her lap. "We're stuck in a cabin, with a pig, I might add, without cell phone service and crazy men with guns after us." She bit down on her lip a moment. "I don't think any date could top this." She

smiled at him and then stood. “I’m going to heat up those cans of pork and beans while Ralph’s still asleep.”

Harry glanced over at the mini-pig, who was snoring or grunting. Either way the little porker was making the best of the situation. Harry listened to Melissa’s movements in the kitchen area and thought about the kiss they’d shared. His body was cooling and his brain was back online and functioning.

Now was not the time to lose focus. While he’d like nothing better than to make love to Melissa in a cabin in front of a roaring fire, it would be without a pig and certainly without men with guns—not to mention gunshot wounds.

Twenty minutes later, Melissa carried two bowls of warmed up pork and beans over to the coffee table. The smell wafting towards him made his stomach grumble in anticipation.

“Eat up,” she urged him. “You need to keep up your strength.”

“Don’t worry.” Harry scraped at his bowl, enjoying each bite. “They didn’t hit anything vital. I’ll be fine.”

Melissa set her plate on the table. “You’ll be fine if we get medical attention and if those men are put in jail. If we have to run around these woods for long, your wound will get infected. Worst case, they find us and your wound won’t matter because we’ll be dead.” She looked away after she said that, her face growing noticeably pale.

Harry swore, the pork and beans tasting like ash in his mouth. He finished the last bites because he’d been taught from a young age never to waste food. He dropped the spoon into the bowl and then leaned over to stack them with her bowl and spoon.

“Let me,” Melissa said, motioning for him to stay seated. She picked them up and took them to the sink. He heard the water running and a few minutes later Melissa returned. “That water is freezing.” She stuck her hands out towards the fire, warming them

up. When she turned back to him, her expression was serious. She held his gaze as she asked, "You still haven't told me why those men after you."

Harry rubbed his face. "I screwed up. Uncle Sho's instincts were on target when he said we shouldn't take this case. I should've listened to him."

"You've mentioned this Uncle Sho before." She sat once more on the sofa, tucking one leg underneath her thigh. "It's an unusual name. Is it short for something?"

"Sho Tanaka of Tanaka and Fontana Investigations, and it's not short for anything. Uncle Sho is my mother's brother. The family is Japanese on my mother's side, Italian on my father's. It leads to interesting family get togethers."

"I'll bet," Melissa said. "Though being Irish through and through, the Carmichaels could give you a run for your money."

"You probably could." He gazed into the fire and thought about his latest case. "We were hired by a mid-sized company to figure out who was stealing from the company accounts. Uncle Sho was working on how the money was being moved out of the company's accounts. We had narrowed down our suspects to three people. My job was to look for signs of lavish spending, gambling, debt, and so on. I trailed one of the suspects to a meeting near a warehouse. He met up with those goons you saw."

Melissa sucked in a breath. "How were you able to stay hidden?"

"Not very well apparently," Harry said, moving his injured arm and wincing. "There were trees around the edge of the parking lot. I had to park behind the tree line, so it took me some time to get close enough to see anything. I couldn't hear anything, but they'd already started working the guy over." He paused. He wasn't a stranger to violence, not with his years in the military, but there'd been something particularly brutal about the beating he'd witnessed. He could at least spare Melissa the bloody details. "I could hear him well enough to recognize he was pleading for them to let him go. I got a few photos and then took out my phone to call the local cops and an ambulance because I figured the guy

was going to need it. I had my Bluetooth earphones in, the phone was ringing and I had my finger on the camera shutter. Then bang!" He slammed his fist down on his knee.

Melissa startled, rearing back. "Bang?"

"Yeah." He rubbed his leg where he'd hit it. "The guy with the trucker cap shot my suspect, once in the stomach and then in the head, for good measure, I guess." He clenched his jaw at the memory. As a general rule, he didn't carry a gun. He usually didn't need one.

In retrospect, none of them had stood a chance. He hadn't expected the guy to be shot and he, himself, had been unarmed. He replayed the events in his mind, thinking how it might've been different had he been armed. His military training whispered that sometimes there was nothing that could be done and that he had to accept it or go crazy.

"Oh my," Melissa whispered. "Then what happened?"

"Bad luck, which I seem to have had a ton of today." He let his head fall back against the sofa. "A damn bird flew at me squawking loudly. I must have been too close to its nest or something. The bad guys caught a glimpse of me and started shooting. I played duck and run. Unfortunately, one of the bullets clipped me. I almost went down and that's when I must've lost my phone and my earphones. I managed to get into my car and drove like a bat out of hell for the city. Figured when I got back, I'd report the killing and get patched up. I must've been losing more blood than I thought because the next thing I knew you were bending over me and our cars were lip locked."

"Lip locked, huh?" She shook her head. "You might owe me a new car before we're done." She went silent and her attention turned to the fire. "So what do we do?" she asked finally. "You saw those guys kill a man. They aren't going to forget about that. You're a witness they can't afford. And now I'm with you. I'm expendable too."

Harry reached over and grabbed her hand. "You're not expendable to me." He rubbed his thumb along her soft skin. "Whatever happens, I'm going to get you out of this mess." A loud snort interrupted him. "And Ralph. I'm going to get Ralph, out of it, too."

She turned her hand in his and squeezed lightly. "I know you're going to try." She started to yawn and brought up a hand to stifle it. "Goodness, I'm feeling exhausted." A mischievous look entered her eyes. "Like I've been in a minor car wreck."

Harry laughed. "Really? I feel like I've been shot. Oh wait...."

Melissa joined him in the laughter until it faded away. She shifted her position so her shoulder brushed against his. She didn't remove her hand from his light clasp, which he took as another positive sign. It'd been a while since he'd last enjoyed a woman's companionship. His last relationship had ended in a fizzle after canceling one date too many because of an investigation. He liked the feel of her hand in his own and he liked the way she fit against him. Damn, he really wanted to go out with her when this was over and they were safe.

Neither of them spoke, and the silence wrapped around them like a warm blanket. The fire crackled, while the storm blew furiously outdoors and Ralph snored softly. With Melissa cuddled up against his side, Harry was content to let the time slip past.

"I should look for some blankets and we should try to get some sleep." She pushed off the sofa to stand up.

"We'll get out of this," something compelled him to assure her, though he knew there were no guarantees.

She looked down at him and gave him a small smile. "What time should we leave in the morning?"

Harry scratched his head a moment as he thought. He really wanted a shower and a change of clothes, but that wasn't happening soon. "I want us to slip out before the sun rises. With the storm raging outside, I doubt those two are on the hunt. They'll wait for the storm to pass and maybe call in reinforcements unless they think we've escaped, and then they'll be staking out our homes."

She pressed her lips together and nodded in understanding. At the same time, she dug her phone out of her pocket and appeared to check for a signal.

“Anything?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. But I’m going to send another text. You never know when it might get through.” She finished and tucked the phone away. “I’ll find us some blankets. I’ll get some more wood for the fire. Otherwise it’s going to die out.”

Harry watched her walk away, not bothering to argue with her. He could damn well get the wood himself. He might be down one arm, but he wasn’t incapacitated. He got up from the sofa, grimacing some from the pain. He picked up his coat where she’d left it, not bothering with his shirt. As it was, he got one arm into the left side and then pulled the right side over his shoulder. It would have to do. Then he went to the door they’d used to enter the cabin. The firelight barely reached this part of the house, which would help shield him if anyone was outside watching.

He threw back the bolt just before he heard the sound of grunting and the click clack of Ralph’s hooves on the floor. The mini pig ran up to him and snorted.

“I guess you want to go out.” Harry stared down at the creature, thinking how much ribbing he’d get if his buddies could see him now. He didn’t know much about pigs, but he sure preferred that Ralph did his business outside. He just had to make sure that Ralph didn’t escape because he knew without a doubt that Melissa would launch a search for him. And if anything bad happened to Ralph, she’d blame herself and then him.

Since he planned on claiming his first date with Melissa as soon as they were safe, it was definitely in his best interest to keep the little pig safe.

“Stay,” he said sternly to Ralph and was pleasantly surprised when the pig didn’t move to follow him. He went back to the kitchen where he’d seen some twine when he’d found the lanterns. He grabbed the twine and turned to find Melissa dropping some blankets on the sofa.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to make a leash for my pal, Ralph, so he can do his business and then I’m going to get some wood.”

Melissa looked over at the empty spot where Ralph had been and then glanced over towards the door. “He’s my responsibility. Besides, you shouldn’t use your arm.”

Harry frowned. He didn’t like her thinking of him as a weakling in need of rescuing. “It’s a scratch. I’m fine.”

She fisted both hands on her hips. “I’m pretty sure the Black Knight said that in a Monty Python movie and he was in worse shape than Humpty Dumpty.”

“You like Monty Python? A woman after my own heart,” Harry said as he marched towards the door and Ralph. “Tell you what, you make me a leash, but I’m still going to be the one to take Ralph outside. We don’t know if anyone is out there. I want you safe inside.”

She hurried up to him and took the twine from his hand. “Fine. But you’d both better come back to me.” She tied the twine to Ralph’s collar and made a loop at the end for Harry. “There are some scissors in the kitchen. I’ll cut the end off.”

Harry kept a firm grip on his makeshift leash. “Open the door and then close it behind me. I’ll let Ralph do his business and I’ll bring him back to you before I grab enough wood to last us for the night and come back inside. Don’t open the door until I say ‘first date.’ ” He paused and fixed her with his most serious expression. “If you hear shots, or if I don’t give you the password, barricade yourself inside and keep trying to reach help.”

She swallowed, her eyes wide in her face. “You said they probably aren’t out in this storm. There’s no reason for anything to happen.”

“Humor me.” He tugged on the leash. “Come on, Ralph let’s go.” He gazed over at Melissa. “The door, please. Bum arm.”



“Of course.” She practically jumped to grab the handle and open it wide enough for him and Ralph to slide out into the night. “Tell him to go potty and be sure to praise him.” Melissa’s voice followed him out the door.

How the heck had he wound up walking a pig? He held firmly to the string leash as he stepped into the area outside the back door. With the rain coming down and the darkness, it was impossible to see much of anything.

“Go potty,” he ordered, as he hunched further into his jacket. He almost whistled in surprise upon seeing Ralph squat and do his business. Immediately, the little pig finished, he turned around and scurried to the back door. Harry didn’t blame him.

He knocked on the door. “First Date,” he said in a voice loud enough to penetrate the wood.

The door flew open and Melissa reached for Ralph’s leash. “You’re soaked! Hurry, and get the wood and get in front of the fire. And I’m not closing the door, so don’t bother telling me to.”

There was enough light that he could see her lips pursed in a firm line. Melissa Carmichael had a stubborn streak.

He turned to the stack of wood and grabbed as many as he could carry given his injury. He ended up making three trips to ensure they had enough.

When he came in with the last load, he brought it straight to the fireplace. Ralph was lying down by the coffee table. Behind him, Melissa slammed the bolt home and then her hurried footsteps followed him into the living area.

“Thank you for taking care of all that.” She went to his side and helped him take off his jacket. She dropped it onto the armchair. “Now for the rest of it. Strip.”

## Chapter Eight

Harry stared at her a long moment before a wicked gleam entered his sexy brown eyes. "Ah, sweetheart, I thought you'd never ask." He held his good arm out to the side. "As you can see I'm going to need some help. No way can I get my pants off by myself."

He looked like a drowned puppy and he was dripping all over the wood floor. She should have foreseen that he'd wring every drop of entertainment from the experience.

Squaring her shoulders she approached him. "Fine, but I'm only doing this because I don't want you to get sick on top of the injury you already have."

"You're absolutely right," he agreed in a much too cheerful voice. "It'd be awful if I got sick after getting shot."

She peered at him to see if he was being sarcastic, but he wore a look of pure innocence on his face. She could imagine a younger version of Harry sporting that expression when he'd been caught doing something naughty as a child.

Ralph must have thought they were up to something interesting because he got to his feet and wandered over, grunting along the way. Nothing like having an audience as she undressed a man.

"You can start with the button," Harry said helpfully.

Melissa shook her head in exasperation. Well, she'd asked for it by telling him to strip. There was nothing for it but to get the clothes off of him.

She reached for the button, but found her fingers fumbling as she stood so close to him. He smelled like rain and an essence that she could only call "Harry." The button was stubborn and wouldn't work its way through the buttonhole.

"Are you doing okay there?" he asked. His voice had dropped and it sounded so close to her ear that it sent shivers down her spine.

Why did he keep getting to her?

"Perfect," she said through gritted teeth. "It's almost out and there!" Triumph filled her voice. Grabbing the zipper tab she yanked it down.

“Hey, watch out there. I plan on having some Harrys or Harriets in the future. A vasectomy now isn’t in the cards.”

Melissa looked at him and burst out laughing. Somehow Harry’s sense of humor seemed to erase her nervousness whether it was while running from bad guys or removing his clothes. Feeling less self-conscious, she proceeded to peel the jeans down his legs only to stop when she realized he still had his sneakers on.

At this stage, she was squatting with her head even with Harry’s family jewels, her hands brushing lightly against the hair covering his legs. She glanced up to find him staring down at her with a wicked grin.

“You know, if I had two working arms, this situation would have all kinds of possibilities.” He wagged his eyebrows to underline his point.

Melissa felt the heat climb her cheeks and knew it wasn’t from being close to the fire. “Don’t move. I am going to untie your shoe. Lift your foot and I’ll slip the sneaker off.” She untied one shoe and ordered him to lift his foot so that she could remove the shoe. She then did the same with the second. Ralph nuzzled her and then sniffed Harry’s leg and she shooed him away. Sweat collected under her breasts and her body temperature rivaled that of the flames in the fireplace.

She realized that the whole ordeal might have been easier if she’d had him strip closer to the chair. He could have sat down so that she could pull off his jeans. Deciding to bring the chair to him, she shot to her feet, which caused him to step back. Except with his jeans tangled around his feet, he stumbled and started to fall backwards.

Melissa reached out and grabbed him, pulling him flush against her body. She staggered under his weight, but managed to keep them both standing, though her breath hitched when Harry’s hands gripped her shoulders and hers settled at his waist.

She couldn’t seem to move or think. When she got this close to him she could only think about his lips on hers.

"I'd ask you to dance, but I'm underdressed for the occasion." The huskiness of his voice let Melissa know he was as affected as she was by their closeness.

She smiled, hanging on to the humor of the situation because if she didn't she might jump the man. Which was crazy given how little they knew each other. Then again, this situation they were in had led to confidences in which she'd learned more about Harry than she had learned the whole time she'd dated Keith. Keith had been married, for Pete's sake.

"What were you thinking just now?" Harry asked. "Your nose scrunched up like you'd opened up a locker and discovered a bunch of smelly gym socks."

Melissa relaxed her expression and chuckled. "It was nothing important." She relaxed her hold on his waist. "When we get out of this mess, I'll take you up on that dance offer."

"Consider it a deal," Harry grinned. Ralph snorted several times, his snout in the air, and Harry pointed at him. "When we go out, do we have to take the pig?"

"No, we don't," she said with a laugh. "Now, don't move," she ordered. She got the armchair and placed it strategically behind him. "Sit down and let's get these clothes off so they can dry."

While he sat down on the edge of the armchair, Melissa snagged the blanket off the sofa and wrapped it around his shoulders.

"Okay, off they go." She tugged on his jeans and with some effort got them all the way off of his legs. She then turned her attention to his T-shirt. He hadn't bothered to put his long sleeve Henley on after she'd treated his wound earlier.

The T-shirt had been protected by the jacket when he had gone outside. With relief, she decided to let it stay on. "Wrap that blanket around your waist to keep your legs warm. I'll lay out your jeans. They should dry quickly if we keep the fire going."

Harry frowned. "Grab another blanket. You need to stay warm, too. Even with the fire, it's chilly in here."

“I’ll get one in a minute.” She placed his sneakers near the fire, so they could dry out. Then she cleared off the coffee table and placed his jeans on it, stretching them out. With those tasks done, she went into the bedroom, Ralph trotting after her, and found another blanket, which she brought back to the living room. Wrapping herself in it, she sat down on the sofa. Ralph came up to her, lifted his nose in the air and grunted.

“Bed, Ralph.” She injected a voice of command in her voice. Ralph snorted and moved around until he found a spot to settle and go to sleep.

Silence settled around them in contrast to the fury of the storm outside. Melissa thought about trying to contact her brothers or the police again, but it seemed wiser to wait until the storm abated. Surely, she’d be able to reach someone then.

“You should try to get some sleep,” Harry said from the chair.

His hair was mussed and he wore the blanket around his waist, leaving his upper torso and bare feet visible. Even looking like a drowned rat, the man exuded sex appeal. She was quite certain she looked a fright and couldn’t wait to get into a hot shower. Sleep, though? She shuddered at the idea.

“I don’t think I can sleep.” Too much had happened and what if they had to leave the cabin in a hurry or what if Harry needed help?

Harry got up off the armchair and came over to the sofa. “Move over.”

It was an order, but it was said in a soft, husky voice that reached inside her and made her tingle. Without so much as a word, she slid over.

Harry sat down and tucked her underneath his good shoulder. “Try to rest. It’ll be a couple of hours before we can leave.”

She let her body mold to his and leaned her head on his shoulder. He was right. If she didn’t give her body a chance to recharge, she was going to be in bad shape tomorrow.

“Even if we get away, until the police catch those guys, we’re not going to be safe, are we?”

Harry rubbed his hand up and down her arm, each brush sending tiny licks of fire along her skin. This attraction didn't make sense to her. But men chasing her with guns didn't make sense either.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Melissa. Until they're behind bars, we're both going to be targets. But I'm not going to let anything happen to you." The raw promise in his voice touched her deep inside.

She curled closer against his body, knowing he couldn't really keep the promise, but feeling safe and protected anyway. It was an illusion she knew, born out of desperation to pretend even for a short time that the nightmare she'd stumbled into was exactly that—a nightmare.

All too soon morning would arrive and they'd once more be trying to escape with their lives.

She let the warmth of Harry's body and the fire lull her into a doze. A few times during the night she jerked awake, whereupon Harry would whisper a few words of reassurance and urge her to rest some more.

A loud squeal that would have rivaled a foghorn made Melissa jump, her heart pounding in sudden fear, while her brain tried to sort out what was happening. Beside her, Harry swore.

"Put a cork in it Ralph or I'll be dining on bacon for the next month!"

Ralph stopped his loud squealing to grunt at Harry. Then began a little dance accompanied by the squealing again.

Melissa pushed her hair back over her shoulders and rubbed her eyes. "He might need to go out and he's probably hungry." It hit her that the storm's fury no longer battered the cabin like it had earlier. No storm could mean she might be able to get in touch with her brothers, the police, somebody. She bolted upright and clutched at Harry's arm. "The storm. I can't hear it. It sounds like it passed." She scrambled off the sofa, shoving the blanket off of

her as she stood. She pulled out her phone and checked the time. It was nearly five a.m. and the message she'd dreaded seeing was still there sending her hopes crashing. "Still no service. I thought for sure..."

"We'll get out of this." Harry's calm tone penetrated her despair. "I'm going to need help putting my jeans back on. I want us to make our escape before the sun rises."

Ralph's loud squealing once more took precedence. "I should take him outside before he alerts everyone in a ten-mile radius that we're here." While she wanted to be found, she didn't want the thugs with guns finding them first. "Besides, if he pees inside the owners will never get the smell out."

"The jeans, Melissa. I don't care if Ralph christens the whole cabin. You're not going out there on your own."

Melissa stuffed her phone into her pocket and snatched up his jeans. There was no point in arguing. Making herself a target wasn't on her list of things to do, either.

Pushing at Ralph, who was wriggling too close as he made horrendous sounds from that snout of his, she squatted down in front of Harry and had him step into one jeans leg. Immediately Ralph came back and nuzzled against Harry's remaining bare leg.

Harry jerked. "That tickles. Knock it off. Bacon, Ralph. Juicy, sizzling bacon." Ralph squealed and scurried off.

Melissa bit down on her lip to keep from laughing. "You're mean." She helped steady him while he put his leg into his jeans. He put his hand on her shoulder for balance as she pulled them up his legs. In another time, it might've been sexy, but Harry was all business. It didn't help that Ralph was prancing at Harry's feet, snout in the air, and making noises.

"Hush," she ordered Ralph, who completely ignored her.

Once Harry was zipped and buttoned, he grabbed his long sleeve shirt and pulled it awkwardly over his head a hiss of pain escaping from between his teeth as he worked his injured arm into the sleeve.

Melissa found the string they had used as a leash and attached it to Ralph's collar again. She led him to the door where his squeals had at least morphed into loud grunts.

"Don't open the door yet," Harry ordered.

She glanced over her shoulder to see him jamming his feet into his sneakers and then he was striding towards her. "I'll take the pig out. In five minutes, ten at the most, I want to be out of here. The fire needs to be put out and the place put in order. The last thing we want is to be arrested for breaking and entering." He flashed her that grin that never failed to make her heart skip a beat and was out the door, Ralph trotting after him.

Melissa whirled around and hurried to the fire. Grabbing the poker she spread the logs out, glad to see the fire had burned down during the night. She then picked up the fireplace shovel and shoveled the ashes on top of the burning embers. She recalled seeing a box of baking soda in the kitchen and got that to spread on top of the ashes. She was putting the baking soda away when she heard a noise near the door. She jumped, her heart pounding, relieved to see Harry coming through the door.

"It's still raining. Not as bad as yesterday, but we're going to get wet." He walked over to the fireplace. "Nice work. Remind me to take you with me the next time I go camping."

"I think we still have that first date to get through," Melissa retorted. She went to the sofa and quickly folded the blankets and returned them to the bedroom. "Everything is back in its place. The owners might know that someone was here, but they can't say we left a mess."

"Thanks. This bum arm sucks." Harry bent down and picked Ralph up with his good arm, tucking him under it like a football. Ralph tossed his head and then settled. "Let's head towards the lake. It'll be a hike, but if we follow the lake line we should hit the marina and be able to get help there."



Melissa followed Harry out the door, unconcerned by the rain that hit her face, determined that they would reach the marina and help. The night silence pressed down on her, though she knew in a short time, the woods would be alive with birds, insects and animals going about their day. She knew the darkness was their friend enabling them to hide, but that meant it kept the enemy hidden, too. She tossed a quick look over her shoulder at the cabin. For a brief time, it had represented safety. They couldn't hide there any longer, but oh, how she wanted to recapture that sense of safety.

Instead she stepped along the wet ground, her feet squishing in mud and wet leaves and kept a steady pace behind Harry. The cool, wet air stung her cheeks and she hunched in her jacket. Within minutes they were swallowed up by the tall trees that blanketed the lakeside area.

While the wet ground dampened the sound of their movements, Ralph's periodic squeals and grunts provided a beacon for anyone who might be chasing them. She pushed a wet branch out of the way and followed Harry, trusting that he would get them to the shoreline.

It didn't take long for her hair to become soaked and she was glad her jacket was thick enough to offer protection. She slipped at one point and nearly went down, maintaining her balance at the last minute.

"You okay?" Harry asked, pausing to look back at her, concern filling his voice.

She pushed a wet strand of hair off her cheek off and nodded. "Fine. Slipped on some mud."

"We should hit the lake soon." He stood there and she came up to his side. "I'm really sorry about this, Melissa." Ralph grunted as if to underscore Harry's apology.

"It's not your fault. We should go. The sun will be up soon and that'll make it easier for them to see us." She was wet, cold and scared, but if she focused on that, she'd never be able to put one foot in front of the other. Instead, she focused on reaching the marina in one

piece and promised herself that when she got out of this mess she was booking a one-day spa treatment for herself because she deserved it.

“Shoreline,” Harry called out softly.

She hurried up beside him her hands coming up to her mouth in joy at seeing Wheeler Lake directly in front of him. Since the sun needed another hour to rise, the lake’s dark glossy surface was all that was visible.

Harry turned and pointed. “The marina is in that direction. Let’s go.”

Safety. The word drummed through her head like the strobe light of a beacon. “Let’s do it.” Family, a hot bath, hot food and friends. She had lots to live for. They would get out of this mess alive.

## Chapter Nine

Harry trudged over the sodden ground, keeping a firm grip on Ralph. Melissa followed close behind him, not a word of complaint from her as the steady rain soaked them to the skin. His admiration for her went up even more.

The sun rose over the horizon confirming his guess that they’d been hiking for about an hour. “There,” he said, nodding in the direction of the marina now visible through the trees. “We should be able to find a landline that works.”

Melissa paused next to him and shoved several strands of wet hair behind her ear. “A landline would be good.” She gave him a tired smile that told him more than words how much she was hanging onto her composure. “After that, a good bath and breakfast. I’m starving.”

Ralph snorted and wriggled in his grip. Harry looked down at the mini-pig. “Don’t mention F-O-O-D or we’ll have him doing his imitation of a baboon.”

“Would you like me to hold him?” Melissa held up her hands and after a brief hesitation he passed Ralph to her.

It made sense to give her the animal. The closer they got to the marina, the more he would need to be on his toes and on the lookout for their attackers. He'd rather Melissa and Ralph stay hidden nearby while he actually walked into the marina.

“Let's go. We're almost out of the woods.” He winked at her. “Pun intended.”

She chuckled and they started the final leg of their trek. With the rain continuing to pour down on them, neither one of them was interested in talking. Even Ralph had ceased his grunting, though he did snuffle now and then.

When they reached the edge of the marina, Harry held up his good hand, calling a stop to their movement. The marina wasn't very large and catered to a mostly recreational crowd, particularly in the summer months. The white clapboard building sported a number of large bay windows overlooking the lake. The building served as a restaurant and club and was often rented out for functions. Right now the building was dark, the parking lot empty, and not a soul could be seen around the place. No one with a brain in their head would attempt to take a boat out in weather like this.

“Why don't you stay behind those trees over there?” he suggested, jerking his thumb in the direction of several trees not far from the parking lot. “I'm going to check things out.”

“All right,” Melissa agreed. “First, though, let me check my phone.” She pulled it out of her pocket and her face lit up. “I've got a bar. It might not be enough for a call, but you never know.” She tapped on her phone and then held it up to her ear. “Hello? Hello?” she said. “We have an emergency at the Wheeler Lake marina. Men with guns. Hello?” She paced in a circle as she spoke, Ralph nuzzling at her neck. “Wheeler Lake Marina. Please send help!”

She hung up and stared at him in frustration as she pushed Ralph's snout away. “It was all crackly. I don't know if they could hear me clearly.”

He reached out and squeezed her arm. "You did your best. Thanks. Now go hide over there while I scout out the place. There might be a vehicle hidden somewhere we can use."

"All right. Be careful." Her eyes conveyed her apprehension.

"I'll be back soon," he promised. He didn't like leaving her on her own, but until he could check out the marina, he didn't want to take the chance of her walking into a trap.

Once he left the tree line, he would be completely visible to anybody who wanted to use him for target practice. His best bet was to run to the small wooden shack that sat next to the clubhouse. He hadn't been to the marina in years, but had a vague recollection of the building being used as a bait shack in the summertime. For the moment, it would give him cover. He took off at a run, ignoring the pain in his arm at each jouncing step, and using a zigzag pattern reached the edge of the shack. The windows had been shuttered, preventing him from seeing inside. He eased around to the back corner and surveyed the parking lot. Nothing moved.

With his back against the siding, he slid around the building and dropping low, ran as fast as he could to the marina steps. The second floor housed the restaurant and public spaces. The bottom floor was used for equipment rentals, lessons, and a gift shop. He was certain the place would be locked up tight. He was also pretty sure that the building was connected to an alarm company. Melissa may have gotten her 911 message across and if not he was sure she was still trying to call her brothers for help, but there was nothing like covering one's bets. Triggering the alarm would alert the security company to a problem and could lead to the police being called. Every signal flag they sent up could make the difference between being rescued or left alone.

The front door was a single wooden door the top half of which was broken up by small glass panes. The door itself wasn't particularly high-tech, and he doubted it would take much to jimmy the lock. The other option was to break one of those glass windows.

While breaking the window would serve its purpose, it wouldn't get them inside. He wanted inside to offer Melissa additional protection and to search for potential weapons they could use to defend themselves.

He was about to start picking the door lock when a shot sounded, the bullet smacking into the wall beside his head. Another followed breaking one of the glass windows in the door.

Harry ducked and attempted to find cover. He took a few steps then another blast sounded, forcing him back. With no choice he dropped from the stairs to the cement pavement and crouched to make himself less of a target. He searched the trees where he'd told Melissa to hide. Had she been spotted?

Both shots had come from the same direction, indicating one shooter. But was the shooter alone or was his companion now working his way towards Melissa's hiding place?

He couldn't stay where he was. It made him a sitting duck and he'd made a promise to Melissa and to himself that he would keep her safe.

He sprinted for the shack. A shot hit the ground, spitting up dirt. He dug his heels in and put on a burst of speed, diving behind the shack as another shot blasted a hole in the siding. He kept his back to the wall and eased his nose out around the corner to try to find the shooter. Shots peppered the building, pinning him down.

He scanned the trees for a sign of Melissa or Ralph. His gut twisted at the thought of anything happening to them. Where the hell were the cops? While he hadn't broken into the marina, one of the shots had taken out a pane. The security company should have been alerted.

Duckwalking his way to the edge of the shack, he judged the distance to the trees. The shooting had stopped. Was the guy waiting for Harry to make his move? Well, he didn't have time to waste on guessing what the other guy intended to do. He needed to save

Melissa. Like a mantra playing to a drumbeat, he heard the words repeated in his head. Save Melissa.

Running back to the trees would lead the shooter or shooters right to Melissa. He could work his way around the shack and create some kind of diversion to draw the guy out. It wasn't much of a plan. In fact it sucked as a plan, but he was out of good ideas.

Before he could act, he heard a shout and froze.

Melissa emerged from the trees, carrying Ralph in her arms, her steps jerky. Right behind her the guy with the trucker's hat followed, his automatic pointed right at her head.

Harry held up his hands as if to surrender, his mind racing to find a way out of this. Dying was not an option.

"You okay?" he asked.

Her eyes wide in her too pale face, she nodded, offering him a weak smile. "I'm fine. I'm sorry. He sneaked up before—"

"Shut up!" the guy yelled. "I'm the one who does the talking. We're going to take a walk down to that pier. You try anything and she gets a bullet to the head. Got it?"

"I got it," Harry said. "Where's your friend?" He slowly turned to give the impression that he was obeying even as he considered their options. Somehow he had to get Melissa away from that gun before he made a move.

"He's coming. Damn tree fell across the road, messing up everything. But don't you worry. I can handle you both just fine and I told my buddy that, too."

Harry's hopes rose briefly. Taking on one thug was a million times better than taking on two. "Why don't you let the woman go? She didn't see anything. Your beef is with me."

"You think I'm stupid. She's seen plenty. Blame yourself that she's gonna die."

"Just so you know," Melissa interrupted. "I come from a large Irish family that takes attacks on family members very personally. I can guarantee that you will not have a

peaceful day for the rest of your life if you kill me.” Ralph grunted as if to underscore her comment.

“She isn’t kidding,” Harry added. “Her brothers know how to hold a grudge.” They had passed the shack and were walking in front of the Marina clubhouse heading for the long pier that jutted out into the lake. Large plate glass windows allowed him to view his reflection and to see Melissa walking right behind him, her captor still holding a gun to the back of her head. He had to get her out of the line of fire. While his mind turned over ideas, he kept talking. “On the other hand, I’m part Japanese and part Italian. You know what that means? I’ve got connections to the Mafia on one side of the family and to the Yakuza on the other.” The lie rolled smoothly off his lips. He was willing to try anything if it would buy them some time or help them escape.

“You’re bluffing. And so what? No one’ll ever connect me to you two. They’ll never find your bodies once I dump you in the lake.”

“I hate to put a damper on your enthusiasm,” Melissa said, “but that isn’t exactly true. I called the police and gave a description of you and your buddy. In fact, I may have sent a photo of the two of you searching my car at the accident site. The police are on their way and I’m sure they’ll scoop up your buddy in no time. Your best bet is to let us go and escape while you can.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Anger and a trace of fear laced his words.

Harry’s admiration for Melissa increased. He didn’t recall her taking any photos, but she understood the necessity of keeping their captor guessing and off-balance. When he caught a glimpse of the guy lifting his arm to wipe his brow, it only confirmed in Harry’s mind that the guy wasn’t as cool as he was trying to act.

“Keep walking you two—all the way out to the end of the pier,” the thug ordered.

Harry peered over his shoulder as he slowly walked to their destination. “So what’s the plan? Kill us so we fall into the lake? You do realize that people fish off this pier. They’ll fish us up pretty quickly.”

“If there were a boat,” Melissa piped up, “he could take us out in it and then shoot us. But I don’t see any boats, do you?”

“No boats,” Harry agreed. “I think you should rethink this plan of shooting us. It’s not going to work. The police’ll be on you before you can even get out of the parking lot.”

Ralph squealed. “Hold still,” Melissa said. “Ralph, what is your problem. This isn’t the time for tantrums.” Ralph let out several loud grunts in between squeals.

Harry paused and glanced back to see Ralph wriggling in Melissa’s arms. She stared at Harry hard.

“Keep that pig quiet or I’ll shoot it first.” The thug’s voice rose, his agitation evident. “And who the hell owns a pig? I like my pork cooked.”

Ralph let out his megaphone squeal. “Ow!” Melissa said and dropped down, releasing Ralph.

Harry didn’t waste a moment. He pivoted and tackled the man with the gun.

## Chapter Ten

Melissa scrambled out of the way of Harry and the thug, who were rolling around the dock. Harry had a grip on the thug’s wrist, forcing the gun up in the air. The thug used his free arm to land a punishing hook to Harry’s jaw. Harry’s head snapped back, but he didn’t let go.

Melissa hunted for something she could use as a weapon. Near the edge of the pier, she spied a rusty bucket. She ran for it, the sounds of grunts and punches making her ill.



She snatched up the bucket, not certain how she would use it or how much of a weapon it would make, but it was better than nothing. She rushed back to witness Harry tackle the thug to the ground. The two rolled over trading punches.

She couldn't see the gun anymore. Where had it gone? She inched closer, her gaze darting between the fight and the ground.

The thug was on top of Harry. He was bleeding from his nose while Harry sported a nasty cut near his eye and he began banging Harry's head against the ground. Clearly, the thug had the upper hand.

Melissa let out a cry and raising the bucket brought it down hard on top of the thug's head. There was a loud clang and the thug lost his hold on Harry.

Melissa sprang back as Harry pushed the thug off him and landed two brutal punches to the man's face, making him lose consciousness.

Harry grabbed the gun off the ground and slowly got to his feet, pointing the weapon at the fallen man.

"Are you okay," he asked, shooting a glance her way.

Melissa brought her hands up to her mouth as she took in his pale face and the cuts and bruises that were already forming. "I'm fine. You're the one who got beat up." She saw the way his right arm was hanging limply at his side. "And your arm! Is it okay?"

Before he answered, sirens announced the arrival of the police. Relief coursed through her, but was temporary. While the nightmare was over, she'd lost Ralph! Where had the mini-pig gotten to? If she couldn't find him, she'd never forgive herself.

Her gaze bounced back and forth from Harry holding the gun to possible areas a pig could hide. Ultimately, Harry's situation took precedence. "I'll bring the police over if you're sure you can handle things," she said with one last glance around.

His look spoke volumes. "Get them so this piece of garbage can go where he belongs."

She hurried towards the parking lot as she mentally catalogued places Ralph could be.

A police car pulled in and Melissa waved her arms to get their attention. As soon as it parked and the two officers exited the vehicle, she asked for their assistance.

When she returned to where Harry was she saw that he hadn't moved, but the thug was conscious and moaning. The police rushed around the building, their weapons raised and ordered Harry to drop the weapon.

He placed the weapons on the ground and raised his arms. Melissa turned on the police demanding they listen to what happened. She'd barely got into her explanations when familiar shouts caused her spirits to rise.

"Melissa Joan Carmichael, you've added gray hairs to every member of the family," her oldest brother Sam announced as he strode towards her, worry lines etched on his face.

Melissa let out a small cry and closed the distance between them, cherishing the feel of his arms wrapped around her. As she'd known deep down, her brothers would move heaven and earth to find her.

She held onto her brother, several sobs escaping as the emotions she'd kept contained throughout the ordeal bubbled to the surface like a just opened bottle of champagne. She gulped, trying to put the cork back in. "I'm so glad you're here," she finally said as she released her grip and wiped the tears leaking from her eyes. She didn't have time to cry. She needed to find Ralph and now that Sam and Matt were here, they could help her.

She turned around intending to recruit them in her efforts only to see her second older brother Matt stalking towards Harry who was speaking to a patrol officer. Matt grasped Harry by the lapels of his jacket, pulled one arm back and popped Harry on the chin. Harry stumbled, but kept to his feet.

Thoughts of Ralph were replaced by fury at her brother picking on Harry, the man who'd kept her safe from two lunatics and who'd made her laugh more than once during

their time together. She didn't believe fists solved problems, but she had a hankering to grab that bucket and bash her brother on the head with it. What in the world could he be thinking to attack Harry like that?

"Matthew! Stop that!" Melissa disengaged from her older brother and rushed over to where Matt was making a fool of himself.

Harry rubbed his jaw. "You get one shot, dude. Any more and I'll meet you on the mat once my arm is healed."

Melissa shoved Matt out of the way. He was lucky she didn't kick him in the shins. "What's wrong with you? Can't you see he's hurt?" She tipped Harry's chin up and winced to see another bruise forming to match all the others. She fisted her hands on her hips and glared at her brother.

"He had no right dragging you into this mess," Matt said. He shoved both hands into his short hair and swore. "You could've been seriously hurt."

Still hanging on to Harry's good arm, Melissa got her anger under control. She adored her brothers, but they tended to be overprotective. While she loved the fact that they cared so much, and the fact that she'd known her brothers would have kept on searching for her had helped keep her from falling apart, now that she was safe and the situation was controlled, she wanted them to dial it down a notch. In her book Harry was a hero.

"It was an accident. And Harry kept me alive. If he hadn't dragged me into the woods, those guys in the van might've gotten rid of me there and then. I almost didn't go with him." When she thought about how she'd dug her heels in and almost refused to follow him after the crash, shivers rippled across her body.

"I was telling Officer Todd here that there's one more guy out there. That guy," he said pointing with his chin to where the thug was being read his rights by Officer Todd's partner, "had a partner. I witnessed the two of them shoot Donald Kane at a warehouse

parking lot off the interstate, about five miles this side of the Pennsylvania border.” He rattled off an address and continued. “They caught sight of me and winged me in my right arm. I dropped my phone and my Bluetooth earphones. If someone can find them, I’d appreciate it. I must’ve been hit worse than I thought because I crashed into your sister’s car, which is how she ended up with me.”

“Damn it, Harry,” Matt exploded, but before Melissa could get in his face again, Sam told him to stow it.

“Thanks for keeping Melissa safe,” Sam said. “An ambulance should be arriving. They can patch you up and check out your arm.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. Then he reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a small SD card. “I caught most of it on camera. You should be able to ID his buddy from this.” He passed the SD card to Sam.

“I’ll take care of this,” Sam promised. “The state troopers have arrived. I’m going to have a word with them. Matt, why don’t you see if our pal over there has coughed up a name or ID?”

Matt gave an abbreviated salute. He shoved both hands into his jacket pockets and blew out a breath. “Thanks for keeping Mel safe.” He studied Harry’s face. “Sorry about the punch. Dude, you look a mess.”

Harry thrust out his fist and the two men fist bumped. Melissa rolled her eyes. Men and their ways of bonding.

“You know I’d wipe you if I got you on the mat,” Harry said with a weak laugh.

“Damn straight,” Matt said. “I may be a hothead, but I’m not stupid.” Matt wrapped an arm around Melissa’s shoulder and gave a squeeze.

Once more emotions welled up. Her brother could exasperate her, but she never doubted that he loved her. She’d never been more grateful for her family than at that moment. “Idiot,” Melissa said fondly, blinking back tears. It felt good to be safe. Her, Harry

and “Ralph! We’ve got to find Ralph!” She pushed her brother away and started calling for the pig.

“Who’s Ralph?” Matt asked. “I’ll need a description.”

Harry sniggered. “He’s stout. Has a tendency to snort and has an aversion to pork. Just the word sends him running.”

“There he is,” Melissa said and pointed to a corner of the clubhouse where the poor thing was hiding under a bush. “Come here, Ralph. Come here, sweetie.” Ralph stuck his snout out. She bent down and continued to call his name, keeping her voice light and sweet. Eventually, he left the safety of his bush and ran as fast as his little legs could carry him towards her.

Behind her she heard Harry’s guffaws and her brother’s exclamations over the fact that Ralph was a pig. Melissa scooped up the little guy and marched back to the two men. Utilizing the stare that she’d perfected in her last managerial position, she speared each of them with a frosty look. “Matthew James Carmichael, don’t you have something better to do with your time? And you, Harry Fontana, stop laughing and let the paramedics take you to the hospital.”

“No hospitals. I hate hospitals.” He grumbled every step of the way, but allowed her to lead him towards the man and woman who were heading their way.

“I will leave this gentleman in your capable hands,” she told the two medical attendants. “I’ve got to give a statement to the officers.”

“Take care, Harry.” She leaned over and kissed him. Ralph wriggled and squealed in her arms. “Ralph says thank you, too.”

“Hey,” he said, his brows crinkling, “this isn’t goodbye. We have a date.”

“Well, you know where to find me.” She pivoted and walked over to where Sam was standing.

Melissa smiled, joy and relief mingling within her. After being on the run, talking about a date with Harry was so normal. Then again, nothing that had to do with Harry could ever be normal.

She lifted Ralph up and kissed his snout. "It's over Ralph. Time to go home."

### Epilogue

Melissa scrunched her nose as she reviewed the changes to her resume. Detail-oriented and efficient sounded like the kind of boring description that everyone put on their resumes. Of course, those were the perfect descriptions for administrative, managerial positions. There were two job openings she had the background for if she could finish up her resume and actually hit send.

She leaned back in her desk chair and sighed. The question was did she really want to go back to an office job like the one she'd had before.

The scabble of nails on the hall floor and the tapping of hooves pulled her attention to her office door where Dobie, a mutt of very uncertain origins, ran full tilt through the doorway, followed by Ralph, squealing in pursuit. She'd found Dobie when she'd finally driven back to the scene of the accident, wanting to lay some ghosts to rest. Dobie had been wandering along the side of the road. Afraid he'd be hit by a car, she'd picked him up and brought him home. She'd advertised and asked around, but no one had come to claim him. He and Ralph had bonded and the two were inseparable.

Dobie ran for the sofa couch she had against the wall and jumped on it. Ralph grunted and twirled in a circle, expressing his indignation.

"You two knock it off. And Dobie get off. Down. Down," she ordered. She had just stood up to shoo him off when her cell phone rang.

Melissa pulled it out of her pocket and when she saw Harry's name across the screen her breath hitched and her pulse sped up. It'd been three weeks since their nightmare adventure. Harry had called once to check on her and tell her he'd be out of town and then nothing. Not even a text! The phone continued to ring in her hand.

Was she miffed enough to let it go to voicemail?

Not enough apparently, she thought, as she swiped the accept button and Harry's voice flooded her ear. "Hey there, sunshine. I'm calling about that date we had."

Anticipation flowed through her from just hearing his voice. What was it about Harry that lifted the clouds in her life? Still, she reminded herself that she was irritated with him. "It's been two weeks since your last call. How do you know I haven't met someone else in that time?" She made sure to reply with a dash of tartness. She didn't want him to think she'd been pining for him.

"I should've called and I would've, but..." His voice trailed off. "Give me a chance to explain?"

Any thoughts of making him wait, flew out the window. She wanted to see him and she wanted to hear his explanation. "Alright. When would you like to meet?"

"How about right now? I'm standing on your front step." The doorbell sounded and Dobie let out a string of barks as he ran to the front door, Ralph trailing in his wake.

"Now?" Melissa said, but he'd already cut the connection.

She hurried to the front door, automatically smoothing down the sweatshirt she was wearing. At least she'd secured her hair in a clip.

How like Harry to show up unannounced.

"Dobie, sit. Ralph, stay." She waited until both her pets were doing as she bid before unlocking the door. She opened the door and sure enough, there was Harry with a huge bouquet of a mix of yellow and white daisies.

"They're beautiful!" she said.

“For you.” He thrust them towards her.

She took them, unable to resist sniffing them to take in their fragrance. She looked up at Harry. “Thank you.” With a sweep of her arm she invited him in. “Come in. You’re welcome to have a seat in the living room while I get something to put these in.”

As soon as he shut the door behind him, Dobie and Ralph seemed to take that as a sign that they were released from their temporary obedience. Dobie jumped on Harry while Ralph snuffled against his legs.

“Who’s the mutt?” Harry asked as he trailed her down the hall towards the kitchen. Dobie ran around him, his tail wagging furiously, while Ralph grunt and squealed in apparent excitement. “Hey there, Ralph, buddy. You’re looking good.”

“That’s Dobie,” Melissa said as she tried to remember which cabinet she’d stored the only vase she had. “I found him, which is a story for another time.” She lucked out on the first overhead cabinet she tried, spying it in the back. She pulled it out and placed it on the counter. Then she took off the wrapping covering the flowers and placed them inside the vase, adding some water.

“I talked with your brothers,” Harry said, while petting Dobie and Ralph. “Those two goons look likely to plea given the video I took, in which case neither of us will need to testify in court.”

“They told me the same thing.” Melissa lifted the vase to show him. “Thank you again for these. They’re lovely.” She put the vase down on her kitchen table. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Harry checked his watch. “No time.”

Her spirits plummeted at that. “You’ve got to go. I understand.” She supposed the flowers were a nice way of saying “see you.”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d go with me. That is, if you’re free.” The mischievous look she’d gotten to know was twinkling back at her.



“Go where,” she asked cautiously, even as her heart soared in excitement.

“Ever been to Niagara?” he asked.

“Falls? Of course, I have. But what does that have to do with anything? Niagara is halfway across the state!”

He grinned. “Not if you fly.”

“Fly? In a plane? To Niagara? Now?” She knew she sounded like a parrot, idiotically repeating his words. But her mind was in a whirl. How could they possibly fly halfway across New York?

“Yes, in a plane. I’ve got my pilot’s license and if you’re game, we can be up in the air in a little over an hour.” He closed the distance so that less than a foot separated them. “This is our first date. I intend for it to be so magical that it’ll erase all the bad memories of how we met.”

Warmth and tenderness welled up inside her at his words. “I don’t want to forget how we met.” She took a step closer so that she was only a whisper away.

“You don’t?” His breath caressed her cheek.

“Nope.” She slid her hands up over his shoulders and around his neck. She’d found something special in Harry Fontana and whether he knew it or not, she intended to hang on to it. “I intend to savor every single memory I have of being with you, the good and the bad.”

“You know what?” Harry said, his lips skimming hers. “We don’t have to go to Niagara. We could order pizza.”

His mouth touched hers and fireworks went off. Explosions of red, yellow, pink and every color of the rainbow burst behind her eyelids. His taste brought on a wave of desire that had her drawing closer until she thought they would fuse together. When they broke apart, they were both breathing hard.

“Pizza?” Harry suggested again.

Melissa stepped out of his embrace and laughed. “Are you kidding? And miss out on the most amazing first date ever?”

Dobie and Ralph danced around Harry’s legs. “You two are not invited.” He pointed at Melissa. “Go ahead and do whatever you need to do. I’ll be waiting.”

Walking past him, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s what I’m counting on, Harry Fontana.” One thing she knew for certain. Life with Harry would always be full of surprises.