

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric background with a blueish-grey mist or smoke rising from a circular, perforated metal manhole cover. The author's name is at the top, and the title is centered over the manhole cover.

Renee MacKenzie

*Confined
Spaces*

Confined Spaces



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Confined Spaces



A BLUE FEATHER BOOK

by
Renee MacKenzie

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CONFINED SPACES

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Chapter 1

The Cave might not have been the classiest joint in Bensonville, Georgia, but bartender Andie Waters liked to think it was the friendliest. She glanced toward the kitchen where the bar's owner, Chuck, was taking a food order. He was a good guy to work for, and she'd known him practically forever. Thanks to Chuck's uncompromising support—and daunting size—most of the male patrons respected Andie's declaration that she was off-limits.

Andie glanced at the spattering of customers around the pool table and bar before she turned her attention to one of her regulars.

"I've told you a million times. I'm a lesbian trapped in a man's body," Joel said.

"And I've told you just as many times, that is so lame." Andie crossed her arms over her chest. She racked her brain to remember why she put up with this guy. He tossed a generous tip onto the bar, jarring her memory.

"Call it what you want," he said, "but it hurts that you won't accept me for who I am and go to bed with me."

Andie rolled her eyes. "Joel, screw you." She smiled and wiped the slick, candy-apple-red bar in front of her. Joel was one of the few guys there who could push the limits with teasing her and get away with it. He was harmless. "You want another?" she asked as she nodded at his beer bottle.

"Yep." Joel tipped his head back and drained the last bit. "Keep it coming, darling." He stroked his goatee. There was a sprinkling of silver in his facial hair, even though the dark hair on his head showed no signs of gray.

Andie watched as her best friend sidled up to the bar. "Hey, bartender. Who's getting lucky?" Marla asked.

"You will," Joel said, "if you're real nice."

"Not in this lifetime," Marla retorted. She turned to Andie. "Anything interesting going on?"

“Interesting?” Five days a week in the field pulling waste samples, three nights a week bartending. The rest of the time hanging with her hound. Interesting? No. But she was content. “Just another hopeless Friday night, working at a dingy straight bar, cleaning up after slobs like Joel.”

“Hey, I resent that,” Joel said.

“You resemble that?” Marla asked. She turned to Andie. “You look cute tonight,” she told Andie. “I wish I could get away with little tank tops like that. But with these things...” She squished her large breasts up and together. “So, who’s cooking tonight?”

“Chuck,” Andie and Joel answered simultaneously. Andie was surprised Joel could get the word out, given how he was slobbering all over himself as he stared at Marla’s cleavage.

“Ah, Caveman Chuck,” Marla said. “Yummy. Let me go see my buddy.”

“Behave yourself, Marla,” Andie said.

She watched Marla sashay away. She and Marla had been close since high school. They’d met on a double date their sophomore year. Andie went to the prom with a popular senior, and Marla was that boy’s friend’s date. After the dance, when Marla saw how uncomfortable Andie was with her date’s hands all over her, she feigned being drunk and sick. Then Marla insisted that the guys drop Andie off at Marla’s house to help her sneak drunkenly past her parents. As soon as they got inside, Marla’s stumbling ceased; she stood up straight, and sober. “We should have brownies and cocoa to celebrate our independence.”

Andie smiled at the memory.

“I guess Marla’s on the prowl,” Joel said.

“According to her, she doesn’t prowl.”

Joel sipped his beer. “I get you not wanting to go out with me since you’re a dy—I mean a lesbian—but what’s Marla’s excuse?”

“Good taste?”

Joel put a hand over his heart. “That really hurt.”

Andie stared at him. Sometimes she wasn’t sure when he switched gears from playful to serious. She fumbled for something nice to say.

“Gotcha.” Joel pumped his fist.

“Ass,” Andie said.

“Why’s Joel an ass this time?” Marla asked as she plopped down on the stool next to his.

"I don't need to sit here and take this crap." Joel swung off his bar stool. "I'm going to go find a woman who can appreciate my considerable charm."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Marla called after him.

"You should be nicer to him."

"I don't have to be. He doesn't tip me." Marla leaned on her elbows. "Seriously, anything going on?"

Andie tilted her head closer. "Don't look now," she said, knowing full well Marla would do just that, "but guess who's in the corner by the pool table."

Marla craned her neck. "Ah, straight-but-curious Julia. She come on to you yet tonight?"

"Not so much. I think she's gotten the hint."

"Finally. But I have to tell you, if I were a lesbian, I'd be all over her. She's hot."

Andie checked out Julia and appreciated the view. Julia bent over the pool table with her cue in hand, her dark bobbed hair swaying as her ass moved left to right slightly. Before making the shot, she looked over her shoulder and winked at Andie.

"Admit it," Marla said. "That scenery is better than at your day job."

Andie nodded. "Yeah, and even Joel smells better than the shit I work with."

Marla gave an exaggerated shudder. "I don't get how you can work with sewage."

"Let's see: I get a steady paycheck but have very little interference from supervisors, and I get to work outside."

"Hmm. Not much of a paycheck. And you have to work in the heat and the cold and the stench. I repeat, I don't know how you can work there."

"I met Xena through work. That alone makes it well worth it."

"Speaking of Xena, how is the old girl?"

"Getting older. Bless her heart, she's really slowing down." Andie thought about her Walker hound. She'd been out sampling at a clay mine when she ran across the tick-covered, skin-and-bones dog. She'd been so affected by the sight of the hound that she went back to the mine the next day, vowing to bring the dog home if she saw her again. And she did.

"How long have you had Xena now?"

"Seven years." Andie paused. "My longest relationship yet."

"Cheers, then. I guess I'll drink to you and Xena. A margarita, *por favor*."

Andie grabbed the Cuervo Gold from the shelf. As she was mixing the drink, she noticed Chuck peeking out from the kitchen. She put the cocktail in front of Marla and excused herself.

Andie walked the length of the room-long bar down to the end where Chuck was lurking. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Chuck held out a plate of chicken wings. "Will you give these to Marla?"

"Don't be scared. I hear she only bites when invited to."

"Just take these to her. Please."

"What's up with you?" The tangy spice of the wing sauce tickled her nose. She feared the scents of beer and buffalo wings would forever conjure images of The Cave in her mind's eye.

"Can I ask you something?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Has Marla been flirting with me?"

"You know, sweetie, if she's coming on too strong, just tell me and I'll handle it for you. Isn't that what you guys always tell me about overzealous customers?"

"It's not like that."

"No? What's it like then?" She grinned at the way the big man shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't totally off base."

"No, you aren't." She took the plate of wings over to Marla and plopped them in front of her. "Here are your dead chicken parts."

"Saying crap like that doesn't faze me. I will forever be a carnivore."

"Ugh."

Marla waved a wing at Andie. "The West wasn't won on salad." She wriggled her eyebrows. "And Chuck won't be, either."

"Poor Chuck," Andie said.

"Shit," Marla said as she nodded in the direction of the door.

Andie followed her gaze. "Shit," she echoed.

"Did you know your brother was in town?" Marla asked.

Andie swallowed hard as she watched Chuck approach Jack. The memory of her brother's rejection stabbed into her chest. It was her first semester at college, and she'd had her heart broken by a girl. Marla was on vacation with her family, so Andie couldn't talk to her about it. She decided to look for consolation from her brother. It didn't quite work out that way.

"You're a freak," he'd yelled. "You're disgusting and you're going to hell."

Jack had told her parents about Andie's sinful behavior. They, too, had lectured her about going to hell. Not long after that, Jack

married a nice Christian girl and moved to Alabama. Their parents soon followed, explaining their move as wanting to be nearer to their normal child.

Andie stared at her tall, thin brother. There was so much she wanted to say to Jack but wasn't sure she could find her voice.

"Be back in a sec," she said with a catch in her voice.

"I'll be right here."

Andie tried to keep her steps at a natural pace. Her racing heartbeat, though, she couldn't control.

Jack stood two feet taller than Andie. She felt her throat pinch off as she looked up at him. It took several deep breaths before she could speak. "Hello, Jack." She began sweating as her brother stared through her. "Jack," she said slightly louder.

Freak. Disgusting. Although unspoken this time, the words assailed her all over again. She willed away the tears threatening to form. When she opened her mouth to repeat his name, nothing came out.

Jack turned toward Chuck. "Nice to see you, buddy."

"You, too. And congratulations, Jack." They shared a manly half-hug, and Jack patted Chuck on the back before strutting to the door without the slightest acknowledgement of Andie's presence.

Andie followed Chuck into the kitchen. The stench of burnt grease added to the nausea she felt from Jack's newest rejection.

"Why were you congratulating Jack?" she asked him.

"Come on girl, you know I can't talk about Jack with you."

"I'm his sister."

"You know how bad I feel about the shit between you two. But it's not my place to say anything."

She clenched her teeth. She'd always been good about not holding Chuck's friendship with Jack against him, and it'd been years since she'd asked him for any information about her brother. Jack came to town every year or so to see people he'd grown up with. She usually heard about him being in town, but she hadn't seen him for herself since he moved. Seeing Jack face-to-face at The Cave and having him totally ignore her had both angered and saddened her more than she thought still possible. Then again, it wasn't fair to take it out on her boss.

"You're right. Sorry."

"I'm sorry, Andie. I really am. You don't deserve the way he treats you, but I can't get involved in all that."

Andie nodded. "I know. I wish you were my brother instead of that asshole."

Chuck wrapped her in a bear hug. "I always wanted a sister to terrorize," he said.

"Let me go. You're crushing me." She play-punched him in the chest. "You big oaf."

Chapter 2

"Come on in, Brooke," Kara Travis called out.

"Hey, stranger." Brooke nodded toward the suitcase on the sofa. "Where you headed this time?"

"Georgia," Kara answered as she tried to tame her wild hair by pulling it back and pinning it up.

"Hotlanta?" Brooke asked.

"I wish." Kara plopped onto the arm of the sofa. She ran her fingers over the soft hemp cloth. "I'm going to Bensonville, Georgia, home of a thousand churches and zero gay bars."

"Poor you," Brooke said. She stood behind Kara and rubbed her shoulders, leaning into her well-toned back. "Maybe you need a little loving to hold you over," she said hopefully.

"Brooke," Kara warned. She glanced over her shoulder. Brooke's hair was a lighter shade of blonde than Kara's. And she was tall like her. But unlike her, Brooke had perfect cheekbones. Good-looking, but not beautiful. Curved in all the right places. But not Kara's type.

"I know, I know, you don't feel that way about me." She massaged Kara's shoulders more deeply. "Even after I've held this torch for you for over a decade."

"We haven't known each other that long."

"Close enough. Besides," she said and gave a melodramatic sigh, "I knew you long before we ever met."

Kara stood. "Now you're jerking my chain."

"Yes, I am." Brooke plopped onto the matching hemp chair. "How many losers do you think you'll fire this time?"

"I have no idea. Only one or two, I hope."

"You hope? You still haven't learned to properly revel in your power?"

"Maybe I'll work on that while I'm down there." Sarcasm laced her words. She hated making these surprise visits. She hated knowing she'd probably fire more than one person this time.

"I'm just saying that, for such a control freak, I'd expect you to appreciate it more when you have that much power over other—"

"First off, even if I was a control freak, I'd only be interested in controlling my own life. But that doesn't apply, since I am not a control freak."

Brooke sat back in the chair. "Are you flying down?"

"No, I'm driving."

"All the way from Baltimore to Georgia? Why?"

"Because I hate flying."

"Why do you hate it?"

Kara had known Brooke long enough to know where this line of questioning was going. She threw a pair of socks at Brooke.

"Because you hate the lack of control involved with flying," Brooke said as she tossed the socks into Kara's suitcase. "Because you're a control freak."

Kara opened the closet door and peered inside. She pulled out her golf clubs. "It's easier to take the essentials when you drive."

Brooke glanced from the golf clubs to the suitcase. "I presume you're taking the company car, not your Mini Cooper?"

"Of course," Kara said.

The phone rang. Kara looked at the caller ID. "It's my mom."

"That's my cue. Have a safe trip."

Kara answered the phone while Brooke let herself out. She cringed when her mom asked, without preamble, "Are you still traveling south this week?"

"Yes." As she had in her discussion with Brooke, Kara knew where this conversation was going.

"So you'll stop in Virginia," Carla Travis said.

"I can't this time, Mom." She folded several pairs of khaki pants in half and spread them over the stacks of blouses and polo shirts. She needed to remember to check the forecast. Spring in Georgia could still be cool or could get very hot.

"When do you have to be there? Can't you stop for one day?"

"I have to be there Monday, but you know I need a few days to get acclimated. I like to at least know where to get decent food before I get stuck in the trenches." She had a love-hate relationship with the travel her job required. She loved seeing other parts of the country, but hated the hit-or-miss aspect of finding decent restaurants.

"I will never understand why you took that job to begin with. Your father would have had you sitting pretty in his firm once you finished law school."

“I’m not interested in sitting pretty.” She looked around her nicely furnished condo—the hemp sofa and chair, granite countertops, bamboo floors—and felt like a hypocrite.

“No, you’re just not interested in making your parents happy.”

Kara pressed her suitcase shut. When it sprung back open, she sat on it. She tried to zip it but with the phone tucked between her ear and shoulder, she couldn’t make the maneuver work. The other line beeped. She looked at her caller ID.

“Mom, that’s work on the other line, I have to go.”

Her mom harrumphed her displeasure.

“I’ll call you from Georgia when I get a chance.”

She clicked over to the other line. “Brooke, you angel. Just like the old days in college.”

“I thought you might need some help getting off the phone. Have a safe and prosperous trip.”

“Bye, Brooke.”

Kara thought about Brooke’s earlier accusation. What was wrong with wanting a little control in one’s life? Besides, she didn’t have to control everything. She thought about Joanie. She’d spent five years, one month, and two days with Joanie. During that time, Kara had rarely felt in control of any aspect of her life. And after the pain of losing Joanie, she didn’t want that level of chaos in her life ever again.

Chapter 3

Andie held the phone in one hand and reached up with a dust rag in the other to wipe the top of one of her framed photos. "I can't. I'm working tonight." She clenched her jaw. Her friends Barb and Cindy knew damned well she had to work. "Otherwise, I'd love to meet the newest member of the Serial Monogamy Pot Luck Society."

"It's called the Second Saturday group, and you know that," Cindy said.

"Saturday being the operative word. You know I work Saturday nights."

"I hate the mere thought of you going into that yucky straight bar," Cindy said.

From the extension, Barb uttered her usual complaint. "And you are way too friendly with the men in that place. How will you ever meet a nice lesbian if you're always hanging out with straights?"

"This is as much about my friendship with Marla as it is the guys at the bar, isn't it?" They didn't answer right away. "You two are such heterophobes."

Either Barb or Cindy let out an exasperated moan. Andie couldn't tell which.

"I'm sorry if I've let you down by not being a good little militant separatist dyke. But I've got bills to pay, you know."

"There are alternatives to spending so much time with those people. You could have gotten a job at a queer club if you simply had to bartend," Barb said.

"Yeah, if I wanted to drive all the way into Athens or Atlanta. I spend too much time on the road during the week as it is." She glanced at the clock on the mantle. "It's late. I have to go."

"If you come to your senses, Second Saturday's meeting at our house tonight. You're always welcome," Cindy said.

"I can't, but thanks anyway. Talk to you later."

Barb and Cindy were always trying to get her to go out with one of their friends. Andie was tired of serial monogamy and the musical chairs feel of her friends' social circle. If breaking old, stale patterns meant being alone for a while, then so be it.

She set the phone back on its charger and knelt beside Xena. She ran a finger along the longest part of her dog's leg, over ridges of black, v-shaped scars. Barbed wire nicks. She ached for the pain Xena must have felt as the metal bit into her flesh.

"Never again," Andie said. "As long as I'm alive, you will never again be that scared or that wounded."

Xena rolled onto her back, offering her soft belly for a rub.

"Sweet, sweet girl," Andie murmured.

Xena whimpered.

"I know, baby girl. One day I won't have to work two jobs. Once I get Visa and MasterCard paid off, we'll have every moment of the weekends to ourselves. You can have all the long walks your old bones can take." She kissed the top of Xena's head. "I promise. But now I have to go to work at that stupid old straight bar."

* * *

Andie stood behind the bar, cleaning up after the day shift. She stuffed the dishrag into a glass and twisted it. Between the sticky alcohol residue in cocktail glasses and the oily sheen on sampling jars at the lab, both her jobs left her feeling like nothing more than a glorified dishwasher.

She glanced at the front door and wondered how she'd handle it if Jack came into the bar again. Would she work up enough courage to tell her brother not to flatter himself, that she was better off without him and their parents? Or would she be strong enough to ignore him as he had done to her last night? Damn him for stirring up thoughts of her family's rejection. She wished he'd just stay in Alabama with his bigoted wife and their bigoted parents.

Chuck had been so apologetic last night after Jack left without talking to Andie. By the time he was done saying he was sorry, she almost felt worse for Chuck than for herself.

Her attention wandered to the other end of the bar. Tony, the early shift bartender, was fixing a drink for a stunning blonde. Wow, Andie thought, I hope she hangs around for a while. What an attractive distraction she could be.

Andie continued scrubbing the same glass as she stared at the blonde hair tucked behind the woman's ears. Her long, wavy mane

was just shy of being wild. The cut of her white, button-down shirt revealed breasts just big enough to get comfortable in without drowning.

Stop it, she chastised herself. She was the hired help in a hetero bar and didn't need to be getting all hot and bothered over a woman who was most likely straight. Besides, she reminded herself, I don't screw around with women I meet at work. Not usually, anyway.

She really liked the way this woman's hair fell down across her shoulders... the way she held herself confidently... the way she smiled when she looked over and caught Andie staring.

"Oops," Andie said as she looked away and back to the dishes in the sink. She felt her face grow warm and was glad for her dark complexion so her blush didn't show so much.

"Hey, girlfriend," Marla said as she sat at the bar. "Just so you know, tonight is Chuck's lucky night."

"I better go warn him."

"You stay right where you are." She leaned over the bar and ran her fingers through Andie's short, dark curls. "You got a haircut."

"Yeah, I had it done right after Barb and Cindy lectured me about wasting my life working in a straight bar. You don't think it's too short, do you?" Andie glanced toward the woman at the far end of the bar again.

"Not at all. It's hot." Marla's attention shifted in the direction Andie was looking. "What's so interesting over there?" Marla opened her eyes wide in mock astonishment. "Oh, now I see."

"There's nothing to see. I'm just making sure everything's fine out on the floor."

"Yeah, she is fine. I know exactly who you're looking at."

Andie walked away without acknowledging Marla's remark. She saw Joel come through the door and pulled a Bud from the cooler. She set it in front of Joel as he plopped onto a stool.

"Thanks, darling. Put it on my tab?"

"Sure thing. You doing okay tonight?"

He tipped the beer up to his mouth, took a big draw, and set it back down. "Doing better already. But you know what would make my night even better?"

"If this has anything to do with you and me, it's not going to happen." She scooted a bowl of pretzels in his direction and walked back to where Marla waited.

"You should take a break now and go talk to her."

"No way."

"If you don't use it, you'll lose it." Marla gave a lascivious grin. "Go talk to her."

Andie didn't respond. She grabbed a bottle of water for herself and squeezed a lime into the top. The volume of the music escalated, and she looked over at Tony. He waved and Andie waved back. He always ended his shift by cranking the music to what he called night level.

"Even if you don't get laid, some heavy make-out time can only help your—" Marla's words were lost in the music.

"My what? Complexion? Attitude?"

"Hey, I'm just saying you've gone without for far too long." She leaned closer to Andie. "You've at least been keeping the wheels oiled, haven't you?"

"I've been what?" Andie shouted over the music.

"Masturbating," Marla yelled as the music lulled.

The blonde almost choked on her drink as she approached Andie and Marla.

"The conversation is much more interesting over here than at my end of the bar." She smiled at both women. "Mind if I sit?"

"By all means, please do." Marla shifted in her seat and gave the woman her undivided attention. "I'm Marla," she said and motioned toward Andie. "And this is Andie."

"I'm Kara."

"Are you alone?"

Andie coughed.

"Yes," Kara answered.

"And new in Bensonville?" Marla continued.

"Yeah, but just here temporarily."

"So, you're looking for a little short-term—"

"God, Marla," Andie said.

"What? Short-term entertainment. What's wrong with that?"

Kara fidgeted with her empty glass.

"What are you drinking?" Marla asked.

"Cape Cod."

Marla turned toward Andie. "Our new friend would like a Cape Cod."

Andie mixed the drink. When she placed it on the bar in front of Kara, Marla said, "And that's on the house because Andie finds you very interesting."

"Marla," Andie warned.

"I can pay for my own drink, but thanks," she said to Marla.

"No, it is on the house," Andie said. "Because you're new to our quaint town."

"And because you're hot," Marla said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" Kara asked.

"Hot. You don't talk with a Southern accent, so I was wondering if you found our neck of the woods to be too hot. You're from up north, right?"

"Yeah. Baltimore. Originally Virginia, but I live in Maryland now."

"And why did you move there?" Marla asked.

"Marla," Andie said again.

"For work," Kara answered. "But I absolutely refuse to talk about anything to do with my employment. I'm off until Monday and don't want to even think about it."

"That's fine, we'd much rather talk about your love life," Marla said.

"Are you flirting with me?" Kara asked.

"No, not me. But Andie is."

Kara laughed.

"Damn it, Marla." Andie took a step back from the bar.

"I'm going to go terrorize Caveman Chuck. You two get to know one another better." She wagged her fingers. "Tootles."

"She's quite a force," Kara said.

"Yes, she is."

"That's a nice necklace," Kara said.

Andie looked down in an unsuccessful attempt to see the jewelry. "This was a coming out present from Marla. Years ago." She thought back to the day Marla gave her the pewter goddess pendant.

"Coming out?" she'd asked Marla.

"Yeah," Marla had responded. "Would you just come out already? I've known for years that you're a big ol' dyke, so when are you going to make it official and tell me all about it?"

"Are you two—?" Kara asked.

"No."

"Have you ever?"

"No. Not my type. Besides, Marla's straight. Straight-straight."

"And you?"

"Lesbian."

"Lesbian-lesbian?" Kara asked.

"Through and through. You?"

“One hundred percent lesbian.” Kara took an exaggerated breath. “What a relief to get those formalities out of the way.”

Andie stared, lost in Kara’s blue eyes.

“And what a wonderful surprise to find a lesbian-lesbian working in the bar I chose for blowing off some steam.”

“Yo, Andie,” Joel called out. “Bud.”

Andie excused herself to get Joel’s beer and gave the bar in front of him a quick wipe. She glanced at Kara.

“Can’t you leave some of the hot ones for us guys?”

“Shut up, Joel.”

He stroked his goatee. “What the hell you doing still over here?”

Andie wasted no time getting back to Kara, only to be interrupted when a group of five people made it up to the bar. She stole several glances at Kara as she poured a round of tequila shots for the group.

Kara was finishing her drink when Andie returned to her. “Can I ply you with alcohol to get you to stay until closing?”

“You sure can.” She smiled.

Andie thought it was the most gorgeous smile she’d ever seen.

Just before closing, Marla danced up to the bar. She leaned in close. “Chuck and I are cleaning up and closing for you tonight, girlfriend.”

“Huh?” Andie asked.

“We are getting you out of here early.”

“But I thought it was Chuck’s lucky night.”

“Oh, it will be, don’t you worry. But he’ll have to wait a bit. You see, I practice what I preach, and if there’s any way to help make sure you’ll get you some, I’m willing to make that sacrifice.” She glanced at Kara. “And I will expect details tomorrow. But not too early.”

Andie did what she had to then walked Kara out the back door and around to the side parking lot.

“So,” Andie asked. “What brought you here?”

“To the bar? The sight of a Prius sandwiched between all these pickup trucks piqued my interest, so I decided to check out The Cave.”

“The Prius is mine,” Andie said.

“Of course it is.”

Andie gave her a questioning look.

“There’s something sexy about hybrids. And there is definitely something sexy about you.”

Andie looked away. “How about Bensonville?”

“My job brought me to Georgia, but as I said inside, I’m not talking about work until Monday.” Kara took a step closer. “How long have you been working here?”

“If we aren’t talking about yours, we aren’t talking about my jobs either.”

“Ah, plural.”

Andie closed the space between them. She tilted her head up to stare into Kara’s eyes. Her palms grew sweaty, and she wiped them on her jeans.

Kara’s lips gently brushed Andie’s. “I’ve been wanting to do that all night.”

“What a coincidence,” Andie said. “I’ve been wanting you to do that all night.” This time she kissed Kara, letting her lips linger for several delicious moments.

Andie shoved the fingers of both hands into the thick waves of Kara’s hair. Kara’s tongue teased her mouth open, and Andie welcomed the soft wetness with a whimper.

“I’ve never seen the inside of a Prius.”

“I can manage that.” Andie unlocked the door and shut it after Kara was in the passenger seat. She got in the driver’s side and had barely turned before their mouths were back together. She carefully maneuvered herself to straddle Kara, and their kissing gained intensity.

Kara grasped Andie’s sides, and Andie let her mouth trail down Kara’s neck. She cupped her hands over Kara’s breasts and reveled in the delight of nipples hardening against her palms.

“I’ve never made out in a hybrid before,” Kara said.

“What a coincidence,” Andie said into Kara’s neck. “Neither have I.”

“Oh?”

“I, um... I don’t usually do this.”

A ruckus two vehicles away interrupted them.

“Not the most private place, huh?” Andie asked.

“Right.”

“A bit confining, too,” she said as she tried to stretch out a little.

“Right again,” Kara said.

“And I should get home to let the dog out.”

“Oh.” Kara frowned.

“But you could follow me.”

“Oh,” she repeated.

* * *

Andie pulled the Prius into the garage as Kara parked the company's Malibu in the driveway. They went in through the garage. Andie hesitated in the mudroom when she saw her work clothes. At least they're stuffed into the hamper, she thought. After work, she always stripped in the small room between the garage and the kitchen before going farther into the house. Just inside the kitchen door, she introduced Kara to Xena and was impressed with Kara's affection toward her dog. Sign of a good woman, she told herself.

Andie went through the kitchen, into the living room, and let Xena out the back door. When she returned to the kitchen, Kara was looking at a photo of her friends Dana and Gayle in a magnetic picture frame stuck on the refrigerator. She didn't think she'd ever seen anyone more beautiful than the woman standing in her kitchen in a pair of khakis and a button-down shirt. She cleared her throat. "Those are my friends, Dana and Gayle, aka The Guardian Angels of Hounds." Her stomach growled. "Guess I'm hungry. Are you?"

"Yeah, actually I am."

"I make a mean smoothie." Andie wondered what Kara must think of her—inviting her home, making her think she's going to get lucky, then wanting to feed her.

Kara twisted a strand of curly blonde hair around her finger and said, "I'd love a smoothie."

"Have a seat." Andie nodded toward one of two bar stools at the kitchen counter. She pulled out the blender. "Strawberry, banana, kiwi?"

"Yum." Kara motioned toward the fruit as she sat. "Are you a health nut?"

"Not really. I'm a vegetarian and try to avoid most processed foods. But based on the amount of chocolate I consume, I'm definitely not a health nut."

"I'm a vegetarian, too."

Andie threw the fruit into the blender with ice and a splash of organic soy milk. "I knew I should have played the lottery today. What are the odds of meeting a vegetarian lesbian in a Bensonville straight bar that serves buffalo wings as its main offering? How long have you been a vegetarian?"

"Since I was eight."

"Eight?" She stopped talking while the blender whirled to life. "A kid with a conscience?"

"No, a kid with a rebellious streak. I did it to piss off my parents."

Andie poured the smoothies into glasses. "Did it work?"

"Oh, yeah." Kara sipped her beverage. "This is great."

"Thanks." Andie rinsed out the blender and set it in the sink. She sat down on the other stool. "How else were you a rebellious kid?"

"When I was thirteen, I shaved my head."

"That makes an interesting image."

"My hair grows fast, so it really wasn't that big a deal. But then there was the mother of all rebellions, as far as my parents were concerned." She grimaced. "I didn't go to law school."

"So, I know what you don't do for a living."

"Enough about me. Tell me, when did you become a vegetarian?"

"When I went to college." Andie took a sip of her drink. "I had a crush on a girl who wouldn't kiss anyone who ate meat."

"So you gave up meat and got the girl?" Kara asked.

"Not exactly. I gave it up and still lost the girl. To a vegan." She threw her hands up in mock surrender. "I consoled myself by bingeing on meat, but it made me sick, so I quit again after a few days."

Xena nudged the back door. Andie got up to let her in. She gave Xena a special chewy-bone to occupy her then washed her hands.

After they finished their smoothies, Andie put both glasses in the sink. She and Kara stood, one on each side of the L of the counter.

Andie struggled for something sexy to say or do. How could she move them from the kitchen to the bed? She wished they'd come through the door and torn each other's clothes off, before self-doubt had the chance to settle in.

"I have a confession to make," Kara said.

"Oh?"

"I wanted to meet you the second I laid eyes on you."

"When you caught me checking you out?" Andie asked.

"So I was right. You were watching me."

"Guilty." She looked into Kara's eyes and again felt lost in them.

Kara reached across the countertop and ran her finger along the back of Andie's hand. "What else are you guilty of?"

Andie stared at the pale, slender finger running over her tanned, slightly freckled skin. The contrast made her shiver. She swallowed hard, urging herself to say it. "Guilty of wanting to make love to you."

"Lead the way," Kara said.

Andie led Kara down the hallway. In the bedroom, Andie's fingers fumbled with the button of her jeans. She prayed Kara wouldn't see how her hands shook in anticipation. A smile played at the corners of Kara's mouth, and Andie wondered if perhaps she was a bit nervous herself. The thought both comforted and excited her.

When Kara slipped out of her panties, Andie said, "You want me to turn out the light?"

"No. I'd rather see you." Cradling Andie's face in her hands, Kara leaned in to kiss her. Her tongue explored Andie's mouth as her hands ran down her neck, over her shoulders, along her arms. "Hmm," Kara murmured into Andie's mouth. "Bed?"

Sensation splintered through Andie. "Yes, bed."

They lay down. Kara immediately covered Andie's body with her own. "You feel so good."

Andie arched her back slightly, bringing Kara's hips harder against hers. Kara bore down for a second then lifted herself to hover over Andie. "We'll get to that," she said.

Kara's mouth found one of Andie's breasts, then the other. Her tongue trailed over both nipples in turn. She sank her fingers into the flesh of Andie's hips just as she closed her mouth over a nipple.

Andie whimpered. "Touch me. Please."

Cold air hardened Andie's nipple even more as the heat of Kara's mouth left it and traveled down Andie's body. When Kara's deft fingers opened her labia, she involuntarily lifted her hips.

"You're so wet," Kara said. Her fingers stroked through the slickness of Andie's want. "Wonderfully wet."

Andie dug her fingers into Kara's back when Kara entered her. She lifted her hips even higher and shuddered when Kara's fingers plunged deeper into her. Kara slowly withdrew her fingers until they were barely inside her. She gave a little growl before languidly pushing so deep into her that Andie gasped.

Kara continued the torturous in and out until Andie dug her heels into the bed and pushed up hard to meet Kara's fingers. "Now, fast," she begged. "Fuck me fast. Please."

Kara sucked hard on Andie's clit, holding it in her mouth as she shoved her fingers faster and faster into her.

"Oh, God," Andie screamed. "I'm coming. I'm—" Andie sat up and wrapped her arms around Kara's head and shoulders. "Stop. Please, you have to stop." Laughter bubbled out of her as she kissed the side of Kara's head over and over. "Dear God."

Kara turned her head to better see Andie.

"Come up here and hold me." Andie opened her arms and let Kara settle in against her.

Andie had never felt so open to someone, so responsive to a lover's touch. It was almost overwhelming.

She stretched alongside Kara's lithe body. She couldn't believe this beautiful woman was in her bed. She looked with amazement at Kara's full, lush breasts, her smooth, flat belly. "Beautiful," she whispered.

They kissed, and Andie stroked her hands down the length of Kara's body and back up again.

Andie didn't understand at first when Kara grasped her hands and brought them with her own above her head.

"Hold me down?" Kara asked in a husky voice.

Andie took both of Kara's wrists in one hand and held her arms above her head. She wasn't sure what to do next. She'd never played like this in bed. She pressed her lips to Kara's, trying to buy some time. What if she couldn't play along with everything Kara asked?

Kara's teeth found Andie's bottom lip, and Andie gasped. She knew immediately she would give this gorgeous woman anything she asked for.

Chapter 4

Kara stood in Andie's living room and stared at a framed photo on the wall of a disheveled Afghan hound. She felt Andie's presence behind her. There was no denying the tingle that ran down her back at the memory of making love with Andie. Making love? Don't you mean having sex? Kara asked herself.

"Good morning," Kara said without turning around.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Did you take this?" Kara asked as she studied the close-up photo of the Afghan hound.

"Yeah, that's Buffy."

"As in Vampire Slayer?" Kara asked. She adjusted the tie of the robe she'd borrowed from Andie.

"Yeah."

"Buffy and Xena. I'm sensing a pattern." Kara turned to face Andie. "Was she your dog?"

"Yeah. Xena and I adopted her. But she died last year."

"I'm sorry," Kara said.

Andie kissed her forehead and Kara shivered, trying not to melt right there on the spot. She turned back to the photo. "I really love this shot," Kara said. She leaned closer to the dog's image, then she glanced around the living room. "Did you take all of these photos?"

"Uh-huh."

Kara walked a few feet to her right and stopped in front of a large print of a red-shouldered hawk. "And this one." She stopped talking when the sight of Andie in boxers and a tank top sank in. Her face grew warm; between her legs, damp.

"What's on your walls at home?" Andie asked.

"Pier One. Nothing original." She thought about the prints on her walls. The same that could be found on just about anyone else's. Not real art like Andie's. She walked to the hallway leading back to the bedroom. A path of framed photos lined the wall. She studied one with several vultures on a chain-link fence around a cemetery.

Even though the content was a bit peculiar, she didn't find it at all strange to have it blown up, framed, and hanging on the wall.

Kara moved to the next picture in the series, which was of several headstones in the foreground with a jumble of electrical towers, ceramic insulators, and transformers looming in the background. She glanced at Andie. "I'm seeing a theme here. And I'm pretty sure I figured out what your day job is."

"What? I make headstones?"

"No." She pulled Andie to her. "You're a professional photographer."

Andie smiled. "Shut up and kiss me."

"Ah," Kara teased into Andie's mouth, "you're a morning person."

"And I'll show you how much so in a couple of minutes." She walked to the back door and let Xena in.

"What?" she asked her dog.

Xena barked.

"I can't hear you."

Xena let out a bugle sound.

"Oh, you said you want your Milk Bone."

Xena barked and furiously wagged her tail. Andie told her to sit and placed a large dog biscuit at Xena's feet. "Leave it." She turned to Kara as Xena sat frozen, staring at the Milk Bone. "We have this little morning ritual."

Kara loved the look on Andie's face.

"Free! Take it!" Andie said.

Xena jumped up and batted at the biscuit. She lowered her front end in what Kara knew to be called a play bow. Then she grabbed the treat and bolted under the dining table in the corner of the living room.

"That's her special morning treat place. She's always done that."

"She is so frigging cute."

Andie beamed. "Yeah."

You are so frigging cute, Kara thought. "Weren't you about to show me something?" she asked.

"What?" Andie asked, slyly looking out of the corner of her eyes. "What are you referring to?"

"How much of a morning person you are."

"Oh, yes, I do have something to show you." Andie took Kara by the hand and led her down the hallway to the bedroom.

Andie slipped the terry robe off of Kara's shoulders and dropped it on the end of the bed. Then she pulled her shirt over her head. Kara's legs trembled as she watched Andie slip off her boxers.

"You are so beautiful," Andie whispered.

Kara studied Andie. Tanned skin stretched over slightly muscled arms. Her breasts were small, but perfect, her legs well defined. "You," Kara gasped, "are gorgeous."

Andie tangled her fingers into Kara's unruly blonde hair, and Kara felt her pulse quicken with the memory of how Andie hadn't missed a beat when she'd asked her to hold her down. Oh, how wonderful that was. She hadn't realized how much she wanted the overwhelmingly freeing feeling of giving in to someone completely.

With Andie, Kara was so comfortable asking for what she wanted. And Andie was so willing to give. Yes, there was definitely something about Andie.

Andie brushed her lips against hers. Delicious. Kara parted her lips to welcome Andie's tongue.

Kara trailed her mouth down Andie's neck, across her collarbone, journeying down until she hungrily found her nipple. She shivered when Andie's fingers entwined deeper into her hair.

Kara reached back and placed a hand over Andie's. She pressed her hand harder against hers, hoping Andie would understand.

Kara moved her hand away, pleased when Andie's remained, increasing its pressure on the back of Kara's head.

Andie forced Kara's face harder to her breast. "Yes?" she asked.

"Yes," Kara answered against her hardened nipple.

Kara licked and sucked while Andie arched against her. She tried to pull away a little, but Andie held her firm.

Kara ran her fingers across Andie's other nipple. When Andie gasped, Kara pinched it then continued to work both.

Andie grabbed Kara's hand away from her breast and placed it between her legs. Kara sucked harder. Andie pressed her hand firmer to her and Kara stroked through the wetness.

"Go inside me," Andie commanded.

Kara grew hotter and wetter hearing the forceful instructions. She pushed two fingers in. Andie pressed Kara's face harder against her breast, and Kara responded by sinking deeper into her.

"Yes," Andie said. "God, yes."

Kara reveled in the way Andie's muscles clenched and unclenched around her fingers. She quickened her tongue against Andie's nipple.

"On your knees." Andie moved her hand from the back of Kara's head. "Go down."

Kara knelt. Andie grabbed her by the hair and angled her face upward to look into her eyes. "You want this?" she asked.

"Oh, yes."

Andie tightened her grip on Kara's hair and pushed Kara's face into her.

When her mouth found Andie's exquisite wetness, electricity jolted through her and she grew wetter. So did Andie.

Andie's muscles tightened further around Kara's fingers, and Kara sucked harder and harder on Andie's clit as she pushed deeper and deeper into her. She almost came herself as Andie's orgasm hit.

They remained very still until Andie's breathing became steady. "Go to the bed," Andie said.

When Kara sprawled across the bed, Andie straddled her. "So, beautiful." Andie nudged her knee between Kara's legs. "Open," she said.

Kara did as she was told. Andie was going to see how dripping wet she was, and Kara was thrilled by the thought.

"Spread your lips for me," Andie said.

Kara complied.

"Open more."

Kara stretched herself as far as she could and was rewarded with the stroke of Andie's tongue. Kara arched, needing to feel more of Andie. "Oh, God," she said. "Oh, yes."

"What do you want, baby?" Andie asked into her wetness.

Kara shivered. "I want you. Fuck me."

Andie sucked her clit into her mouth. Then she sank two fingers deep into Kara. Kara gasped and clutched at the sheets. When Andie pulled slowly out then plunged back in, Kara knew she had at least three fingers in her. Kara bucked her hips as Andie moved in and out of her, over and over, until Kara gasped and stiffened and screamed out Andie's name.

* * *

Kara leaned against the wall in Andie's living room. She held her cell phone to her ear and smoothed down yesterday's khakis. "Brooke, you know how unlike me this is. But oh my—she's

absolutely gorgeous. And so freaking sexy. She's going to make working with all those losers so much more bearable. At least my evenings and weekends will have a nice distraction with Andie."

"I don't know what to say," Brooke replied.

"Damn, I wish I could find someone like Andie up there."

"If you had that woman up here, you wouldn't let her get close to you, and you know it. You haven't let anyone get close since Joan—"

"Can't you be happy for me?" Kara interrupted.

"I am happy for you. But, you just met her yesterday. What's gotten into you?"

"I'll tell you what I want to get into me," Kara said. "Or should I say whom I want to get in—" She stopped mid-sentence. "She's coming out. I have to go."

Andie emerged wearing a pair of cargo shorts, a tie-dyed T-shirt, and a ratty pair of running shoes. "Stay away from me," Andie warned as Kara pulled her into an embrace. "We promised Xena a special w-a-l-k for letting us have private grownup time, and if you don't take your hands off me, I'll have to break that promise."

"And I'm willing to bet you don't like breaking promises."

"Not even when the temptation is as great as this," Andie said.

Kara studied the short, dark curls that hugged Andie's head and accentuated the delicate curve of her neck. She wanted to put her mouth on that neck but settled for running her fingers along it instead. "Okay, I'll behave." She stepped away.

"Thank you." Andie clipped the leash to Xena's collar.

"Last night while you were making smoothies, you said you went to college—where?" Kara asked.

"UGA."

"What did you study?"

The question seemed to cause Andie discomfort. "Journalism. For a while anyway."

It made sense to Kara that Andie would be a journalist and photographer. She started to ask why she only went for a while, but given Andie's obvious unease, she opted not to press for more information. They stepped out of the house and set off at a leisurely pace with Xena leading the way.

They paused while Xena sniffed a mailbox post. And sniffed. And sniffed. "Okay, baby girl, I think we're done here."

They resumed their walk.

"What kind of dog is she?" Kara asked.

"She's a Treeing Walker Hound."

"I've never heard of that," Kara said.

"It's a type of coonhound."

"I thought coonhounds were red."

"Because of *Where the Red Fern Grows*?" Andie asked.

"Oh, God, I bawled for days after I saw that old movie."

"Me, too. But I think there are five kinds of coonhounds. I'm no expert, but I do know my girl."

"How long have you had her?"

"Seven years."

"Where'd you get her?"

"Work related." Andie winked at her. "Up for a run?"

"A what?"

"This is where Xena and I let loose and take a little run. Well, more of a jog now that she's gotten older."

Kara glanced down at her loafers. "You go right on ahead. I'll catch up to you."

"Be right back," Andie said.

Kara watched Andie's graceful movements juxtaposed with Xena's exaggerated, clumsy ones. "Is she for real?" Kara wondered out loud. "Damn, she's something."

When Andie and Xena returned, Kara said, "I could watch you move all day."

"Oh, you like to watch?"

"Is that all you think about?" Kara asked.

Andie grinned but Kara thought her deepening color was more telling. There was a hint of shyness about Andie that was quite endearing.

"Do you ever let her off the leash?" Kara asked.

"No. Even though she's well trained, the bottom line is she's still a dog. I'd never forgive myself if she took off after a rabbit or squirrel and something happened to her."

"She's a lucky girl."

"I'm a lucky girl," Andie said.

As they walked, their hands brushed. Kara let her index finger catch with Andie's. Fingers linked, they swung their hands gently between them. Kara couldn't remember the last time she was so happy.

When they returned to the house, Xena collapsed onto the dog bed in the corner of the living room.

Kara hugged Andie to her. "I can't believe tomorrow's already Monday. I hate that the weekend is coming to an end."

"Can I see you during the week?" Andie asked.

“Yes. I’d like that.” She sighed. “I can’t believe the Universe gave me this gift.”

“Gift, huh?”

Kara hated sounding so serious, but went on. “Yeah. With all the unpleasantness I’m about to become a part of, this...” She hugged Andie tighter. “You...” She stopped. Was she really saying all this to a woman she’d just met?

“I what?” Andie asked.

“Make it bearable.”

“Damn, what are you, an executioner?”

Kara cringed at the absurdity—at her own absurdity. “Nothing quite like that, but heads will roll.”

Andie tucked a strand of Kara’s hair behind her ear.

“Maybe we can have dinner Wednesday or Thursday?” Kara asked.

“I tend bar Wednesday night, but Thursday sounds good.”

“By then I should have my bearings about me.”

“You mean the heads will have rolled?” Andie asked.

“No, but I’ll have a good idea which ones will need to. And I’ll know how hard I’ll have to work to whip the rest of the slackers into shape.”

“Whipping, huh?” Andie asked.

Kara appreciated Andie trying to lighten the mood, but the thoughts of why she’d come to Bensonville still resurfaced.

Andy tilted her head. “You really aren’t looking forward to work tomorrow, are you?”

“By the time I’m finished, some people will be unemployed and others will find they have to work a lot harder to keep what they have.”

“Sounds harsh.”

Kara shrugged. “Sounds like reality.”

“Sounds like we need to forget about reality for a while.”

“What do you have in mind?” Kara asked, already lost in thoughts of Andie’s body.

Andie used her hands and mouth to show her exactly what she had in mind.

Chapter 5

Andie teetered on the edge of the F-150's rear bumper as she heaved bags of ice into the truck bed. A large cooler, wedged between two compositors for pulling samples, awaited. Six compositors, three bags of ice. A busy Monday.

She noticed the outline on the truck door where the magnetic signs with the company name belonged. She pulled open the door and grabbed the signs from behind the seat. She always took the signs off over the weekend to keep the neighborhood kids from stealing them. She closed the truck door and meticulously lined up the dusty sign with the dirt outline on the door and repeated it on the other side.

She filled the tank with gas, pulled out the company credit card, and went inside.

"Morning, sunshine," the gray-haired woman behind the counter called out.

"Morning to you, too, Lori." Andie handed her the credit card and scanned the candy rack. She placed a Snickers and a five-dollar bill on the counter.

Lori cocked her head to the side as she slid the credit slip over to Andie to sign. "Something's different."

Andie smoothed her hair. "Haircut."

"No, something else." She rang up the candy bar and gave Andie her change. "Definitely something more subtle than a haircut." A huge smile split her face. "You got laid."

Andie grabbed the Snickers from the counter. "You cannot tell that by looking at me."

A rattling smoker's laugh escaped Lori. "It didn't hurt that Marla was in here ten minutes ago."

"That bitch," Andie said in a teasing tone.

Lori laughed until it got her coughing. When she caught her breath, she said, "A real live lesbian comes into town, and you snatch her up before I even get word that she's here. Just my luck."

Andie grinned. "I have to go."

"I hear she's a real looker."

"She sure is." Andie wondered how quickly Lori would be on the phone telling one of Barb and Cindy's Serial Monogamy Pot Luck buddies about Andie getting lucky.

Andie left the gas station and drove downtown. She joked with herself by holding her eyes shut for a second then opening them and announcing, "I blinked and missed it." Thirty seconds later she was on the other side of downtown.

A white cruiser with bold blue writing waited on the shoulder of the road for unsuspecting speeders. Andie tapped the brake pedal. As she passed Officer Bennie Manning, he pointed a scolding finger at her. She waved at the ex-football jock she'd gone to school with, knowing he wouldn't pull her over for speeding just a little bit. Being friends with his wife, Jill, definitely helped.

Andie turned right onto Old Powell and drove on past the nursing home. And there she was. Tampons, headstones, office furniture, and circuit boards: the entire industrial park.

She pulled up to the main office of the tampon factory. She rang the buzzer at the door, announced herself, entered, and strode across the chilly room. At the desk she greeted Hector Lansing. She remembered how, when she'd first met him, he was so unfriendly, but she'd eventually won him over—must have been because of her considerable charm. These days, she forgave his past coldness, deciding it had to do with his being an ex-marine and getting stuck in a job rut, guarding feminine hygiene products, of all things.

"How are you today, Ms. Waters?"

"I'm good, Mr. Lansing. No, wait—I'm great, thank you very much. Yourself?"

"Not as good as you, obviously, but not half bad."

Andie signed the roster. She checked the time and wrote that and the date beside her name. She took the offered key and headed back out.

She drove the truck down the narrow road that led to the retention pond. She stopped at the gate, got out to unlock it, pulled through, and got back out to shut and relock it behind her. She heaved herself back into the Ford. "I hate that gate." It exhausted her before she even had her first compositor set up to pull samples.

She shifted in her seat and felt the exquisite soreness that only great sex could cause. She smiled. She couldn't believe she'd begged Kara to fuck her. That she'd actually said those words. Fuck me. And pinning Kara's hands down... Andie had never been so

turned on. She didn't know that having control over someone like that could create such a powerful feeling.

A steady strumming began between her legs, and she shifted again in her seat. "I could so get used to this feeling."

Stop it, she told herself. Kara was only in town temporarily. Then what? A relationship? As if a beautiful woman like Kara would consider any kind of relationship with her, let alone a long-distance one. Take what you can get, she told herself. Enjoy whatever time there is with Kara and then get on with your life.

She drove slowly toward the retention pond and let her mind drift to how it would be to anticipate seeing her long-distance lover after an absence. She and Kara would come together, passionately, every time like the first, every chance they got. They would e-mail and text and talk on the phone every evening. Where in the hell did that come from?

Her attention was drawn to an American Kestrel that joined its partner on the power line. She loved the lively colors of the birds. At first glance, they looked like doves, because of their erect posture. But a second look showed the orange, the blue-gray, the black-and-white-patterned face.

Andie parked alongside the pond. Before she got out, she slipped on a pair of latex gloves and stuffed a pair in her pocket, just in case. She hauled the best compositor from the bed of her truck. Since the tampon-making powers-that-be would sometimes check out the sampling, she wanted to use the one whose outer plastic shell was in the best shape. She positioned it at the edge of the pond, ignoring the hundreds of fragile dragonfly corpses embedded in the dirt or floating on the brown water.

She returned to the truck to gather ice and the other equipment, which she stuffed into a crate. She brought the crate to the sampling site and lifted the top two sections from the compositor. She set the four-liter plastic bucket inside the molded-plastic base. After arranging half of the bag of ice around the bucket, she replaced the top two sections. She removed the lid and attached the nickel cadmium battery. After she attached one end of the six-foot tubing to the compositor and a low-flow strainer to the other end, she placed the strainer end into the brown water.

She programmed the compositor to pull 100 milliliters of sample every hour for twenty-three hours. The samples were twenty-four-hour composites, but since she would have the compositor pull its first sample while she was still there, it only had to pull twenty-three more times.

While she waited for the pH meter to calibrate, she let her attention travel the length of the field. It was so serene. Some mornings, she'd see deer off in the distance. On mornings like that, she could almost convince herself she was doing something good for nature, for the earth. But mostly she knew that she was, in essence, the hired gun for industry. She pulled the samples, and her coworkers analyzed them for everything from oil to bacteria to pesticides. Then the company would either have proof of their compliance or would pay an inconsequential fine.

Andie scooped up a portion of the pond water and stuck the pH probe into it. Once the number stabilized, she jotted it onto her paperwork with the date and time. She grabbed the pH meter and crate with what remained of the bag of ice and headed back to the truck. She would pour up all the samples for that location the next day.

Climbing back into the truck, she said, "Congratulations. One down and only five to go." She stopped in the middle of fastening her seatbelt. Congratulations. Chuck had said that to her brother two nights ago. And she still didn't know what that was all about.

She glanced at her clipboard and reminded herself she had work to do. And better yet, she had a date to look forward to on Thursday.

* * *

Kara spent the first part of the day in her hotel room, reading over personnel files and scanning the financial reports pertaining to the Georgia division. It was midafternoon before she pulled into the dusty lot in front of Royal Environmental and parked between a Taurus and Pathfinder, beneath a tall pine. There were also two pickup trucks and a Camry in the lot.

She reached for her briefcase and laptop and noticed her muscles were tender. Having multiple orgasms could be a much better workout than the machines at the hotel's gym or whacking a basket of golf balls at the driving range. A much better workout, indeed. She wondered if Andie played golf. If not, it'd be more than a little sexy to teach her. The image of her standing behind Andie, the shorter woman's ass pressing into her as she guided her swing, excited Kara. Then she reminded herself that she had a job to do. Thoughts of making love to Andie would have to wait until later.

Again with the making love? she chided herself. It's just sex. Yeah, if she kept telling herself that, maybe she'd eventually believe it.

The faux brick front blended well with the neutral siding, but overall the building wasn't particularly impressive. The heavy door took a yank to open, and Kara almost tumbled backward. A stained countertop ran the length of one wall, and stacks of deliveries from UPS and Fed Ex cluttered the opposite one. Straight ahead, a neat desk squatted adjacent to a closed door. The sign on the door said to ring the bell for service.

She studied the countertop. Three twelve-pack-sized coolers were set to one side, the words "Royal Environmental" stenciled on the side of each. A stack of paper was beside them. Kara leaned over and scanned the chain-of-custody sheets. She looked up when the interior door opened.

"Hello," Kara said.

"Hello. May I help you?" a tall, heavysset young woman asked.

"Yes. I'm Kara Travis, Senior Corporate Operations Manager for Royal Environmental."

Kara almost felt bad when the woman's jaw dropped. Almost. She had to admit she got a tiny perverse pleasure from watching the sheer shock cross employees' faces when her presence sank in.

Kara extended her hand, and the woman hesitated before taking it.

"I'm Tammy. Morgan." She quickly withdrew her doughy hand from Kara's.

Kara's mind sifted through the personnel files she'd read over breakfast. Tamara Morgan. BS in Business Administration from UGA. Employed by Royal Environmental as Office Manager for five years. Consistently late with her reports.

"It's very nice to meet you, Tammy."

Tammy glanced around the room. "We... uh... we weren't expecting company."

"Let's not think of me as company, then."

Yes, Kara thought, Tammy just turned pale.

Tammy led Kara through the door from the front office to the rest of the lab. She stopped outside the door to the next office and introduced Kara to Rob Nelson, the Lab Manager. Kara shook his hand. Robert Nelson, MS in Microbiology from Georgia Tech, with the company for eight years. New client acquisitions had stagnated during his tenure.

“Welcome, Ms. Travis.” Rob shuffled his feet, and his face reddened. “I need to make some calls. Tammy, why don’t you show Ms. Travis around? I’ll join you soon.”

Kara read the look Tammy gave Rob as “Thanks a lot, you rat bastard.”

“How about showing me the conference room first,” Kara said.

“Right this way.”

Kara looked around the cluttered room then pushed the lab supply catalogues that were strewn about to one side of the long table so she could set down her briefcase and laptop. She grabbed a pad and pen from the outside pocket of her laptop case.

“Shall we get on with the tour?” she said.

Tammy nodded and wandered into the first room. “This is the oil and grease room.”

Kara looked around. Glassware once used with the Freon method still cluttered the room, even though the EPA no longer allowed that method. She jotted a note to have it packed up.

She glanced at the still-new hexane extraction rig. The Freon method was hard on the environment, but the hexane method was rougher on the analyst. She checked the maintenance log on the fume hood. The equipment that sucked out the offending fumes was an analyst’s best friend, as long as it was maintained properly.

“All right. I’ve seen what I needed to here. What’s next?” Kara asked.

Tammy led the way to the next room. “And in here we have the Inorganics Department.” Tammy straightened up the clutter on the nearest countertop as she spoke.

A man with black-rimmed glasses and neat lab coat looked up from where he titrated a sample on the countertop across the back wall. He looked away long enough to read the pipette and jot down the volume on the bench sheet.

“Sidney, this is Kara Travis.” She cleared her throat. “From corporate.”

“Oh,” Sidney said as he peeled off his latex gloves. He extended his hand. “I’m Sidney Ketcham.”

“Nice to meet you.” Kara shook his hand. She recalled his file. Sidney Ketcham, Masters in Inorganic Chemistry. On paper, Sidney was the most impressive employee in the Georgia division. Given the employees she’d met so far, she was still impressed.

Kara turned to an analyst distilling ammonias. She noticed there were only three ammonia rigs. She would recommend allowing them the capital expenditure necessary to double their

capacity. The analyst could cut the distillation time in half with more rigs. Good business.

"Nanette Bell and Mike Tucker," Sidney said as he gestured toward the woman distilling the ammonia samples and a man in the corner putting away glassware, "are two of the other analysts in this department." Both employees nodded toward Kara, but neither moved away from their work. "Ted Robinson is out today. He's the last of the motley crew in inorganics."

When Sidney looked back toward his samples on the counter, Kara said, "Thank you, Sidney. I'll be back in later to talk more with you and the others."

Rob Nelson was in the corridor when they left the inorganics room, a stiff smile plastered on his round face. He'd put on a lab coat, several sizes too small for his large midsection. Kara watched in amazement as his face grew redder and then redder still. His eyes even seemed to bug out. Damn, she thought, don't have a stroke.

Kara followed Rob and Tammy to where the hallway intersected with another, forming a T. They turned right, to the micro lab. In this room, Rob introduced her to Linda Walden, who was setting up drinking waters and testing them for coliform bacteria, an indicator organism that determined potability. Linda didn't appear as nervous as Tammy or Rob. She indicated her gloved hands. "I'd shake your hand, but—"

"I understand. It's very nice to meet you." Kara noted how Linda's small hands barely poked out from the end of her lab coat, even with the sleeves rolled up. It looked as if the protective wear had swallowed her.

They moved to the left side of the T, where Tammy pointed out the sample log-in and glassware areas. Then Tammy indicated the last room before coming to a back door. "And finally, we have the sampling room."

A man stood against the counter, talking on his cell phone. He looked at Kara when she walked in with Tammy and Rob. He smiled and said into the phone, "Let me call you right back."

"Kara Travis, this is Calvin Wren. Calvin, Kara is from corporate," Rob said.

Calvin shoved his cell phone into the front pocket of his stained and holey jeans. "Uh, hi," he said as he pulled his baggy jeans higher onto his hips.

"Calvin samples the drinking and ground water," Rob said.

Kara's first reaction was concern that this man was often the only person from the lab that clients would meet. He desperately

needed to shave. The dirt on his pants she would chalk up to him having already been in the field, but there was no excuse for how his pants were hanging off him like he was some kind of thug.

Calvin snatched a freezer bag of samples in 100-mil Whirl-Pac bags and gestured toward the door. "I need to get these to Linda."

Kara followed him out into the corridor. Overall, Kara found the cleanliness of the lab unimpressive. It needed to be swept, and she was pretty sure some serious sterilization was in order. She hesitated to touch the doorknobs. That was one of the bad things about arriving unannounced. But, she figured that by the next day, the lab will have become mysteriously clean... if the manager had any sense, anyway.

Kara looked up when the back door opened. She squinted. The woman entering the lab wore Levi's, work boots, and a polo shirt. Her eyes traveled over the trim figure, the short dark curls. She had to look away.

"That's Andrea Waters, our field sampler," Rob said.

Kara's mind reeled. Andrea Waters. Some college but no degree. Employed by RE as field sampler for seven years. Consistently has OT, so she's either a hard worker or pads her time sheet. Andrea Waters. Andie the bartender. Good God, this can't be happening.

Kara took a deep breath and tried for as much composure as she could muster.

* * *

Andie stared in disbelief. Yes, she recognized the cheekbones, the lips, the thin hands. But the hair pulled sternly away from her face? The glasses perched on the middle of her nose? No.

"Hello, I'm Kara Travis, from the corporate office of Royal Environmental."

Andie stared at the outstretched hand. "Andrea Waters." Her gaze flitted from Kara's face to her hand. She quickly shook Kara's hand and pulled away as fast as she could. She stood, speechless, trying to reconcile the woman standing in front of her with the woman she'd held in her arms the day before. Her stomach churned.

Calvin approached Andie from behind. She sensed him watching her.

"So," Rob said. "Ms. Travis will be watching over our shoulders, trying to help us figure out how to improve our bottom line."

“Bottom line?” Andie asked. If everyone hadn’t been staring at her she might not have known for sure that she’d actually said the words out loud.

Kara cleared her throat. “Yes, your bottom line. I intend to determine how we can increase efficiency and decrease cost.”

Andie watched as Rob nodded in agreement. She wanted to scream that the woman was there to can them all. Andie fought the urge to ask her if seducing her was all part of the job.

“So,” Kara said to everyone, “I’ll be as noninvasive as possible.”

I’m sure you will, Andie thought. “Nice to meet you,” Andie said.

She nodded at Rob and marched down the corridor. Her head throbbed and her chest ached.

What in the hell? Andie asked herself. She still couldn’t believe it was Kara. And she couldn’t believe how composed Kara was. It ticked her off.

“Hey, Andrea,” Calvin called. He sauntered up to her, hitching up the belt that circled his baggy pants. “Oh, the look on your face when you saw the corporate chick. I know she’s hot, but you looked utterly shocked. Kind of like you wanted to eat her for lunch.”

Andie almost choked.

“And you know I know you think she’s hot, because we have the exact same taste in women.” He stopped talking when Tammy came into the room.

“So, why is she really here?” Tammy asked.

“To help bring down costs,” Calvin said. “Weren’t you listening? She just told us that.”

Andie’s mind wandered to Kara writhing beneath her, begging her to hold her down and fuck her harder. She grew light-headed.

Andie was thankful she’d assembled her bottles on Friday and had them ready in the truck. One less thing she had to force her way through before she could get out of there. Since she could finish her paperwork at home, all she really had to do was change the buffer solutions in her pH meter.

The next day wouldn’t be so easy. The second day of the sampling cycle never was. She’d have bottles to prep, samples to log in, and equipment to clean.

While she worked, she thought about how everyone would be better dressed the next day. Of this, she was certain. And she’d be expected to wear her lab coat while in the building. And safety glasses. Putting on a show. Screw it. She’d wear the most ragged

jeans she had. And she'd forget to don her lab coat until Rob had a stroke trying to discreetly signal her to put it on. Okay, don't take it out on Rob. It's not his fault corporate sent Ms. Travis down to shake them up. Or root them out.

Or shut them down? She wasn't worried about being canned because she knew she was a hard worker. But if the whole division were shut down, it wouldn't matter how hard she worked.

How would she get her credit cards paid off if Royal Environmental shut them down? Her stomach sank.

She made a beeline to the back door. She jumped off the loading dock and climbed into the F-150. Not wanting to take the chance of being intercepted, she pulled away from the dock and stopped only at the driveway. She stuck her favorite live CD into the player and clicked through tracks to get to the song she wanted to blast: "Nebraska," Melissa Ferrick style. Her Melissa. Marla had her own Melissa—Etheridge—but Andie's favorite was Ferrick. She cranked the volume. She played that song twice then skipped back to the fifth song, "Burn This Guitar." Oh, to be able to extinguish the burn in her gut. She turned up the volume and stepped on the gas.

* * *

In light of what had just happened at the office, Andie put aside her vow of saving water and let the shower beat hard and hot on her back. She wished she could scrub off the shock of seeing Kara at the lab. Even more, she wanted to slough off her knowledge of why Kara was there. Part of her felt guilty that she knew more about what was going down at work than anyone else did but couldn't say anything about it. She wouldn't divulge their pillow talk, no matter how pissed she might be.

Andie heard Xena barking over the sounds of the water cascading over her. It was Xena's "someone's at the door" bark, and she knew who it would be. She shook. How could this be happening? She let the water assault her face for several moments before turning it off and grabbing her towel.

She took her time getting dressed. She pulled on a pair of faded Levi's and a plain white T-shirt.

Xena had stopped barking, but was sitting expectantly at the front door. Andie opened the door and saw Kara sitting on the brick steps. Without speaking, Andie watched as Kara rose from the steps. She stepped to the side and let her in.

“Andie,” Kara said.

Andie didn’t look at her. “You want a drink?” She paused and added, “While I can still afford it?”

“Jesus, I can’t believe this is happening,” Kara said.

“Is my head going to roll?”

“I don’t know,” Kara went pale and massaged her temples. “You were the bartender. It should have been safe,” she said.

“Safe?” Andie yelled. “Safe?”

“Someone to be intimate with for a while without having to worry about messing up anyone’s life,” Kara said.

“Do you make a habit of messing up lives?”

“This is not my fault. I had no idea.”

Andie started to shake. She prayed she wouldn’t cry. She didn’t ever want Ms. Corporate to see her cry.

“I didn’t know,” Kara said. “All I’ve been able to think about all day is seeing you again. I couldn’t wait to have dinner with you, spend time with you and Xena. But seeing you at the lab? I swear to you I didn’t know you were Andrea Waters.” Her lower lip twitched, and she steadied it between her teeth. A tear ran down her face.

The vulnerability—the raw emotion on Kara’s face—snatched the breath right out of Andie. All she wanted was to cover that mouth with her own, to touch her lips against Kara’s, to keep the twitch from turning into a tremble. She focused on Kara’s mouth and knew she was a goner. She closed the distance between them.

When Andie kissed her, Kara pressed her mouth harder against Andie’s.

Andie grabbed Kara by the hair and pulled it free from the clasp that held it back. She wanted it loose and wild. She buried her hands in the waves and used Kara’s hair to force her closer, in an attempt to regain the other Kara.

Two minutes later, their clothes were in a heap on the floor, and they fell onto the bed, hands and mouths journeying over one another’s bodies.

Andie stared into Kara’s eyes while Kara’s fingers moved in and out of her in long, slow strokes, just like Andie liked it, only going faster right before she came.

Andie held Kara close until her breathing calmed. Then, without thinking, she flipped Kara onto her belly.

“Lift your ass,” Andie said.

Kara did, and Andie supported her with a pillow before slipping inside her with one finger, then two, three. Kara clutched the sheets and moaned consent while Andie pumped into her.

Andie was half-triumphant and half-shocked when she slid all but her thumb inside Kara. Confusion clouded her thoughts as she worried that she might be trying to fit too much inside her, but Kara wasn't telling her to stop. Andie thought maybe Kara wanted it to hurt, some kind of penance, but knew she didn't deserve that. But still Andie continued to fill her, and Kara continued begging her not to stop. Then Kara came hard, and Andie collapsed, exhausted, onto Kara's back. She didn't want to break the contact between their bodies but also worried Kara would think Andie chose to fuck her from behind because she couldn't bear to look at her. That was somewhat true, not in a mean way, but in a sad one because seeing her all flushed and spent and knowing it was probably over would break what was left of Andie's heart.

"Damn, woman," Andie said. "Damn."

"Look at me," Kara said. "Please."

Andie slid off her and propelled herself up. They lay on their sides, face-to-face. Andie kissed the tears on Kara's cheeks.

Kara placed a hand on each side of Andie's face. Andie could smell herself on her.

"We can't do this again," Kara said.

"We'll find a way." We have to, she thought. Andie brought her lips to Kara's and let them rest there. She took in Kara's breath as her own and felt her chest tighten.

Kara lightly kissed Andie's lower lip, sucking it gently into her mouth. They stayed that way for what felt to Andie like an eternity.

"You have no idea how much I wish we could keep seeing each other. But we can't," Kara said. "I am so very sorry things turned out like this." A few minutes later, she said, "I should go."

"At least stay the night."

"That would only make things harder." Kara sat up and reached for her pants.

Andie buried her face in the pillow. Watching Kara leave was more than she could bear.

* * *

Kara stared at the Royal Environmental truck sitting in front of Andie's house. How had she missed it that weekend?

She pulled out of Andie's driveway. Her hands shook as she clutched the steering wheel. "Jesus, Kara, what have you done?" she asked. "You just slept with an RE employee. One you're down here to audit. Fool, fool, fool."

She drove slowly down the residential road, checking the rearview mirror constantly. She knew Andie wouldn't come after her. And that both relieved and saddened her.

She should have known better than to go to Andie's. What did she think was going to happen? They'd sip smoothies and laugh over the irony? That they'd understand that they had to forget all about the smoldering passion threatening to ignite every time they were near one another?

She'd had to go to Andie's, hadn't she? She couldn't have just shown up at work, day after day, doing her job and pretending nothing had happened between them. They would have had to address things sooner or later.

But to have sex again? Wasn't that messing with their heads? Wasn't she screwing with Andie's head? "Typical, Kara," she said aloud.

She reminded herself that she hadn't a clue that Andie the bartender was also Andrea the Royal Environmental field sampler. But she knew that only justified her actions over the weekend. To rationalize sleeping with Andie after knowing who she was bordered on delusional.

Kara could still see the look of devastation on Andie's face when she'd asked Kara to spend the night and Kara had said no. The expression had caught Kara totally off guard.

She turned onto Main Street and thought how she'd never have a reason to be in this part of town again. She'd make a point to stay north of the small downtown area, where her hotel and the lab were located.

So, what was next? Should she ask Andie if she planned to say anything to anyone at the lab about what she knew about Kara's visit? Or would that be adding insult to injury? She considered herself a good judge of people, and her gut told her that Andie wouldn't say anything. Or so she hoped.

Kara headed toward her hotel room, cursing that all five of the town's spotlights seemed to conspire against her.

She kicked off her shoes as she entered her room with its two queen-sized beds, dusty TV, and carpet with suspect stains. She thanked the Universe for the vodka she brought with her from

home. She poured the booze into a glass and downed it. Then another. And another.

Kara thought about Andie fucking her. How easily Andie slipped almost her entire hand inside her. How wet she was from having made Andie come, from smelling Andie on her, from the excitement heightened by Andie's weight on her as she held her down on her stomach, making her back struggle to arch, to offer herself. Kara had never been so turned on.

The memory made Kara wet, and she downed her drink in one gulp and put the glass aside. She'd never been so relaxed and open as she was with Andie. Not ever.

She undid her pants as she moved to the bed. Her hand drifted down her belly, pausing at the waistband of her panties. She undressed. She'd been so spent just an hour earlier. How could she possibly need to touch herself now?

"Andie," she whispered as her fingers found her wetness and plunged in. She gasped and worked her clit with one hand while she slid two fingers of the other in and out of herself.

"Andie," she said. She came hard then collapsed onto the bed. She didn't bother to clean herself up.

Exhaustion allowed thoughts of Joanie to sneak in under the radar. Kara thought back to her ex-lover's anger any time she swerved from the party line about violence and women. Joanie maintained that it was wrong, whether consensual or not. She hadn't thought of that in a very long time—how Joanie had berated her the only time she'd ever asked her to hold her down during sex. What she had been thinking about lately was how gentle and sweet Joanie could be in bed. Did she block the bad memories of her life with Joanie, only really acknowledging the good ones? And if so, was that an act of denial or of self-preservation?

Thoughts of Joanie were replaced by images of Andie getting Kara so wet and relaxed that Kara was able to take nearly all of her hand. God, what an unbelievable feeling to take it all in. The fullness was indescribable. Kara had felt that the power coming from Andie's strong hand was endless.

She wondered if it was equally as moving for Andie. Of course, she could never ask. Those conversations were now totally off-limits between them.

Stop thinking!

Sleep arrived only moments before Kara rolled over and stared at the red glow of the digital numbers of the alarm clock. It was five in the morning. Her head pounded and her mouth was dry.

Andie's scent lingered on her hands, and her own sex mingled with it. She inhaled the scents deeply and wondered how she'd make it through the next few weeks, being so close to someone she wanted so much and knew she could not have again.

She labored out of bed. "Get it together," she said to her reflection in the bathroom mirror before stumbling into the shower. "And promise, promise, promise you won't be with Andie again."

As she let the water roll down her back, she consoled herself with the fact that Andie would be in the field until the afternoon when she finished sampling. Kara would have several hours to get into corporate bitch mode before she had to see Andie. She'd just have to work on her game face.

Chapter 6

Andie held her cell phone in her hand as she watched the back door of the lab in her rearview mirror. She'd been sitting there for thirty minutes with the truck backed up to the loading dock, trying to decide if she could actually see Kara again without falling apart.

She punched in a number. When Marla answered, she didn't say hello, she said, "Have I told you lately how damned sexy Chuck is?"

Andie meant to laugh, but it came out as a sob.

"Oh, God, what's wrong?"

"You know that job Kara didn't want to discuss when we met her at the bar that night?" She hated how high and squeaky her voice was.

"Yeah?"

"She works for Royal. And she's here to audit the lab. And me. She gets to determine if I keep my job."

"Oh, Lord, you're sleeping with the corporate auditor?"

"I slept with—as in past tense—the Senior Corporate Operations Manager for Royal Environmental."

"Oh, my God. Wait. You said past tense?"

"Yes, past tense," Andie said, her voice breaking. "She won't see me in any way other than professional now."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry." Marla paused. "Was she surprised to see you at the lab, or did she have some idea?"

"I'm sure the look of shock on her face when she saw me mirrored mine perfectly." Andie leaned forward and pressed her forehead against the steering wheel. "How am I supposed to see her day after day when I still want her so much?"

"Oh, you have it bad, don't you? Maybe she'll come around."

Andie sat back. "I am such a fool. You know, after just one weekend, I wanted to date her. Like, start some kind of long distance epic love affair." She sobbed. "I'm pathetic."

"You are not. You're sweet and sensitive, and you deserve someone better than her."

"All I want right now is to do what I have to do so I can get out of here. I'd better go in. Thanks for listening."

"Call me later and let me know how it goes this afternoon."

Andie disconnected and blotted her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. She jumped out of the truck and grabbed what she needed from the back before she headed in.

She used her hip to push the back door of the lab shut behind her. Her grip on the two stacked milk crates grew more and more precarious with every step. She was trying to get all of her dirty buckets and hoses and used batteries inside in one trip. The sooner she got out of there, the better.

She glanced down the corridor and into the glassware area on her way to the sampling room. She smirked at how clean the lab was. At the other end of the hall, she could tell that word had gotten to Ted even though he'd been out the day before, because he was wearing nice khakis instead of his usual work pants.

She deposited her crates in the sampling room. She saw movement in the hallway, so she stuck her head back out. Tammy motioned to her from the micro lab. She noticed that Tammy, too, was dressed nicer than usual. When Andie got to the door, Linda pulled her in. Andie was swallowed into a huddle with the two other women.

"You know how Tammy talks to office managers from other divisions sometimes?" Linda whispered.

"Yeah," Andie said. She knew the next words out of Linda's mouth would be interesting.

Linda elbowed Tammy. "Tell her."

"Lucy at the New Jersey office heard that the Travis woman walked into the Virginia Beach Division and fired two people on the spot for not wearing their lab coats."

"Urban myth," Andie said.

"No, it's not. She really cleaned house in Tennessee, too. Trimmed their workforce by twenty percent," Linda added.

Calvin trudged into the room while Linda was speaking. "No way."

"Yes, way," Tammy said.

Andie looked Calvin over. He had shaved off his perpetual five o'clock shadow. And there was not a single acid hole in his jeans. He wore a nice belt, and his shirt was actually tucked in. She was pretty sure that, in the four or five years he'd worked at the lab,

she'd never seen his shirt tucked in. He'd sold out, too. Andie glanced down at herself. She hadn't meant to sell out, but all her holey jeans were in the hamper. But she'd be damned if she'd bother with a lab coat because Kara Travis was in town.

"Good, Andrea, you're here." Rob gave her one of his fake smiles as he crashed the party in the micro lab. "Ms. Travis will be going out into the field with you tomorrow, so you'll need to come to the lab in the morning before you start your route."

"Tell me you're joking," Andie said.

He turned red. "No joke. And please behave yourself."

Andie felt herself go pale.

"You know," he added. "Watch your speed. Your driving is my biggest concern. I know you do everything else by the book."

"There's nothing wrong with my driving."

"Not if you're on a racetrack," Calvin said.

Andie shot him a dirty look. He was supposed to be her ally. He was the only one at Royal Environmental that she'd ever been social with, if comparing notes on what makes a woman sexy and having an occasional beer at The Cave could be called socializing.

"Kids, kids," Rob said. "Quit your bickering and meet me in the conference room in fifteen minutes. Ms. Travis wants to go over some things with you both before she does any field auditing."

Andie returned to the truck at the loading dock. She put down the tailgate and dragged the cooler full of ice and samples across the truck bed and into the building. She was unloading the samples onto the counter when Rob stopped in the doorway.

"Tammy will log everything in. I need you in the conference room," Rob said.

Andie ducked into the restroom to wash her hands and put a stick of cinnamon gum in her mouth. She paused in the hallway, smoothed down her short, unruly curls, and realized her stomach was in her throat.

She stood in the doorway to the conference room and watched as Kara hovered over her laptop, busily typing. Her hair was pulled back in business mode, and her reading glasses perched on her nose. Andie's heart thundered in her chest, and all she could hear was the roar of blood in her ears. How could she possibly pretend she'd not known this woman intimately, had not fallen for her the first night they'd met?

Kara looked up, and Andie saw a slight frown start on her mouth, to be quickly replaced by a not totally convincing smile. "Good morning, Andrea."

The sound of her full name coming from Kara caught her off guard. “Good morning... Ms. Travis.”

“Please, call me Kara.”

Calvin and Rob entered the conference room.

Kara closed her laptop. “Let’s get right to it, then. As Rob has probably told you, I’ll be going out in the field with each of you once or twice, to get a feel for how your days are structured.”

Andie and Calvin nodded obediently.

Kara sat back. “So, Calvin, you do all the drinking water and groundwater wells?”

“Yes, I do,” he said.

“Andrea, you do waste water mostly?”

“Yes.” The roaring in her ears returned.

“Calvin,” Kara said, “is there ever a time you would collect a sample even though the groundwater monitoring well hasn’t fully recharged after being bailed?”

Calvin cleared his throat. “I... um... I would have to check the SOP.”

Kara pushed her glasses up her nose. “Calvin, will you grab the Field SOP for me?”

Calvin hesitated, and Andie started to stand.

“No, Andrea, Calvin can get it,” Kara said.

He glanced toward the bookshelf then at Andie.

“You said you’d check the Standard Operating Procedures if you didn’t know something about sampling monitoring wells,” Kara said.

“Yes,” he said.

“Yet you act like you haven’t a clue as to where it is.” Kara kept her eyes on Calvin as she continued. “Andrea, will you show your coworker where the SOP is kept?”

Andie hesitated. For a moment she entertained the idea of feigning ignorance in an act of solidarity with Calvin. Then she decided she wasn’t playing games. She walked to the wall-to-wall bookshelves and grabbed the thick white binder.

“Thank you,” Kara said. “Andrea, tomorrow will be your day with me in the field.”

Andie bristled. Being in the field under Kara’s professional scrutiny was the last thing she wanted. She gave a stiff nod and avoided eye contact with Kara.

“In the meantime, I’d like to see the paper trail on something you’ve sampled. Shall we go to the file room and pick an example?”

Andie led the way. Kara walked in behind her. She ran her fingers along the edges of the files in one of the drawers before stopping short and pulling a file free. She looked at several folders before she handed one to Andie. "I'd like to see all paperwork on this one, from collection to reporting."

Andie's hands shook as she opened the manila folder. "This is from nine months ago."

"And?"

"And... I'll get my logbook and get on it." She turned away and said, "Ma'am."

Andie assembled her paperwork and sulked as Kara pored over every detail. She wouldn't look at Kara's thin hands and risk thinking of how they felt stroking her. Oops, too late, she'd thought about it. Damn.

When Kara handed her the logbooks and file, Andie hurried from the room. She put her stuff away and headed for the back loading dock.

Andie pulled on gloves and started going through bags of trash. Couldn't her coworkers at least pretend to separate the recyclables? She tossed a plastic water bottle into a bag in the bed of her truck. "And would it kill these people to reuse their damned bottles?" she said.

"Hey, what's up?" Kara asked.

Andie jumped. "Oh, hey." She looked around her at the piles of plastics and glass. "I'm off the clock."

"So I'm not allowed to talk to you?"

"So don't worry. The company's not paying me to do this."

"Why wouldn't the company pay you?"

"Recycling isn't in our budget."

"Don't be—" Kara stopped mid-sentence. "Oh."

"So I sort it and carry it to the recycling center on my own time."

"Can I give you a hand?"

Andie appraised Kara's pressed khakis and white shirt. "I'm almost done."

Kara gave a little shrug and walked away.

When she finished sorting, Andie went back inside to wash her hands. The silence in the lab told her most of her coworkers had already left. The only lights on were the sampling room, lobby, and file room. She checked her watch and decided Xena would be okay for a little longer.

Andie paused in the doorway to the file room and watched as Kara meticulously examined folders. The woman was gorgeous, even with her hair pulled back in business mode and her reading glasses perched on her nose. She felt the ache of losing the chance at something she knew could be good. She knew unequivocally that, in and out of bed, Kara could have been *the one* if the circumstances had been different.

She forced the thought from her head. “If you tell someone what you’re looking for—whether it’s me or someone else—they could give you a hand.”

Kara held Andie’s gaze—for the first time in what felt like forever—and slowly nodded.

“I need all the folders for walk-in clients who had total coliforms analyzed this year.”

“This year?”

“Only if it was the only thing they had done and they paid cash.”

“That’s still going to be quite a few. I guess I should give you a hand, or we’ll never get rid of you.”

“Ouch.”

“That didn’t come out right. Sorry. It was meant as a joke,” Andie said.

“It’s okay.”

They worked toward one another from opposite sides of the top shelf. Andie tried to limit the amount of times she snuck glances at Kara. She wanted to say something to Kara about what had happened between them, but she didn’t want to start a conversation that would make them even more awkward around each other. She decided to follow Kara’s lead where that was concerned.

“Here goes,” Kara said in a low voice as she picked up the stack of files they’d amassed. She took them to the computer while Andie continued working along the shelf.

Andie heard Kara make a few keystrokes, then the computer would beep an error at her. The pattern lasted for several minutes.

At length, Andie’s curiosity got the better of her. She stepped closer and looked over Kara’s shoulder. She watched as Kara searched for one work order after another in the archived database.

Kara turned slightly, and her arm brushed against Andie.

When their eyes met, Andie took a step back. She needed some distance from the heat building between them.

Andie nodded at the computer screen. “Am I seeing a very bad pattern there?”

“Yeah. Very bad.”

“Specifically?”

“Samples with cash payments for bacteria tests are logged in. After the analyses, the reports are issued. But before the work orders are invoiced, they’re deleted from the system.”

Andie contemplated the implications for a moment before replying. “The clients have what they need, so no one notices.” Then she added, “Except whoever’s doing this didn’t bother to remove the paper files.”

“Probably didn’t think it was necessary.” Kara let out a long breath. “Listen, I know you don’t owe me any favors, but can we keep this between you and me?”

Andie nodded. “You may think you and I are on separate teams, but most of us here are honest and hardworking. Most of us would be appalled by what it looks like is going on.”

“I know. Shit.”

“You didn’t expect to find someone skimming off the top, did you?”

“No,” Kara said. “I knew there were problems here, but I figured they’d be issues of competency, not legality.”

Andie glanced at her watch.

“You need to go let Xena out, don’t you?” Kara asked.

“Yeah.” Andie couldn’t believe she’d hung around as long as she did. So much for staying as far away from Kara as possible. “Seriously, I won’t say anything about this mess,” she said as she nodded toward the stack of folders. “You’re the last one here so I’ll lock the building behind me.”

“Thanks,” Kara said. “Really.”

Andie smiled and got the hell out of there.

The drive home seemed to take forever. She repeatedly had to remind herself to slow down. The last thing she needed was to get a speeding ticket in the company truck.

At home, Andie took Xena for their usual post-work walk. They jogged a little, but it wasn’t enough to calm Andie’s restlessness. And frustration. She brought Xena home and went back out for a proper run.

She ran hard, but she couldn’t purge the frustration. She kept thinking about the way Kara smelled and tasted and reacted to her touch. That she’d never again be allowed to feel or smell or taste her gnawed at her like acid.

She stopped and gasped for air. Good God, what would she do with the lump in her throat, the tightness in her chest?

* * *

Kara dialed the number for Wanda Turner, Royal Environmental's IT guru. She jumped when Wanda answered. "Royal Environmental, this is Wanda speaking."

"Hi, this is Kara Travis. I didn't expect you to answer this time of the evening. I figured I'd leave a message."

"Want me to hang up so you can talk to my voice mail instead?" Wanda teased.

"Nope. Unless you're busy."

"Never too busy for you. Anything for Royal Environmental, you know."

"Are you drinking?"

"Not yet. Should I be?"

Kara chuckled. "That is yet to be determined. I need a favor."

"Fire away."

Kara explained how she'd determined someone had been skimming.

"So, you want me to tell you who was logged in when these deletions occurred?"

"I don't think it'll be that easy." Kara paced the length of the conference room. "From what I've seen, hardly anyone ever logs off, or they log in under each other's names. Just because someone was logged in doesn't necessarily mean they were even in the building."

"Hmm."

"I thought maybe comparing log-ins with time sheets..."

"Could they cover for each other on time sheets?"

"There's nothing stopping them. Maybe if we cross-referenced the alleged time sheets with the log-ins and the bench sheets for the analysts."

"And the chain of custodies for the field samplers?"

"Yeah." Kara's heart rate escalated at the mention of the field samplers. "You can access the log-in information?"

"Oh, yes, big brother has been watching. Hope you're not downloading porn on the work computer," Wanda joked.

Kara was well aware that most corporations watched their employees' computer activities these days, but it still made her uncomfortable. In this instance, though, it might help them catch the culprit who was pocketing stolen profits at the Bensonville office.

"I'll e-mail you the information as soon as I get it," Wanda said.

"Thank you so much."

Kara hung up the phone. Her eyes were so weary from poring over files that she was on the verge of seeing double. She heard a key in the lock at the front door. What explanation would justify her presence at the lab at eight at night? Hell, she reminded herself, she didn't have to explain herself to anyone.

"Kara," Andie called out. "I don't want to scare you."

Kara stuck her head out of the conference room. "Hey." She smiled when she saw the take-out containers from Great China.

"I thought you might be hungry."

"I am. Thanks." Kara fought not to stare at Andie's toned body. Andie wore a tank top and jean shorts. Had she no mercy? Kara's heart pounded with the thought of Andie holding her head to her breast. The way Andie's nipple hardened under Kara's tongue. The sweet way she asked, "Are you sure this is okay?" before grabbing her hair again and holding her face tighter to her. Kara's own response, even now, echoed in her memory. "Yes," she'd gasped. "Yes."

Andie deposited the containers on the conference table. She ran her hands over her hair and nodded at the stack of folders. "Is that all of them?"

"For the last year and a half."

"Oh, boy." Andie shook her head. "You do believe me that I had no idea what was going on, don't you?"

"Oh, Andie," Kara said. "Of course I do."

Andie looked away. "Um... enjoy your dinner."

"Won't you stay and eat with me?"

"Xena's in the car. She insisted on taking the r-i-d-e with me."

"She's so cute." She resisted the urge to add, *and so are you*. "Thanks for the carry-out."

"You're welcome." Andie stared at her cuticles. "So, I guess I'll see you here bright and early tomorrow."

"Yes." Kara looked down at a file when she responded. She had gotten the hint earlier when Andie wouldn't even make eye contact during the discussion of auditing her, that Andie resented her going into the field with her. She looked at Andie. "Good night."

"Yeah, good night."

As soon as Andie was out of the lab, Kara grabbed her cell phone. Brooke had barely gotten “hello” out of her mouth before Kara was blurting out everything that had happened the last two days.

“You’re shitting me,” Brooke said.

Kara sighed. “I shit you not.”

“And she actually said she wanted to find a way to keep seeing you?”

“She wasn’t really thinking at the time. Surely she knows that can’t work.”

“It sounds perfect to me. You can be her boss during the day, and she’ll be yours at night. Pretty hot.”

“No way,” Kara said. She poked around in her Chinese vegetables with her chopsticks.

“Why not?”

“It would be unethical to keep seeing her.”

“You said yourself that she was all for finding a way,” Brooke said. “Hello? Consenting adults?”

“That still wouldn’t make it right,” Kara said. She ate a floret of broccoli.

“You’re putting way too much thought into this. Have some fun, for crying out loud. My God, you’ve practically been a nun since Joanie died.”

“We are not talking about her—ever—remember?”

“I’m just saying...”

“I know what you’re saying,” Kara pushed her food away. “I can’t be with Andie. I wish I’d stayed in my hotel room instead of going out Saturday night.”

“Don’t be silly. Have your fun, then come home to me where you belong.”

“Brooke, don’t.”

“Hey, a girl can dream. Everyone needs some good fucking. Have yours, then come home.”

“We should probably hang up now,” Kara said.

“Yeah, probably. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Kara straightened the stack of folders on the conference room table. Whenever Brooke would say something to indicate her feelings for her, Kara felt like crap all over again. When Brooke moved from Virginia to Maryland and invited Kara up to visit, Kara had thought she was just trying to get her to consider working for Royal Environmental. She’d had no idea that Brooke was also trying to get her further into her life. Way into her life.

A few months earlier, Brooke had gotten drunk and told Kara that she'd intended to profess her love for Kara on that weekend visit eight years ago. That was her plan, until Joanie swooped in and swept Kara right out from under Brooke. The party Brooke had thrown to entice Kara into staying in Maryland and hooking up with her had backfired. Joanie was there, saying all the right things, looking at Kara in all the right ways, and before the end of the night, Kara knew she was a goner.

And now she knew that, with or without Joanie in the picture, she just didn't feel that way about Brooke. Even though she knew Brooke would be good to her and for her, she didn't love her romantically.

Thoughts of Brooke made her feel warm and fuzzy, but not hot and bothered.

Not like when she closed her eyes and thought of Andie.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Kara thanked the Universe that the driving range was open early. The bucket of balls called to her, and she needed to whack Andie out of her system before meeting her at the lab to go into the field.

Sometime during the night, Kara had awoken and fantasies about making love to Andie had weaseled their way into her thoughts. Something had to give. How could she possibly be professional if every time she looked at Andie her heart threatened to explode?

She swung her 1-wood and watched the ball fly. Yes, she could hold her own with the Royal Environmental executives, both in the office and on the golf course. And she didn't care how badly it hurt the ego of the Chief Financial Officer or the Vice President of Quality Control when she kicked their asses. She was thankful that the CEO, George Royal, played a wicked game. It kept her from having to decide whether or not to let him win.

She swung again and winced when it sliced far to the right. "Shit," she said. Joanie had introduced her to golf. Kara had fallen in love with the game immediately, but Joanie's interest waned soon after she insisted Kara buy her all the best, most-expensive equipment. Kara had to admit that, over time, she'd grown weary of Joanie's temper tantrums out on the course. Not to mention the embarrassment of the last time they played together. Joanie had gotten mad at Kara for some perceived slight and took off on the golf cart. She left Kara standing midway between the tee and the green on the sixth hole with a 9-iron and a shocked expression. Joanie would never actually say she was sorry. Instead, she'd be kind and loving, *ad nauseum*, for days after episodes like that.

After golf, Joanie moved on to the next all-consuming activity, tennis. After that, it was kayaking, but Kara stuck with the golf. Maybe if she hadn't spent so much time on the golf course on weekends? At the time she was doing so, she thought Joanie

couldn't care less about their time spent apart. Had Kara misjudged the situation? It wouldn't have been the first time. She frowned. She didn't want to think about her mistakes with Joanie. Or their consequences.

She smacked the ball as hard as she could.

"Jesus, woman," a hoarse voice said from behind her.

She jumped and turned to face the speaker.

"Not only did you beat me out here this morning, but I think you've hit that thing farther than I have in 60 years." The old man shielded his eyes from the low, early sun as he looked in the direction of her ball.

He picked up his bucket of balls and went on his way. Good, she thought. She wasn't in the mood for small talk with a stranger.

* * *

Andie snuck a glance at Kara, beside her in the cab of the F-150. Kara's hair was pulled through the back of a ball cap embroidered with the Royal Environmental logo. Kara wore no makeup and smelled of sunscreen. She imagined Kara looking casual like this in the car with her and Xena, on their way to vacation somewhere together. She fought the urge to take Kara's hand in hers.

Andie distracted herself by looking at the speedometer. She was behaving, and it made her feel like they were crawling down the highway. "I stopped for gas and ice on my way into the lab. I hope I wasn't supposed to wait for you to be with me to do that, too."

"No, that's fine." Kara picked at a piece of short, white hair woven into the truck's upholstery.

Andie was sure Kara would know it was dog hair. She wondered if it was actually in writing somewhere that she couldn't have her dog in the company truck. It's not like she took Xena out on social calls. When Andie sampled the creeks way out in the woods of Lincolnton, she liked to have Xena with her, not only for protection, but for the companionship, too.

As Andie drove up to the security gate, the guard walked to the window of the little shack. She flashed a peace sign, and Andie returned the gesture. Nadine was a sweet woman Andie had served many times at the bar. Every time Nadine and her old man had a fight, she'd end up perched in front of Andie for hours until she couldn't stay awake and her husband was called to fetch her.

Andie drove up to within feet of the sampling site. It saved having to lug the equipment a long way. She pulled on her latex gloves, lifted the manhole cover, and slid it halfway off. She got a compositor from the truck and placed it beside the opening.

“What would you do if you dropped your sunglasses into the manhole?” Kara asked.

“I’d get another pair at the dollar store.”

“How about if you dropped—let’s say—your necklace? The one Marla gave you.”

“Royal Environmental personnel are not trained in confined space entry, therefore, we are not permitted to enter manholes or any other area defined as a confined space.” Andie recited the words like rehearsed lines in an elementary school play.

“You’re kidding me. Did you memorize that for my benefit?” Kara asked.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I have no aspirations of becoming teacher’s pet.” She bit back a smart-ass comment about wanting to pet the teacher instead.

Andie felt Kara studying her as she set up the compositor.

“How do you choose the length of hose to use?” Kara nodded at the hose in Andie’s hand.

“I have pre-measured, dedicated hoses for each of my regular sites.”

Kara continued to quiz Andie on every aspect of her sampling procedure. Coming from any other auditor, Andie would have simply found it irritating. Coming from Kara, it was irritating, annoying, and infuriating.

Fifteen minutes into the barrage of questions, Andie clenched her jaw and vowed not to let a word of her frustration pass her lips. It was insulting. Degrading.

But it thrilled her, too. She was out in the field alone with Kara. No one was watching. There was no reason to be so damned careful about how they looked at each other. *Ha! Like Kara’s bothered to look at me much while we’ve been out here.*

They went to three more sampling sites, and Kara asked more and more questions at each one of them. As best Andie could tell, the more silent irritation she showed, the more aggravating Kara became. She made Andie want to dive headfirst into the manhole to escape her incessant peppering of questions. Or, better yet, maybe she should toss Kara in.

Kara looked at her. Andie hadn’t verbalized the sentiment. She could only pray Kara hadn’t read her mind. She gave Kara a sweet

smile before uncoiling the hose and going about the business of setting up for the next sample.

* * *

Back at the lab, Kara went directly to Rob's office and told him to order pizza for everyone and put it on the corporate account. "And be sure at least half is vegetarian."

Kara lingered in the hallway and watched Tammy jog up to Andie with a rack of drinking water samples.

"Andrea," Tammy said, "Linda had to leave early, and these came by courier. Could you set them up? I wouldn't ask, but some of them are running close to hold time."

Andie took the rack from her. "Sure."

Kara followed Andie into the testing room and watched her set up drinking water samples for total coliforms. She was fascinated by the contrast between the confident technician in the field and the meticulous, not quite comfortable, one in the microbiology lab. And she found the look of concentration on Andie's face utterly adorable.

Andie opened the top drawer and grabbed a five-milliliter pipette. Kara saw her shift slightly and assumed she'd caught sight of her in her peripheral vision. Andie fumbled with, and dropped, the pipette. When she leaned down to pick it up, Kara knew what would happen seconds before it did. As Andie straightened up, she whacked her head on the bottom of the drawer.

Andie winced and Kara reached out to touch her but stopped mid-movement. The look on Andie's face told Kara it wasn't only Andie's head that was hurting at that moment.

Kara walked away. She couldn't bear seeing Andie in pain—not from hitting her head and not from how things had turned out between them.

She stopped when Nanette's voice boomed from the inorganics room. "Where's the one-liter graduated cylinder?"

"How would I know?" Ted asked, equally as loud. "What makes you think I'm the last one to have it?"

Kara leaned against the wall of the corridor and listened.

"Since you're the only pig leaving stuff scattered all over instead of putting it where it belongs, of course I think you had it last."

"Ted, just tell Nanette where it is," Sidney said.

"It's under the fume hood," Ted said. "Would it kill you to look for it?"

"Would it kill you to put things where they belong?" Nanette shot back.

Kara resumed her course toward the front of the lab.

When the food arrived, Andie was the last one into the conference room. Kara looked around at the employees as they scrambled for slices of pizza. She felt like she was getting a good read on them. Tammy and her nervous ways. Calvin's laid-back nature that bordered on laziness. Then there were Ted and Nanette and Sidney and Mike. A lab within the lab, the Inorganics Department was their own little world. Sidney and Mike were like the parents, with Ted and Nanette playing the parts of the siblings who couldn't get along. As Kara had just heard, it was Ted the slob versus Nanette the clean-freak. And Rob. The round man in the tight lab coat reminded her of a tick about to burst. She kind of felt sorry for him. He tried hard to be one of the gang, but the bottom line was that he was still management. At least for the time being.

Then there was Andie. Kara watched her pick at her slice of veggie deluxe. She got the feeling Andie was making a point to avoid eye contact with her.

Andie was... Correction: Andrea Waters was a by-the-book field sampler who didn't take shortcuts or liberties. Clients liked her. Coworkers respected her. Andrea worked efficiently and with a quiet calm.

But the person Kara considered the real Andie was not about efficiency or calm (except with Xena). She was about passion, about reaching into your heart and grabbing hold of it. Kara felt a wave of heat wash over her as she thought about Andie making love to her. But it wasn't only that. It was also the way Andie had laughed with her friends at the bar that first night when Kara had made that ill-fated decision to go to The Cave. It was the way she adored Xena, hell, even the way she blended a smoothie made Kara's heart race.

Kara watched as Andie wrapped most of the slice of pizza she'd been picking at in a napkin. When Andie got up and threw her lunch in the trash on her way out of the conference room, Kara wanted to go after her. Instead, she turned her attention back to the others.

At her house, Andie sat on the floor with her back against the sofa. She stretched her legs in front of her and watched as Xena, several feet away, opened one eye to look at her.

She'd give anything to stay home with her old hound instead of going to work at The Cave. Being around people was more than she could face. Andie wasn't antisocial, but between the lab and the bar, she worked a lot of hours and preferred to stay home when she could. In truth, she preferred the company of her dog to that of most people.

At least Marla understood her need for space sometimes. She was the same way. They were there for one another when needed, but they didn't always have to be in each other's business. Andie was aware that appreciation for distance had allowed them to remain close over the years.

Xena inchwormed her way closer. Andie opted to let the old hound believe she was being subtle, being slick.

Andie had been criticized before for projecting human thoughts and emotions onto animals. Everyone from her brother to Marla to ex-girlfriends had, at one time or another, teased Andie about that. But she didn't care what those people said. As far as Andie was concerned, animals like Xena felt the same range of emotions she did: love, sadness, hurt feelings, empathy, and even embarrassment. Xena could read her like a book—she could read her better than any person Andie could think of.

Xena's toenail dug into the side of Andie's thigh as she sneaked closer, but Andie didn't react. When Xena was close enough to rest her head on her thigh, Andie stroked the side of Xena's soft face and the dog groaned.

"I know, baby girl. I love you, too."

Xena lifted her head, and Andie craned her neck to kiss her between the eyes.

"Thank God I have you," she cooed. Of course, Xena wouldn't be around forever. But for that matter, most women didn't stick around long, either. Of all the couplings she'd witnessed in life, her own included, only two had lasted any real time. Cindy and Barb were going on twelve years together. Her friends Dana and Gayle, the Guardian Angels of Hounds as she called them, had been together at least that long. They had a farmhouse on a few acres outside of town where they offered refuge to abandoned dogs. Most of their residents were old hunting dogs that had been kicked to the curb when they'd outlived their usefulness. Andie assumed that was most likely the case with Xena.

Word had gotten out about the Guardian Angels of Hounds, as it usually did when folks found out there were people amongst them with huge hearts. Animals, mostly dogs and cats, but an occasional fox or raccoon, would show up injured at the bottom of their driveway. People knew they would take them in. At least they didn't just dump them at the local landfill. She knew some did, but Andie couldn't think about that. Not if she didn't want to go into work with red eyes and a blotchy face from crying.

Besides, she'd been feeling morose enough as it was, thinking about Kara and how she wouldn't get to know her better in a personal context. Get over it, she told herself. It was a weekend fling. Move on already.

"She even had you fooled," she said to Xena. "Maybe she's not all bad, since you liked her."

In her gut she knew she had to give Kara the benefit of the doubt. Didn't she?

Andie ran her hand along Xena's neck. "Maybe we'll go out to see the Guardian Angels of Hounds this weekend. Would you like that?" Xena's tongue caught Andie under her chin. "Does that mean yes?"

The doorbell brought them both off the floor. Xena stumbled slightly as she was getting up, and Andie reached out to steady her.

"It's me," Marla called from the other side of the door. That got a semi-howl and major tail wag from Xena.

Andie opened the door and stepped to the side to let Marla in. "Hey, what are you doing in my neighborhood?"

"Since when do I need an excuse?" She scratched Xena behind the ears. "You busy?"

"No. Relaxing before heading to The Cave. What's up?"

"Just making sure you aren't sitting around, pining over your corporate chick."

Andie sat on one end of the sofa, Marla on the other.

"I'm not pining over anyone," Andie said. "Don't make me regret telling you the details of the fiasco."

"It wouldn't matter if you told me or not. This is Bensonville, and I am the Queen, so I would have eventually found out anyway."

Andie rolled her eyes. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, I'm heading to The Cave from here." Marla pulled her legs up under her on the sofa. "I still can't believe how things turned out. And you're sure Kara didn't know who you were?"

"Positive."

"It feels kind of hokey."

"Leave it alone, Marla."

"And you didn't connect the name Kara to some hotshot corporate babe?"

"Why would I have? I don't pay attention to anyone up there. The only name that meant anything to me from Baltimore—until now—was George Royal. And that was only because he signs my paycheck." She looked at her watch. "I need to jump in the shower."

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yep," she said, hoping she could pull off the little lie.

* * *

Kara leaned against the bar and checked her watch. Maybe she'd stay around for the beginning of Andie's shift, or maybe not, now that things were so strained between them.

On the stool next to hers, Marla downed a shot of tequila. "Royal Environmental. I should get a commission," Marla said.

"Oh?" Kara played along.

"Yeah, if it wasn't for my ingenuity, your precious Royal Environmental wouldn't have the Cameron Chemicals account."

Kara gave her a questioning look. "Okay," she said. "I'll bite. How so?"

"I used my considerable charm to procure that work for Andie."

"This ought to be good."

"Oh, it was. On so many levels," Marla said. "You people got that account because one of the executives had to stop at the bar for directions. And he fell madly in love with me."

"I see."

"I talked him into using Andie's company. And, fortunately for you, Andie had time to make a good impression on the entire Cameron clan before I dumped the guy." Marla turned serious. "Andie is a wonderful woman."

"I know that," Kara said.

"She's my family, you know. And I hate to see her upset." Marla took another shot of tequila and slammed the empty shot glass on the bar.

Kara jumped. The sudden shift in Marla's demeanor was disconcerting.

"If you would have told us what you were in town to do. But no, instead you had to be all secret and shit. All cryptic." She fiddled with her empty shot glass. "It makes me wonder."

“Wonder what?” Kara asked.

“If maybe you knew exactly what you were doing by cozying up to Andie here at the bar.”

“That’s ridiculous. If I had known who Andie was, I never would have gotten involved.” Kara hated the defensiveness that crept up. “I never would have—”

“Never would have what?”

Kara didn’t answer.

“Can’t even say it, huh?” Marla asked.

Kara stood. “I’m done here.”

Marla glared at her. “Yes, you are.”

Before she made it to the door, Kara saw Joel pull a stool up closer to Marla. She could only imagine what they’d be saying about her. So what, she thought. Screw them. Screw every damn one of them.

Kara sat at a red light and contemplated why, when Southerners gave directions, they always said “red light” instead of “stoplight.” She’d always wanted to ask if she was still supposed to turn right at the third red light if it was green.

She glanced to her left and remembered Andie taking a back road from the lab to one of the testing sites. If Kara could reverse the directions, she’d get to the downtown area of Bensonville in half the time.

She turned left, pleased with her cleverness. So what if her stay was short? Just like every other town she’d visited, she’d mastered her way around Bensonville.

Kara saw a deer crossing sign. It made her think of the moose crossing signs she’d encountered while auditing the lab in Maine. She’d even taken a picture of it with her phone camera to send to Brooke, who’d never been north of Maryland.

She rounded a bend and was startled by the blinding strobe of red and white lights. She saw an ambulance beyond two police cars. A cop with a reflective vest and light stick was signaling for her to turn right. She stopped and lowered her window. “How do I get to downtown from—”

“Go to the highway,” he said. He pointed his stick with a grunt. “That’ll get you downtown.”

Before she could ask any other questions, he turned away from her.

“How hard could it be?” she asked herself as she went the way he’d directed. She flicked on her high beams and kept her eyes open

for the highway. All she saw were more deer crossing signs and a few mobile homes a distance from the road.

Taillights in front of her prompted her to turn off her high beams. She presumed the car had also been detoured away from the accident scene. Several minutes later, they came to a four-way stop. Was this the highway? And which way did she go if it was? When the other car turned left, she followed.

A few hundred feet later, the car turned down a dirt driveway. Kara was alone. Should she turn around and go back the way she'd come? Or was she only a mile or so away from knowing where she was?

Several miles later, she sat at another four-way stop. Maybe this was the highway. Hadn't she read somewhere that, statistically, right turns ended up being the correct choice more often?

Kara turned right. The road was narrower than the one she'd turned off, so she decided it was indeed not the highway.

She grew furious at the cop. If she'd known anything about a damned highway, she wouldn't have asked about getting downtown from there. Did he get off on getting out-of-towners lost?

She considered calling Andie and asking her how to get downtown, but she didn't want to ask for help. "Pathetic," she said.

Kara slammed her hand on the steering wheel. She wouldn't be lost if Royal Environmental hadn't been too freaking cheap to pay for the GPS she'd asked for. Sure, she could have bought it for herself, but she had her principles to uphold.

It was time to swallow her pride. She wondered if Andie carried her RE cell phone with her at the bar. She couldn't remember whether or not she'd seen it that first night. Not that she would have paid attention. No, all Kara saw then was that brilliant smile. The sensual, brown eyes. The slightly muscled arms. The...

Stop it!

She flipped open her phone and started to dial, but there was no signal. Perfect. She looked up from the lighted screen just in time to see a large tan animal bound in front of her. She slammed on the brakes and pulled the wheel sharply to the left, away from the direction the deer was moving.

Weren't moments like this supposed to happen in slow motion? It hadn't, much to her dismay. The spinning motion not only terrified her, but made her nauseous. She came to a dead stop in the middle of the road. Good thing I didn't have anything to drink at the bar earlier. I'd have been sick for sure.

Kara glanced around. No deer carcass was in evidence. She didn't think she'd hit it, but she didn't totally trust her recollection, either.

"Okay, definitely time to backtrack." And she'd try to resist the urge to run over the insensitive cop who'd given her the shitty directions. Only problem was that she'd spun around and couldn't figure out which way she had been traveling.

"Crap!" She slammed her hand on the steering wheel. "Ouch."

The image of Joanie doing the same thing popped into her mind. They'd been lost on I-695, trying to find the exit for a wine festival Joanie had wanted to attend. She'd refused to stop to let Kara ask for directions, and when Kara snapped at Joanie about being worse than a damned man about admitting she was lost, Joanie reacted in the worst possible way. She'd driven aggressively, weaving in and out of traffic on the Interstate. Despite Kara's pleading, Joanie wouldn't pull off to let Kara out. Joanie drove like a lunatic for forty-five minutes before she exited the Interstate and let Kara off at a gas station. She laid a track of tire rubber as she peeled out, and it was the following day before she returned home.

That was Joanie at her worst. That experience convinced Kara that Joanie wasn't just a bitch sometimes. She was sick. Even though Joanie was never officially diagnosed, Kara was certain Joanie had a real mental illness—maybe even something as serious as bipolar disorder.

No more time to reflect on that, though. Kara straightened her car on the road and decided to drive in the direction it was pointing. Eventually, she'd come to a gas station, wouldn't she? She swiped at tears rolling down her cheeks and felt her anger swell. Oh, if the techs at the labs she'd bulldozed through in the past could see her now.

She saw a porch light through a group of skinny pines and considered going up to the door. She cringed as she recalled some movie she'd seen or a book she'd read where, way out in the country, a family of sausage makers waited for an unsuspecting wayfarer to wander up. Maybe the cop who set her off on this stupid chase is related to them and helps in his own way to keep the family fed. He'd point some hapless traveler in their direction so they could kidnap her, force-feed her into a grinder filled with fatty sausage ingredients, and...

Taillights showed up in the darkness ahead of her. She stayed a respectful distance behind the pickup truck until they came to a stop sign. "Real Men Love Jesus," the bumper sticker read. She

remembered seeing that sticker—or one just like it—on a truck at The Cave. She decided to follow the truck, whether it led to familiar territory or the sausage makers.

Twenty minutes later, the pickup turned into the graveled lot of The Cave and parked beside Andie's Prius. She kept going. She stopped at every red light and didn't complain about a single one of them.

Chapter 8

The next morning, Andie backed the truck up to the loading dock and turned off the engine. She unlocked the back door to the lab and went inside to grab an extra box of latex gloves. When she returned to the truck, she found Kara waiting in the passenger seat. Andie tossed the box of gloves behind the seat, shoved the key into the ignition, and cranked it. Melissa Ferrick's voice burst out of the speakers in full volume. Andie reached over and switched it off.

"That was kind of nice. Maybe a little less volume, though." Kara reached toward the CD player, but Andie stopped her.

No way was Andie sharing her music-angst moment with Kara. No way. She lowered the volume and ejected the CD, replacing it with another.

"Who's that singing?" Kara asked.

"Brandi Carlile." She turned it up slightly.

"That voice. She's terrific." Kara listened for a few moments with her eyes closed before she glanced behind the seat. "Have you seen my ball cap?" she asked.

"The very professional Royal Environmental cap you were wearing yesterday?"

"Yes, that would be the one."

Andie could have said that it was under the box of gloves she'd thrown behind the seat, but she didn't. And she didn't know why. "No, sorry."

Andie pulled away from the lab and let Brandi Carlile's passionate voice caress her mind and soul.

At their first stop, Andie set up the compositor and measured the pH and chlorine. She was a little self-conscious that Kara watched her, but she appreciated not being bombarded with questions about procedures.

Andie closed the last of her meters and turned to face Kara. "Marla told me you were at the bar before my shift last night." She

noticed the color rise across Kara's cheeks. "Looking for anyone in particular?"

"Tell me about your client's pH requirements."

So, that was how it was going to be, huh? "Less than ten-point-five. If it exceeds, the client is to be informed immediately."

"What was it today?"

Andie held out her clipboard with the chain of custody on it. Kara didn't take it. Andie said, "Ten-point-one."

They left the site and headed for the next one on Andie's list. A few miles down Old Powell Highway, Andie saw Kara turn to get a better look at the cemetery to the right. Even without the vultures, Kara would probably recognize it from the photo on Andie's wall. She looked away when Kara turned to her. Andie didn't want to think of anything that would reconnect them to what they were before the nightmare at the lab started.

One of Cameron Chemical's three plants required that sampling be done monthly at the creek at points both before and after their discharge site. The sampling site above the plant was a wooded part of Foreman Creek, a place Andie always found peaceful. It was far enough from the road to mute highway sounds, but not so far that the isolation made Andie ill at ease.

Andie caught Kara staring at her. "What?"

"Why aren't you a photojournalist?" Kara asked.

"I figured out I didn't much like engaging the bigger world. Not as much as I liked photographing a dog or a flower or a dilapidated textile mill." Andie knew what she said next would sound like a weak justification. "Then there was the pesky issue of money. As my bank account shrank, I needed to work more than part-time. Before I knew it, I was at Royal Environmental and taking fewer courses in college, and then none at all."

"Have you ever thought about going back to school?"

"Is there something about the future of my job you aren't telling me?"

"No. Nothing at all. I'm just curious."

"I know it isn't a power career, and I don't make the big bucks, but I like my job. I like being outdoors. And I like the independence of working without supervision. Let me rephrase that—the usual lack of supervision when I'm not being audited."

"*Touché*," Kara said.

Andie looked around and spread her arms. "I like it here in my own little world."

“So, you don’t think you engage the world in your job at the bar?”

“Yeah, somewhat, but I know that’s temporary. Just until I pay off some debt.” She looked at Kara more closely. She debated mentioning that the best weekend of her life had recently been a fringe benefit of working at the bar. Or would that be more like collateral damage?

She studied Kara. “Do you have someone back in Baltimore?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What kind of question is that? Why don’t you have someone?”

“Because I spend all my time hanging out around sewers and straight bars.” She grinned. “What’s your excuse?” she asked.

“I spend all my time on the road.”

“Corporate doesn’t know you’re a lesbian, do they?”

“No, and I have no intention of enlightening them.” She gave Andie a stern look.

“Hey, don’t look at me that way. If you’re nice and comfy in that closet, you’re more than welcome to stay there.”

“I’m not a total closet case, you know. Hell, I even go to gay bars when I’m home. I have gay friends.”

“I have gay friends,” Andie shot back, more defensively than she’d planned.

Kara raised her hands in mock surrender. “Hey, I’m not the one who was judging.”

“I wasn’t judging, I was observing. You can’t blame me for wondering what corporate would say about their golden girl picking up their sewer rat in a bar.”

“Don’t go there,” Kara said.

“Don’t worry, I’d never tattle,” Andie said. “I’ve kept your secrets so far, haven’t I?”

Kara’s face turned bright red.

Andie’s reaction to Kara’s blush was visceral. Her heart pounded. God, she missed being with her. She stepped up to Kara and kissed her. Kara tried to pull away, but Andie held on to the back of her head.

“Stop it,” Kara whispered against Andie’s mouth. “Please.”

If she didn’t win Kara back soon, she never would. Even if it was only a temporary thing, it was better than nothing. She ran her lips along Kara’s jawline.

Kara tried again to pull away.

"I've missed you so much." Andie held Kara's head in one hand and ran the other down her side.

"Get off me," Kara yelled, shoving Andie away. "Jesus Christ, what are you doing?"

Embarrassment and anger flooded through Andie. Her voice got lost somewhere in her throat. Finally, she managed to get out words, but with less confidence than she'd hoped for. "Admit that you want this, too."

"I told you to stop."

Andie crossed her arms over her chest.

Kara trembled. "I said no. What part of that don't you understand? Can't you be professional?"

Andie forced herself to take a breath.

"Do you think I like things being this way between us? Good Lord, Andie, what were you thinking?"

She couldn't answer. She could barely breathe. She grabbed her pH meter and marched to the truck. She sat there for several minutes, forcing herself to inhale and exhale as she waited for Kara to do something. Anything.

Kara climbed into the passenger's side. She slapped her clipboard on the dash while she pulled on her seatbelt.

Andie started the engine, shoved the truck into drive, and pulled away. Her legs were shaking so badly she could barely hold the gas pedal down.

She drove to their last stop in silence. Thank goodness she didn't have to deal with a security guard, because she was pretty sure she wouldn't have been able to utter a single word without her voice breaking.

Kara asked no questions as Andie set up the compositor, and Andie offered no comments. She didn't know whether Kara was taking notes, because she couldn't even glance at her.

The drive back to Royal Environmental was another installment of stone cold silence. Once there, Andie busied herself with straightening out the equipment and coolers in the back of the truck while Kara went inside.

Eventually, Andie made herself go into the lab. She went to the sampling room to replace her pH solutions. Then she leaned against the counter and tried to figure out how she could make it to the front, log in her samples, snatch more bottles, and sneak out to her truck without having to see Kara.

She sighed in resignation. She could only hide in the sampling room for so long. She might as well go up front, face Kara, and get it out of the way.

She closed her pH meter and brought it up front with her. No one was on the computer, and since it was day two of the two-day sampling cycle, she rushed through logging in her samples.

Tammy walked up. "Safe for another day," she exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"The Ice Princess has left for the day. I told you there was a God."

No, Andie thought, I don't believe so. She gathered her bottles and left.

* * *

"What is it with you two? Are you incapable of conversing without the other one on the extension?" Andie asked into the phone. She stretched out on the sofa and draped one arm over the side to stroke Xena's back.

"This will be Atlanta's biggest pride event ever. History will be made."

"You say that every year," Andie said.

"Don't be pissy," Barb said.

"Yeah," Cindy chimed in, laughing.

"I'm not being pissy. And I'm not an idiot. I do realize that the same people who tip me at the bar, or have lunch with me at the lab, or stand chatting with me in line at the grocery store, all go to the polls and either directly vote to deny me my rights, or do so indirectly by voting Republican." She sat up. "But I can't focus on that or it would drive me freaking batty. Am I settling by being content with being just tolerated? Maybe. But it keeps me sane."

"At least think about marching with us in Atlanta," Cindy said.

"Okay, I'll think about it. But I'm busy."

"So we hear. When were you going to tell us about your new girlfriend?"

"I don't have a new girlfriend."

"Bullshit. Lori told Sue who told Rae who told us. Who is this hot blonde?"

"She was a one-night stand. Okay, two nights, but it's over. And I really don't want to talk about her."

"Huh," Barb grunted.

"Don't 'huh' me," Andie said. "If there was anything to tell, believe me I would. Then I wouldn't have to put up with you trying to set me up all the time."

"We want to see you happy."

"I know," Andie conceded. "And I adore you both for it. But I don't need fixing up."

"Okay. We missed *The L-Word* the other night, and it's about to come on again so we have to go."

Andie chuckled as she hung up and sighed when the phone rang again. "What now?" she asked, expecting it to be Barb and Cindy again.

Instead, it was Chuck, asking her to come by the bar.

"What's up?"

"Please come by?" he repeated.

Andie agreed, figuring he and Marla were having problems and Mr. Sensitive needed to talk to someone. She'd do anything to help the burgeoning relationship.

The first thing Andie saw when she walked into the bar was Tony pouring a shot of tequila for Kara. By her posture, Andie guessed it wasn't her first... or second... shot. She wondered how bad things would get.

"Sorry about dragging you out here," Chuck said. "I thought you'd want to drive her home. She's had a lot to drink."

"Thanks." Andie made her way to the bar where Kara was and sat on the stool beside her. "Hey," she said.

Kara ignored her.

"Out partying, huh?"

Again, no response.

"I was thinking maybe you'd like some coffee."

"Tony, 'nother shot, please." Kara's words were slurred.

"How much have you had to drink?" Andie asked.

Kara pulled some bills from her front pocket. "Here you go," she said to Tony as he reluctantly placed her shot on the bar. "You're the best bartender ever."

"Okay, then. Will you at least give someone your car keys?" Andie gestured to the key ring lying on the bar to Kara's left.

Kara turned to her. "Fuck off."

Andie reached in front of Kara for her keys. Kara jumped off her stool, knocking it over.

"Kara, listen—"

"No, you listen. You've been moping around the lab like you're the only one this affects. You think I get off on all this? I

didn't plan this. And I haven't done anything to deserve how you've treated me."

"You haven't. I know. And I'm sorry." She reached out to touch Kara's arm but Kara jerked away.

"Get the fuck off me," Kara yelled.

"Kara, please—"

"Please what?" She glared at Andie.

Andie didn't answer. She didn't know how to tell Kara how truly sorry she was. Or how much she cared for her. Hell, how much she loved her. Oh, God, did she really just admit that to herself?

"Here, you want these?" Kara held up her car keys. "Take them." She tossed them onto the bar. "Tony, a shot for the road. And call me a cab, please."

Chapter 9

Kara massaged her temples as she shifted in the seat in front of her laptop at the conference room table. She had spent the entire morning and half the afternoon studying the printouts that Wanda had e-mailed from corporate.

All Kara had to do was wade through the data until she figured out who was where and doing what at which terminal when the walk-in files were deleted from the system to hide the skimming.

How much easier that would be if she could put her headache, queasy stomach, and guilt at ease.

She wondered if she should thank Andie for getting her car back to the hotel parking lot and her keys to the desk. Kara couldn't believe she'd gone to The Cave and caused a scene. Tequila shots, for crying out loud. Everything about the night before was so out of character for her. All she wanted was to forget it had happened.

She studied the data and compared dates and times to their corresponding employee time sheets. She confirmed that most of the deletions took place while both samplers were in the field. She told herself she was checking on Calvin, not Andie.

Kara struggled to refocus her eyes. She put down the printout and left the conference room to go to the restroom. At the far end of the corridor, she noticed the sampling room light was on. Just as she wondered if it was Andie or Calvin back there, she heard Andie's voice drift down the hall. That meant she was back from her day in the field, but Kara had no way of knowing if she'd logged in her samples yet.

Kara hurried in and out of the bathroom, not bothering to look in the mirror. She didn't realize she'd been clenching her teeth until she was safely behind the closed door to the conference room. She tried to massage the tension from her jaws.

She shouldn't be afraid to face Andie, but she was so embarrassed for causing a drunken scene in front of Andie's coworkers and friends. Worse, what if Andie figured out Kara's

anger was based less on Andie's actions out in the field than on the way her body had betrayed her in its response to Andie's kiss?

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Andie couldn't know how her heart pounded when Andie's lips touched hers. Or how her stomach flip-flopped, or her knees grew weak, or how wet she got when Andie's fingers entwined in her hair.

She jumped when Andie's voice rang out over the intercom. "Tammy, Jim Reed is on line one."

Kara rested her head in her hands and stared at the work in front of her until all the words melted together.

"Get out of my head, Andie," she whispered. "Get out."

Maybe I should go to Atlanta for the weekend, Kara thought. Or Augusta, even. Anywhere so she wouldn't be tempted to go to Andie's bar. If she couldn't face Andie at the lab, she was sure she wouldn't be able to face her at The Cave, either, especially after her performance there last night. The more she thought about it, staying in the hotel room all weekend sounded like a much better plan.

She gathered the printouts and shoved them into her briefcase. She would finish looking at them in the serenity of her hotel room. She'd made it to the door and placed her hand on the knob when she heard Andie's voice. She must have been sitting at Tammy's terminal, logging in her samples. Why couldn't she still be in the sampling room? Kara looked around as if an alternate exit might somehow materialize.

She should be a grown-up and walk out of the conference room, say hello as she passed Andie, and leave through the front door like a normal person. Or she could hide in the conference room like a coward.

Kara sank into the chair, still warm from her hours spent in front of the laptop. "Coward," she scolded herself.

* * *

Andie snatched a glass off the slick, red bar, shoved a dishrag into it, and gave a hostile twist. She couldn't believe Kara stayed behind closed doors the entire day. What had she been doing in the conference room? Was she deciding who to fire? Was she plotting the best way to get rid of Andie?

"Andie, baby," Joel growled from the other side of the spotless bar that Andie had angrily scrubbed to a wicked shine when she first got to work. "A Bud for your favorite man-toy."

She slid the beer across the bar. "What?" Joel asked. "No 'go to hell, Joel'? No 'in your dreams, Joel'?"

Andie forced a smile. "Screw you, Joel." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Is that better?"

"Oh, yeah." He raised his beer in a toast and spun around to check out who was in the bar. "Julia looks hot tonight," he said.

Andie looked over to the jukebox where Julia leaned with a pool stick resting in front of her. Julia winked.

"I'm gonna pretend that was for me," Joel said. "I wouldn't mind losing chicks to you if you'd at least let me watch."

Andie ignored the comment and went back to the sink. Tony had left quite a few unwashed glasses at the end of his shift. She stuck the rag into another glass and jumped when it shattered around her hand. "Shit, shit, shit."

She stuck her bleeding knuckle under the faucet and winced as blood ran pink and thin down the drain.

"Let me see that," Julia purred from beside her.

Andie wasn't sure what surprised her more—the speed with which Julia had gotten to her, or the pleasure she felt over being fussed over. "It's okay," Andie said.

"No, let me see it. I'm very good at fixing boo-boos." Julia had Andie's hand in her own, and Andie thought for sure she was bringing it toward her mouth when Chuck walked up to them and Julia froze.

"First aid?" he asked.

Julia took the gauze and tape from him. "Thanks. Now go on and let me take care of Andie."

Chuck headed back to the kitchen. Andie had sort of forgiven him for not telling her what was going on with her brother when Chuck congratulated Jack, but she was going to give him some major crap for not rescuing her from Nurse Julia.

Andie tried to remove her hand from Julia's after she'd neatly bandaged it. Julia held on.

"Why don't you let me take a closer look at that in the back room? Just to be sure it'll be okay," Julia said.

"It'll be fine," Andie said, trying to sound more dispassionate than she felt.

"Come on," Julia said into Andie's ear. "What have you got to lose?"

My sanity, Andie thought. My dignity. Her attention shifted to the front door, and she watched Kara enter and approach the bar. And Kara. I could lose Kara.

Andie ushered Julia out from behind the bar as politely, yet firmly, as she could. "Thanks for the help with my hand."

"It was my pleasure. And the offer still stands." She lifted Andie's bandaged hand to her lips, gave it a gentle kiss, and strolled back to the pool table.

Kara met Andie with a smirk.

"Dishwashing accident," Andie said. "Hi. How are you?"

She gave Andie a weak smile. "Better," she said shyly.

"Cape Cod?" Andie asked.

"Ginger ale." She pointed at her head. "Still not right up here after all the..." She let her words drift off as she plopped onto a bar stool. She picked up the soda Andie set in front of her and quaffed it.

Andie stared at Kara's throat, at the way it moved when she swallowed.

"Busy night?" Kara asked, steering clear of eye contact.

"Not really. Not yet." She wiped at the sparkling red counter in front of Kara. "But it's still early."

"I... uh... I wanted to say I'm sorry," Kara said.

Andie studied the counter. "Me, too."

"We're okay, then?" Kara asked.

"Yeah, we're fine."

Kara scanned the bar. When she turned back to Andie, she gave her a quizzical look.

"What?" Andie asked.

"Okay, so Chuck knows you're a lesbian. How about your customers? Do they ever give you a hard time?"

"No, not really. I've known a lot of these folks my entire life. And they know if they don't behave they'll have to answer to Chuck. Or worse, Marla."

"So, you're from here?" Kara asked.

"Yeah. Born and raised in Bensonville."

"Your family's here?"

"Nope. My parents followed my brother to Alabama when he and his wife moved there."

Kara studied her.

"I ruined their reputations here," Andie said. "Having a dyke daughter was too much for them. Now they are all one big, happy family elsewhere." Her father's voice slammed into her memory. *Sinner. Abomination.* He'd been worse than her brother, but none of the words were as bad as her mom's silence.

"How do you deal with that?" Kara asked.

Her mind flipped back to the latest assault from her brother—Jack coming into The Cave and ignoring her, even after she spoke to him. She refused to let him win by letting it fester. “Deal with it?” she asked. “It’s funny, but I feel more accepted by these people in here,” she said and gestured around the bar, “than I ever did my own blood.”

“That’s sad.”

“Not really.” She didn’t see it as sad, just really messed up. “What about you? How do your parents handle it? Or are you not out to them, either?”

“I’m out to my family. To the people in my life who count. Royal Environmental isn’t so important to me that I feel I have to tell them everything.”

But they’re important enough to keep us apart, Andie mused silently.

Andie stared at the counter as she wiped it. The high gloss reminded her of a friend’s Firebird in high school. She continued wiping, in a circular motion, as if it were Raymond’s Firebird and she was helping him wax it in anticipation of showing it off to the jocks who’d otherwise not pay a bit of attention to the scrawny, effeminate boy.

Whatever happened to Raymond Haynes? Had he ever stopped pretending to be straight? Had he ever learned to love himself? Maybe she’d misread him all those years ago, and he was happily married to some woman, had the house with the white picket fence, two-point-five children, and the black Labrador retriever.

Andie stopped buffing the counter and looked at Kara. “So what do your parents say about you being a lesbian?”

“Mom ignores it unless forced to face it. Dad’s pretty cool about it. He just wants me to be happy.”

“Even if he preferred you to be a happy, straight lawyer.”

Kara chuckled.

“Do you ever bring women home to meet your parents?”

“Not in a very long time,” Kara said.

Andie waited a few moments then knew she wasn’t going to get any details. She reached over her head and grabbed a glass hanging by its stem. She filled it with water, squeezed a lemon wedge into it and took a drink. She hated that it mattered so much to her that Kara wouldn’t open up.

Kara twisted her bar stool back and looked around the bar, looking at Julia longer than what was comfortable for Andie. “You could have just about any woman in this bar,” Kara said.

“Except I don’t want just any woman in this bar. I want you.” Andie couldn’t believe she’d actually said that out loud. She bit her lower lip and walked away while pretending to be busy adjusting the bandage on her hand.

Chapter 10

Andie glanced in the rearview mirror. The closer they got to Dana and Gayle's, the more excited Xena became. The second they turned onto Route 1, Xena acted as though she knew their destination. Her tail thump-thump-thumping against the backseat reminded Andie of windshield wipers or a distant helicopter.

Andie's thoughts wandered to the first time she'd stumbled upon the haven of Dana and Gayle's farm. It was the day after she'd brought Xena home. She'd driven back out to the vicinity to look around. She half-expected to see posters about a missing dog tacked onto trees or telephone poles. As best she could tell, no one seemed to be looking for a lost female, tri-colored hound. Even if they were, considering Xena's condition when she found her, Andie didn't believe her owners deserved to get her back.

On that day seven years earlier, she'd parked her car near the bottom of a dirt drive on the shoulder of a two-lane road and walked toward the sound of barking dogs. She had no idea what she'd say once she got to the old farmhouse. Maybe she'd ask for directions to the gas station while she snuck a quick peek around.

A tall, wiry woman with deep lines on her face came from around the side of the house as Andie approached. She lugged a bucket of water in each hand.

"Uh, hi," Andie said.

The woman set down the buckets and straightened to her full height. Andie almost couldn't believe how tall she was.

"Uh, hi, yourself," the woman said. "How can I help you?"

Andie looked around and noticed a number of dogs. "Are you missing a dog?"

"Don't tell me," the woman said. "You've found an abandoned dog. One that looks abused or starved or neglected or all of the above."

"To tell the truth..." Andie started to say.

"Welcome to our world," a voice said to Andie's right.

“Oh.” Andie looked into the roundest, softest face she’d ever seen.

The second woman, shorter and heavier than the first, stuck out her hand. “I’m Dana.” She shook Andie’s hand in her pudgy one. “And that’s Gayle.”

Dana and Gayle showed Andie around the property, giving her a brief bio on the dogs as they went. “That one is Lena. She’d been shot in the shoulder when we found her. Surgery and PT have worked wonders for her. That’s William with her. He hasn’t learned to trust yet, but he will. He’s gaining a lot of confidence through Lena. You see there how his fur’s gone on that side? Someone poured hot tar on him.”

Andie cringed. Dana reprimanded Gayle, warning her not to overwhelm their guest.

“Just telling it like it is,” Gayle said.

“William and Lena—what kind of dogs are they?”

“Treeing Walker Hounds. Why? Do they look like the dog you found?”

“Almost exactly.”

Gayle explained that most of the dogs that ended up with them were old hunting dogs. They pointed out a couple of black-and-tan coonhounds. As they walked around the rest of the property, Andie lost count of the number of dogs, and Dana and Gayle laughed when she’d asked them how many they had.

Now, it was seven years later, Dana and Gayle were still rescuing dogs.

As Andie drew near the farm, she glanced again at Xena in the rearview mirror. She eased up on the gas.

The cacophony of barking soothed Andie’s mind. She was amazed by the fact that once a certain number of dogs were barking, the sound blended and harmonized until it was actually less jarring than only a few dogs barking.

She’d had similar experiences at concerts. If the person beside her sang along loudly to the Indigo Girls, whether in tune or not, she found it aggravating. But when The Indigo Girls stopped mid-verse and the whole audience kept singing without missing a single beat, that was auditory brilliance.

Andie took one more look at Xena. She’d have sworn the old girl was smiling.

“You ready to see the Guardian Angels of Hounds?”

Xena whined her response. Her tail increased its rhythm against the backseat.

“That’s what I thought.”

She pulled up beside an old Buick station wagon. The pitch of the barking shifted slightly as Gayle and Dana came out of the house. Andie and Xena got hugs from both of them.

“How about food first?” Gayle asked with a hopeful look on her face.

“Hungry?” Dana asked Andie.

Andie winked at Gayle. “Starving.”

“No fair, y’all are ganging up. As usual.” Dana nudged Gayle with her hip as she made her way toward the house. “Come get us some sweet tea, honey-bun.”

Gayle held the door for Dana, Andie, and Xena. A cat Andie didn’t recognize froze in front of them, its back arched, hair standing on end. Xena went down on her belly. The cat backed away across the kitchen and slid out the door into the dining room.

“Bob’s new here,” Dana said. “Xena, you’re a good girl.” Xena stood and was rewarded with an ear rub.

While they ate sandwiches and drank tea, Dana told Andie about a rescue organization that had contacted them with an offer to help them place some of their animals into good homes.

Andie smiled.

“Wipe that grin off your face,” Gayle said. “We’re not collectors. We’re very particular about who gets to adopt one of our babies.”

In the time Andie had known Dana and Gayle, they’d never rehomed an animal in their care.

After eating, the group of four—Andie, Xena, Dana, and Gayle—walked the periphery of the first of four fenced areas. The dogs were broken into four families to keep the size of each pack manageable and accommodate the inevitable truth that not all dogs get along. Xena briefly went into a play bow when Lena, William, and Henry ran up to the fence, but then she returned to her place beside Andie and leaned against her legs.

Dana linked arms with Andie as they started toward the two black-and-tans that shared a run with a chow-mix and a yellow lab.

“So, kiddo, what’s on your mind?” Dana asked.

“There’s nothing on my mind.”

“Xena is sticking to you like Velcro. She knows you’re upset about something. Why don’t you tell us about it so you don’t keep worrying that poor old girl?”

Andie plucked at the small bandage on her hand.

"Your demeanor reminds me of—well—remember when Buffy was sick?"

"Yes, of course," Andie said, knowing she'd never forget.

"And you thought you'd never get over it or get the bills paid off?"

"I still stress over the bills." She'd run up a \$9000 bill at the emergency vet. Every thousand or so dollars worth of charges, the receptionist had brought a new credit card slip into the room where Andie was trying to soothe her sick dog. The callousness of it had appalled her. At one point, Andie looked into Buffy's gaunt face and realized the dog she knew and loved was no longer with her. She wanted to let the weak, sick shell of the animal she'd loved go with some dignity. And the vet had given her major attitude about it. 'You've come this far with the treatment, why not go the distance for the dog?' he'd asked.

Andie shook the memory out of her head.

"What's going on?" Dana asked.

"I'm a little concerned about my job. And I'm not paying off my credit cards as fast as I thought I would."

"Oh?" Dana and Gayle asked in unison.

"This auditor from our corporate office is here, evaluating us. I guess I'm not sure whether she'll suggest closing us down, or letting me go, or what."

"You're a good person, Andie, and I'm willing to bet you're a hard worker. I can't imagine this auditor being able to justify letting you go. You're probably worrying for no good reason," Gayle said.

"There's a little more to it than that."

"Ah-ha. Spill it young lady," Gayle said.

Andie told them the highlights of her relationship with Kara. She skipped the more intimate details and tried to glaze over the depth of her feelings for her.

Despite fighting them, tears coursed down Andie's cheeks. Dana took her into her soft arms and surrounded her with nurturing cooing sounds. "Oh, kiddo, let it out."

"She sounds like a bitch to me," Gayle said.

Dana turned to Gayle. "Don't even go there."

"I'm just saying."

"Don't." Dana turned away from Gayle. "Andie, you don't think Kara means to hurt you, do you?"

"No." She sobbed. "But I keep doing things to hurt her, too. It's like the only way we can deal with our feelings is by striking

out at one another. And damn, I can't believe I forced a kiss on her like that."

"Oh, quit kicking yourself," Dana said. "What's done is done. Now you need to get on with your life. With her as a part of it, or not."

"Or not," Andie said. "I've really ruined it with her. It's weird. Before I knew she was from the corporate office, I..." She hesitated. "I entertained a fantasy of us continuing to see each other when she left town. You know, like a relationship of some sort. I know it's silly, after just a weekend together."

"Silly? No. Have I ever told you about when Gayle and I met?"

"Don't bore her, Dana," Gayle said.

But Andie knew by Gayle's improved posture that she wanted their story to be told. "Bore me, go ahead," Andie said. "I dare you."

Dana glowed as she told about meeting the love of her life at a tractor pull. "A redneck extravaganza of all things."

Gayle cleared her throat. "Are you forgetting that we *are* rednecks?"

Dana nudged Gayle with her elbow. "So, I'm there with my date—my male date—and Gayle's there with her husband, and we left without the guys and never looked back."

"How long ago was that?" Andie asked.

"Twenty years ago next month," Dana and Gayle answered together.

Andie's mouth fell open. "Damn."

"I see you doing the math in your head," Gayle said.

Dana chuckled. "We were in our forties when we met. Late-in-life lesbians I think we'd be labeled."

"So you were both straight when you met?"

"We were living straight lives," Dana said carefully.

"When did you know? Not necessarily about being gay, but about each other being the one?" Andie asked.

"For me," Gayle said, "I knew the second I looked into Dana's eyes that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her." She nodded for emphasis. "But for Dana, it didn't click until several hours later when I kissed her."

"Knocked my socks off," Dana added. "And the rest is history."

"Back then," Gayle said, "we didn't know what the hell we were doing. But we did it anyway. You younger people should have it so much easier than we did, but somehow y'all end up making everything so damned hard."

Andie didn't say anything.

"If you want this woman, tell her so."

"Gayle, don't be so rough on her. She's stuck in the middle here."

"So, she needs to get unstuck."

Hmm, Andie thought. Unstuck. When Andie saw couples like Dana and Gayle, and even Cindy and Barb, it gave her hope. But then her own history of serial monogamy and that of so many others she knew would always start chipping away at that hope. She knew her friends meant well, but it wasn't as easy as just deciding to get unstuck. Was it?

Chapter 11

Kara climbed into Calvin's truck and immediately noticed the candy wrappers littering the floor. Mingled with them were a couple of used latex gloves and a few Whirl-Pac bags. His truck smelled like a field sampler's truck, whereas Andie's was the cleanest sampling truck she'd ever been in, even with the few dog hairs woven into the upholstery.

Also, Andie was punctual when meeting Kara to go out into the field. She checked her watch. Calvin was fifteen minutes late.

Calvin arrived, climbed behind the steering wheel, and started the truck. Kara reached over and turned off the radio that had come on automatically. She hated talk radio and abhorred the conservative program Calvin had on.

"Good morning, Calvin."

"Good morning." He stared at the silent radio.

"What's on the agenda today?" She pulled on her seat belt.

"Uh, drinking water." Calvin spent so much time untangling and twisting his seat belt into position that Kara had to wonder if he'd ever used it before. Probably like the SOP, she mused. He only knew about it in theory.

"How do you have your runs broken up?" She adjusted the tie holding her hair back in its ponytail and wished she could find her ball cap.

"I, uh, I do five samples in three areas today." He put the truck into gear and pulled to the end of the driveway. "We have to stop for gas first, though."

Kara looked out the windshield as Calvin drove across town. She could see him in her peripheral vision, taking every possible chance to look her over. She could tell she made him nervous but hadn't figured out yet if it was her position with the company or something else.

Calvin pulled into the gas station and got out. Kara stayed where she was. He'd only put in a few gallons before he went inside

the store. She watched him through the advertisements and Lottery signs on the large front window of the store as he lingered by the counter, talking to a young woman. Kara checked her watch, curious as to how much time he would waste.

She expected Calvin to come out of the store with a bag of ice to put in a cooler for his total coliform samples, but all he had with him was a pastry. She didn't say anything about the ice as she waited for him to eat his snack in the truck before they left.

The first area to sample was an older, but very neat, neighborhood. The pine trees were tall, obviously not recently planted. Calvin pulled onto the shoulder of the residential road and grabbed his clipboard and the pH and chlorine meters from behind the seat. Kara followed him to the hose bib on the left side of the driveway of a brick rancher.

Calvin turned on the water and stepped back. He opened his pH meter and fussed around with it for several moments. Then he opened the chlorine meter and fiddled with it as well. After letting the water run for about ten minutes, he set the plastic cup of the pH meter under the flow from the spigot and stuck the probe into the sample. Kara saw the plastic containers of the buffer solution stuffed in the meter's case and picked up one, then the other. Both the pink and the blue solutions were cloudy. They obviously hadn't been changed for quite some time.

Calvin jotted down the pH reading and nodded toward the solutions. "I got those really dirty last time. I'm changing them this afternoon."

He decreased the flow of the water and filled up the vial for the chlorine meter. He took the reading in what felt to Kara like slow motion. He looked like he knew what he was doing but apparently wanted to take his time doing it. Next, he filled up the 100-mil Whirl-Pac bag and twisted the ties on it shut.

"How often do you get samples that fail?"

"Here? Hardly ever. I do have a run next week that has a hit now and then. But not this neighborhood."

Inside the truck, he stuck the sample into a gallon-sized freezer bag and placed it on the seat between him and Kara. The next four sites in that neighborhood went quite the same. Slowly. After pulling each total coliform, he placed it with the others in the freezer bag. She kept waiting for him to put them on ice in the cooler in the bed of the truck, but he didn't.

Calvin drove across town to a high school. He explained how he pulled samples in two of the boys' restrooms, the cafeteria, the

teachers' lounge, and the gym. Again, each sample was pulled slowly, he fiddled with each meter before taking a reading with it, and he stuffed the coliform sample into the freezer bag for that group of samples.

The last site to be sampled at the high school was the gym. As Kara and Calvin walked in, a boy called out, "Hey, Water Man, you're late!" The boy moved like he meant to loft the ball to Calvin, but Calvin shook his head.

The boy dribbled the ball while he checked out Kara. "It's cool. Next time." He pivoted around and fired the basketball at the hoop, getting nothing but net.

Calvin hurried through pulling that sample, and they left the school.

The rest of her time out with Calvin went much the same way as it started—in slow motion.

As soon as Kara came in from her day in the field with Calvin, she spread a map over the conference room table. He'd made a big deal of needing to restock his truck when they'd gotten back into the lab. Who did he think he was kidding? It hadn't taken nearly as long as Calvin led her to believe it would to pull the samples. And she was certain that was the case for all of his runs.

Rob passed the open door of the conference room. Kara called out to him, and he froze. She imagined she heard the panicked voice in his head saying, "And I was so close to safety, so very close."

"I'd like to see the monthly schedules for both field technicians." Kara pushed her reading glasses further up the bridge of her nose.

"Like who goes where and when?" Rob asked. His face was bright red, the tips of his ears almost purple.

"Yes. And include all addresses."

Rob left the room with the usual forced smile plastered to his face.

In just about every division Kara had ever audited, there was room to improve the efficiency of the field personnel. She didn't think Georgia would be any different. She studied the map of Bensonville and the surrounding area to be sure the technicians were sampling in the most efficient order possible.

Thirty minutes later, she looked up when Andie plopped down in a chair across from her.

"Hi," Kara said, feeling a little breathless at Andie's unexpected presence. Her pulse quickened as she remembered the words Andie had let slip at the bar. "I want you," Andie had said.

"Hello." Andie slid the schedule across the table toward Kara. "Rob said to see you about this."

Hmm, Kara thought, right down to it. She studied Andie's hands, which were folded in her lap. A Band-Aid had replaced the bandage on her injured knuckle. "Hand feels better?"

"Yeah," Andie answered.

"Okay." She glanced over the addresses listed with the days and times. She wished she had a few minutes to review the schedule without feeling the heat of Andie's presence. Kara kept her eyes glued to the paper in front of her.

Andie shifted in her seat.

"So you go out to the south side of the county here"—Kara pointed—"then come back this way into town—"

"Before you go any further," Andie said, "there's a method to my madness. I can't go to PharmChemCo first because they won't let me in until after nine in the morning. But if I wait until after that to go to the packing plant, then they're in a shift change, and it would take three times as long."

"But what about here?" Kara pointed again.

"What about it? There may only be three school buses in town, but between them and the parents dropping off their brats, it would add a lot of hassle that time of day."

"And Grunes? Can't you do that between here and here?" Kara pointed again.

Andie sat back and stared at Kara.

"What?" Kara asked.

"I can't go between eight and ten in the morning or between two and four in the afternoon. Apparently, that's when the shifts change. And according to the person in charge there, that's when everyone is relieving themselves."

"Excuse me?"

Andie smiled. "He blamed his high oil and grease numbers on the naturally occurring grease found in his employees' feces. Our sampling point is at the juncture of both his industrial waste and sewage. So, he claims human waste unfairly elevated his oil and grease levels."

"Come on, Andie, be serious."

"I am serious. And the worst part is that the county lets him get away with dictating that crap. Pardon the pun."

Kara stared at her. "That's absurd."

"I know." She lifted her hands and shrugged. "Welcome to my world."

* * *

“Oh, there’s more,” Tammy said.

Kara stopped in the corridor outside the micro lab. Sometimes eavesdropping was a necessary evil in her job.

“I swear the bitch checks the clock every morning when I come in. She isn’t even subtle about it,” Tammy said.

Kara kept listening as Nanette added, “Who does she think she is?”

“Yeah,” Linda interjected.

“She’s one of our superiors, for starters,” Andie said.

“But it’s none of her business,” Tammy said.

“As a company officer, this business is her business,” Andie insisted.

“Trying to score brownie points?” Tammy asked.

“I don’t need brownie points because I get to work on time.”

“Like anyone would know it if you weren’t,” Linda cut in.

“Hey,” Andie said. “You’re all welcome to come out in the field to check on me anytime you’d like.”

Kara heard Andie’s voice closer to the door, and she started to walk away, but Andie was nearer than she’d thought. They almost ran into each other as Andie came out of the micro lab.

“Oh,” Kara said, hoping to hide her embarrassment, “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“Yep. Still here.”

Even if Andie knew Kara had been listening, Kara was glad she opted not to call her on it.

“I’ve got to clean my equipment.” Andie walked away, looking once over her shoulder at Kara and smiling again.

Kara returned to the conference room where several maps and the sampling schedules were still spread across the table.

She set the last Grunes report in the middle of the mess. She understood Andie’s frustration with the county for not reining in the manufacturer, but she also knew how the politics of attracting jobs to poorer counties worked.

Andie walked past the conference room, and Kara called, “Hey, Andie.”

“Yes?” Andie leaned in the doorway.

Kara let her eyes wander over Andie, and her chest tightened with desire. She shook the thought free.

“Something wrong?” Andie asked.

“Ah, no.” Kara glanced down at the sampling schedule on the table in front of her. “How many times in the last year or so did Shit in a Jar exceed their oil and grease limits?”

Andie stared at her. Then she burst out laughing. “Damn, Kara,” she gasped.

Kara faked being offended. “I do have a sense of humor, you know.”

“I know.” She studied Kara. “It’s nice to see it.”

Andie’s smile melted her, and Kara had to remind herself not to stare at that gorgeous, soft, off-limits mouth. Kara gestured toward the sampling schedule.

“Oh,” Andie said, getting back to business. “I’d have to pull the bench sheets to know for sure, but I think it was three or four times.”

Kara checked her watch. She didn’t want to keep Andie too late. “Before you leave, could you ask Sidney to pull them for me?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Andie waved and left.

Kara took the opportunity to stand and stretch her legs while she waited for Sidney. She reached over her head with both hands and felt a crack in her right shoulder. She almost didn’t hear Sidney’s light knock. “Ms. Travis?”

“It’s Kara, please.”

“Kara, hello. Andie told me you needed this.” Sidney held out a clipboard with several sheets of data on it. “I understand you have some concerns over Grunes.”

She took the clipboard from him and couldn’t help smiling. His black-framed glasses matched his bushy, dark eyebrows. His lab coat was neat, as usual. She shuffled through the pages. “Yes, I do have concerns.”

“I started that spreadsheet on them when they first made outlandish claims to justify results being out of range. It’s pretty self-explanatory, but if you have any questions, please give me a shout.”

Oh, Kara thought, I like this guy. He could really go somewhere with Royal.

“Thank you so much. I’ll probably get with you on this in the next day or so,” Kara said.

* * *

Andie grabbed her work cell phone from the kitchen counter. She never got business calls at nine o’clock at night.

“Andrea, it’s me, Calvin.”

“Why are you whispering?” she asked in a mock-whisper.

“I need your help. I wrecked the company’s truck.”

“You what?”

“I wrecked it. Pretty bad, too.”

“Are you okay? You need me to come get you?” She petted Xena, who was leaning against her legs.

“Yes, I’m fine. And no, you don’t need to come.”

“O-kaaay,” she said, stretching out the word. What was the point of his call if he didn’t need a lift?

“I need you to help me figure out what to tell Kara Travis and Rob.”

“Here’s a novel idea. How about the truth?”

“Come on, you have to help me.”

“Don’t complicate things. Just tell the truth.” What she really meant was don’t complicate my life, but she’d be damned if she’d admit that to Calvin.

“Damn it, I’d help you.”

She checked the clock again. She wanted to say she wouldn’t need help because she wouldn’t be driving the company vehicle on her own time. Instead she asked, “Did the police come?”

“No.”

“Can it be driven?”

She endured several moments of silence before Calvin said, “Somewhat.”

“Damn it, Calvin. The last thing I need is to get involved in your crap.” Andie rubbed Xena’s ears.

“Help me.”

“How? What can I possibly do? And don’t ask me to lie about anything. I don’t need this right now. And you know what? Neither do you. Step up and take the consequences.”

Was it a matter of self-preservation because of the uncertainty of the fate of their jobs and the lab? Maybe she simply didn’t want to be put in the position of lying to Kara

“Thanks for nothing.” Calvin hung up.

Andie turned off her cell and put it with her keys on the table by the front door. She was officially done with Calvin and Royal Environmental for the night.

She pulled a bottle of rum from the cabinet over the fridge and swiped at the layer of dust coating it. She sloshed some liquor into a glass of ice and filled it with orange juice. Xena sidled over and sniffed at her glass.

“I know girl, not a familiar smell, huh?”

Xena sneezed.

Andie sat on her secondhand sofa with her E-Z-Mart glass of discount booze and stared at the blank screen of her tiny, out-of-date television.

Xena plopped down on Andie’s sock-covered feet. “I might not have much, but I do have my own foot-warmer.” She wiggled her toes under Xena. “The best things in life are often secondhand, aren’t they, baby girl?”

She took a sip of her drink and winced at the burn in her throat.

Andie thought of Kara and felt an emotion stir. What was it? Sadness? Loneliness?

Before meeting Kara, Andie might have been lonely sometimes, but she wasn’t sad. Until now. Before, she’d been alone, but she was content. Then she met Kara and was blown away by her and how full her life could be. Life is more than just work and more work. Now that she knew what she was missing, she truly did miss it.

Then the memory of forcing the kiss on Kara when they were out in the field washed over her. Her stomach lurched. She hardly recognized herself as the obnoxious person who’d done that.

She sipped her drink and made another face. The taste of the booze was worse than she remembered. Maybe working around drunk folks had turned her off to drinking. Then again, maybe it was the taste. The only time alcohol had recently appealed to her was when she tasted it on Kara when they kissed that fateful night she’d brought her home from the bar.

Now look at the two of them.

Wait.

There was no them.

Chapter 12

"Come on, come on." Kara redialed Andie's cell number. This time, Andie answered.

"I've been trying to call for an hour," Kara said.

"Sorry. I turned my phone off last night and totally forgot about turning it back on until just a minute ago."

Kara rearranged the stack of printouts on the conference room table. "Where are you?"

"Gas station, getting ready to go to my first test site. What's up?"

"I know you're busy today, but Rob's not here yet and I can't get him on his cell. I need you to go by Calvin's."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Someone plowed into his truck last night while it was parked in front of his house."

The long pause on the other end of the phone caused an uneasy feeling to creep over Kara.

"Oh?" Andie asked.

Kara sighed. "That's all you've got to say? Oh?"

More silence.

"Calvin is finishing up the police report now. I need you to take him by the rental place to get a truck. I've already called them. They're expecting you. Put it on your company credit card. I've made arrangements to have his truck towed to a body shop later." She paused. "Andie, are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Anything I should know?"

"Nothing I'm sure you haven't figured out on your own already."

"That's all you're going to give me, isn't it?"

"Yeah, afraid so."

"I appreciate you going to get Calvin for me."

"No problem."

Kara heard a rustling noise through the phone and heard Andie speak to someone else. "Morning to you, too, Lori."

Andie came back on the line. "Okay, Kara. I'll finish getting gas and ice and run over to pick him up."

"Thanks." Kara stared at the phone in her hand and wondered who the hell Lori was.

Forget about Lori and get back to work. Andie could talk to anyone she wanted. For that matter, she could sleep with anyone she wanted. Kara cringed. "Work," she said aloud. "Get to work."

Kara looked over the time sheet she'd been studying when Calvin called and interrupted her earlier. There were several instances when Tammy had claimed overtime for working well into the evening. And all of those days had her in the office alone when file deletions occurred. "Gotcha," Kara said.

That done, she could put her efforts elsewhere. Like getting the heads to roll so she could get the hell out of Podunk, Georgia, and away from Andie Waters and avoid facing her jealousy over whoever that Lori woman was in her life.

* * *

Kara rapped on Rob's open office door.

He looked up from his computer terminal. "Hi, come on in."

"No, I won't keep you long now. I just wanted to ask you to meet with me at four-thirty. Will that work for you?"

"Yes, that'll be fine. May I ask what this is about? I mean, uh, do I need to bring any paperwork with me or anything?" He looked around frantically.

"No, you don't need anything. Unless there's something in particular you would like to address."

"Nope, nope," he said, getting that bug-eyed I-might-stroke-out expression he often had around Kara.

"Okay, then, I'll see you at four-thirty." She left his doorway and strode down the corridor, trying to work out the kinks that had formed from sitting so long while looking over the proof of Tammy's indiscretions.

When she arrived at the T of the hallway, a noise to the left caught her attention. Andie was struggling through the back door with a large cooler. Kara became almost breathless, as she usually did when she didn't have a chance to steel herself from the sight of Andie. She stared at the wiry muscles in Andie's forearms for several moments before she came to her senses.

Kara met Andie at the other end of the hall and reached for one of the handles of the cooler.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” Kara said as she gripped the handle.

Andie released that side, and they each took a handle and carried the cooler to the log-in room. When they set it on the floor and stood up straight, Andie smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Kara’s heart pounded. Oh, she was so going to miss that smile when she left Bensonville. “You’re welcome.” Kara looked away, embarrassed when her voice cracked.

Andie pulled on latex gloves and opened the cooler. She fished out the samples from around the ice and lined them up on the counter in rows according to sampling site. “How’s your day going?”

“Fine,” Kara answered. “How about yours?”

“Not bad.”

Kara wanted so badly to ask Andie if she’d like to have dinner that night, or maybe the next, but she knew better. She had to resist the temptation to spend as much time in Andie’s presence as she could before leaving.

“I guess I better finish unloading my truck.”

“Yeah. I guess I better finish my reports.”

They stood there, staring at one another for several moments before Andie left.

Kara busied herself in the conference room until her meeting with Rob. When he came in, she asked him if everyone else had left. He nodded. Kara noted his worried expression and figured he’d be relieved to find out the meeting wasn’t about him.

“Rob, have a seat.” She gestured at the chair across the table from where she had her laptop set up.

She waited until after he sat before she went on. “One of the first things I noticed when I got here was a discrepancy between the bacteria tests logged in and those actually billed for. It seems that Tammy Morgan has been issuing reports to cash-paying clients then deleting them from the system before they are billed.”

Rob’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

Kara handed him a printout detailing every file she had found in paper form that had been deleted from the electronic billing cycle.

“There’s no way anyone in this lab is stealing from the company.” His face turned bright red. “You’ve obviously made a huge mistake.”

“No, Rob, unfortunately I haven’t. There’s no way over a hundred tests paid for with cash just accidentally disappeared from the system after the reports were issued to the clients.” She slid the copies of the time sheets and the corporate log-in information across the table to him. “It’s all documented.”

He didn’t look at the information. “It’s a mistake. I will not believe that of Tammy or anyone else in this lab.”

Kara tried to relax her jaw enough to keep from speaking through clenched teeth. She was only partially successful. “You will look at the reports. You will not discount all of my work on this just because you can’t believe it of her.” She knew her tone was acidic, but she didn’t care. Rob was on a fast track down to incompetence in her view, and she had little tolerance for that.

Rob picked up the top page and glanced at it.

“Take as long as you need to absorb this. I’m going to return some calls in the meantime. Leave all the reports on the table when you go.” She stopped in the doorway. “This will stay between you and me until tomorrow morning when we’ll address this with Tammy together.”

Chapter 13

Kara pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. She didn't care what Brooke said, she was certain she would never learn to embrace the control she had over people in her job. She had always hated this aspect and suspected she always would.

Rob lingered in the conference room doorway.

"Come on in," Kara said.

"Tammy will be here in a minute." He placed his hands on the chair back and leaned on it. "I really wish you wouldn't do this."

They both turned at the sound of a throat clearing.

"Tammy. Please come in and have a seat," Kara said. She looked at Rob. "You can sit as well."

She placed a stack of files in front of Tammy. "Do you know what these are?"

Tammy opened the top one. Her brow furrowed, and she shrugged. "Should I?"

"These are the paper copies of the files that were deleted after the reports were issued but before they could be billed."

All the color drained from Tammy's face.

"And these," Kara said as she placed copies of Tammy's time sheets in front of her, "are your time sheets. These particular ones indicate overtime worked on the dates that these files were deleted from the system. And the times that the deletions occurred correspond with times you were in the laboratory alone."

"Anyone could have done that," Tammy said. "You can't prove anything."

"No, it couldn't have been done by anyone else. Only you were here."

"You're a liar." Tammy stood.

"Tammy, please have a seat."

"No. No, I will not." Her voice shook.

"As you wish." Kara handed her a folder. "In here, you will find an outline of why you are being terminated, how we

determined that it was the only course of action, and the phone number to the corporate human resources office in Baltimore. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call them."

Tammy glared at Kara and turned to Rob.

"I'm sorry," Rob said to Tammy as she stormed out of the conference room. He turned to Kara. "I really wish—"

Kara held up her hand. "Stop right there. You're sorry? You're telling someone who's been stealing from this company that you're sorry?" She counted to five in her head, giving her professionalism time to return before going on. "We're finished here."

He left the room without another word.

* * *

Andie fingered the bill of Kara's ball cap. The day before, she was all tied in knots for fear Calvin was going to make her have to lie to Kara. She'd already lied to Kara—about something as trivial as finding her hat. Was she going to become a stalker now that she'd procured a trophy from the woman?

She slipped Kara's cap on her head and hauled her equipment to the manhole beside the railroad tracks. She grabbed the crowbar and stared at the heavy metal circle that was skewed slightly to the side. She chastised herself. Must have left it off two weeks earlier when she'd last sampled.

She couldn't believe her carelessness. She used her foot to push the cover the rest of the way off. At least it hadn't been off enough for an animal or child to fall in.

She set up the compositor and leaned over to peer into the manhole. Kara's ball cap fell from Andie's head, bounced off the top rung of the ladder built into the side, and disappeared into the abyss. Andie grabbed for it and nearly lost her footing in the process.

She stared into the dark hole as hot, putrid air wafted up.

"RE personnel are not trained in confined space entry, therefore we are not permitted to enter manholes or any other area defined as a confined space," Andie said. The spiel ran through her head again and again. She started to climb in anyway but got only one foot on the top rung before she changed her mind. No way would she risk breaking that rule. Not after reciting the damned thing to Kara their first day out in the field together.

Andie froze as she stepped back onto the ground beside the hole. Had she heard something? Or was she being paranoid? Maybe

Kara's watching you, she kidded herself. She listened carefully for a moment then finished setting up the compositor.

She pulled herself into the cab and felt a chill run up her neck. Don't be stupid, she told herself. No one's watching. She cranked the truck and headed to her next stop.

* * *

Kara paced along the loading dock at the back of the lab. She didn't know why her nerves were so frazzled. It wasn't like Tammy Morgan was the first employee she'd ever fired.

She watched Andie back the F-150 up to the loading dock. Their eyes met in the rearview mirror. Kara's heart pounded.

Andie swung down out of the cab.

"Hi," Kara said.

"Hi, yourself."

"Everything all right out in the field today?"

"Yeah." Andie looked around nervously. "All is well here?"

"Well, not for everyone." Kara traced an imaginary circle on the cement loading dock with her shoe. "I fired Tammy today."

"You what?" Andie leaned against the truck. "She was the one doing the skimming, wasn't she? Shit."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that."

Andie nodded. "I understand."

"Sorry." Kara glanced into the back of the truck. "Can I help you with anything?"

"No, thanks. Today was set-up day, not much to bring in now."

Kara thought how she would love to give Andie a heads-up but knew she couldn't. "Tomorrow afternoon we'll have a meeting for the lab staff."

"Does that mean it's time for more heads to roll?"

"I can't really say anything." The voice in her head was screaming for her to assure Andie her job was secure. She so wanted to give her some peace of mind. But it would be unethical to tell Andie how she planned to let Calvin go and that Andie would be taking over his route. Andie would have overtime for a while but would most likely fit Calvin's runs neatly into her existing ones. It wasn't as if Calvin was doing a lot of work.

Andie took a very deep breath and let it out loudly. "I know you don't owe me anything, but if I have to wait until tomorrow to learn my fate, I'll have a nervous breakdown."

Kara looked away. "Relax."

“Are you telling me I’m okay?”

“I’m telling you not to worry.” She looked Andie in the eyes and tried to convey to her that it would be all right. She felt herself drowning in Andie’s eyes. She wanted so badly to pull her into an embrace and alleviate all her worries. Hell, she wanted to hold Andie until all of her own worries disappeared.

“So, tomorrow, huh?”

“Yes.” Kara would meet with Calvin before the regular meeting. Then she would meet with Rob Nelson. She planned to demote Rob from lab manager to microbiologist. And she hoped that Sidney Ketcham would accept the offer to take over the lab manager position. From the first day she stepped into the lab, she had been so much more impressed with Sidney than she was with Rob. Among other things, she found it unbelievable that Rob hadn’t called out Calvin on his time-padding long ago.

“I should go in,” Andie said.

“Yeah. Me, too.”

* * *

Kara positioned her feet in the red dirt at the driving range. She shifted her body and gripped her golf club. Focus. She swung, and the ball whizzed away. Just what the doctor ordered. Time to concentrate on something physical that she could do, and do well. And she hoped it would keep her from obsessing over Andie.

She put another ball on a tee and repositioned herself. See, she could do something other than think of not being able to touch Andie’s smooth skin. Or kiss her. She swung hard and missed. She hadn’t done that since the first time she tried to hit a golf ball. “Damn it, Andie,” she said.

She wondered what Andie was doing at that moment. Probably worrying for her coworkers. Kara had heard all the speculation flying around the lab about the big meeting. In the middle of all that, Andie had been very quiet. Almost like she was holding her breath.

Andie was so readable. Especially during more intimate moments, like when they touched on accident. Or semi-accident. Kara’s face warmed with the thought of Andie holding her breath when she hovered over her while Andie looked up client specs in the database. The desire, and its resultant tension, was clearly etched across Andie’s face.

Kara considered how, with every move she made at the lab, like it or not, she mentally gauged Andie’s possible reaction. Would

Andie think Kara was too hardcore if she openly called Calvin out on his abuse of company time and resources? Would she think poorly of her if she penalized Linda for frequently leaving early, even if she did take it as vacation, sick, or unpaid time?

And Kara had been worried about finding a middle ground with Andie. About not being too much of a bitch to compensate for wondering if she'd give her preferential treatment. Andie understood, didn't she?

She hit a ball and was immediately disappointed in her follow-through. She flexed her hands and thought about those words: follow-through.

Kara knew the professional ramifications of her changes at the various labs she'd audited over the years. But she had no idea of the personal cost to RE personnel. There was no update, no reality show called "Fired: Five Years After the Wrath of Kara Travis."

Had she been so focused on proving her worth to the suits at Royal Environmental that she'd done it at the expense of disproving others' worth? Damn it, she told herself, if the people in the various labs had been doing their jobs, she wouldn't have been able to disprove their worth. So, she decided, it wasn't her fault.

She swung and was quite satisfied with the distance. She sighed. She would be thinking about the ramifications this time. Like, how badly would Andie's time with Xena be limited by the extra time her new runs would cost her? Would she end up limiting her hours at the bar? And if she had to, how would it affect her finances?

She supposed her actions at the other labs had ripple effects on more than just those she'd let go. What about the Calvins and Robs at the other locations? Had their firings or demotions sent their worlds into uncontrollable downward spirals? Had their loved ones watched in helpless horror as their lives unraveled? Were lifelines severed or frayed to the point that life wouldn't be worth hanging on to?

God, what if someone she'd fired committed suicide? She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to will the idea away. She gripped her golf club harder and replanted her feet.

She whacked a ball. "It's not on me," she said as the ball disappeared into the distance. But Andie was "on her," and she needed to figure out how to squelch some of the thoughts she'd been having, especially those lingering about the groin and heart.

She also needed to fight the desire to go to the bar that evening to see Andie.

Good God, let the woman breathe, Kara thought. But she knew what she was doing. She didn't like it, but she recognized it. She was trying to stay on Andie's radar. Just out of reach, but not far enough out of Andie's thoughts for her to dismiss Kara too easily. But why? It wasn't as if she saw a future for them together. Still, she couldn't make herself totally discount it either. If she could, Andie wouldn't be in her thoughts nearly every waking moment.

"I will not go to the bar," she said with more conviction than she felt. "I will not." She gathered her things and prepared to *not* go to the bar.

Kara squared her shoulders and made her way across the gravel parking lot to the company car. Tammy Morgan leaned against the back of a dirty Pathfinder, parked a few spaces away from the Malibu.

I do not need this, Kara thought.

Tammy took several steps toward Kara.

"Here we go," Kara said to herself. She unlocked the trunk and swung her clubs in. She didn't hurry.

"I need that job," Tammy said in a low voice.

Kara faced her. She wanted to say that Tammy should have thought about that before she stole the money. She glanced around. The driving range was not the place for a scene. No public place was, but meeting somewhere private with Tammy wasn't something that ranked high on her list of fun things to do either.

"This isn't the time or place," Kara said.

"You had no right to fire me. You had it in for me from the very beginning."

"If you'd like to make a complaint, I suggest you call the corporate human resources office. The phone number is listed in the dismissal package I gave you."

"All business, huh? How's this for getting right down to it? I demand my job back. And a raise."

Kara stared at her.

"In return, I won't bring sexual harassment charges against you."

Kara clenched her teeth and forced herself not to look around. "Call me at the lab tomorrow, and I'll set up a time you can come in to talk."

"Now that's more like it," Tammy said.

Kara wanted to be sure there were no unrealistic expectations, so she added, "Not about getting your job back, but about me not

encouraging Royal Environmental to file formal charges against you for embezzlement.”

“If you had actual proof, you’d have already had me arrested.”

Kara knew that was true, to some extent. She was sure if she chose to do so, she could get the IT people to come up with a good case.

Tammy stepped forward into Kara’s personal space and poked her pudgy finger in the air, at chest level in front of her. “This isn’t over. Not by a long shot.”

All Kara could think was that if the bitch touched her, she’d deck her. It didn’t occur to her to be the slightest bit afraid of the bigger woman. She was too mad to even consider it.

Tammy marched back to the Pathfinder. Gravel spewed in Kara’s direction as the SUV spun out of the lot.

After several minutes of sitting in the car with her head back and eyes closed, Kara sat up straight and put the car into gear. She wanted a drink. Even more, she really wanted to see Andie. She told herself that if she went by the bar for a much deserved drink (thanks to Tammy) but left within minutes of Andie’s shift beginning, she could see Andie long enough to feel better without totally going back on her word to herself.

That was the justification for going to The Cave.

Kara ordered a Cape Cod and smiled at Joel from across the room. She almost saw why Andie liked him. Underneath the rough redneck exterior was perhaps a decent guy.

When the front door opened, the last bit of the evening sun filtered into the bar. Kara cringed when Tammy strode in. Here, too? So much for a safe haven, Kara thought. She took a long slug off her cocktail and set the glass down. She decided to leave. She’d have to wait until the following afternoon to see Andie.

She swiveled the bar stool around. Tammy was standing two feet away. Shit, Kara thought. Here comes the drama. Maybe she could talk Tammy into taking it outside. She hated the idea of another scene in Andie’s place of employment, even if this one wasn’t of her direct making.

“Do you think I haven’t noticed the way you and Andrea look at each other? Sexual harassment can also be you screwing other employees and it hurting my job.”

“I’ve been to the seminars, Tammy. I know all the definitions. And your actions are what hurt your job, nothing else.”

"I will expose you. Then I will sue Royal Environmental. And..." Tammy leaned a bit too close to Kara. "If I go down, I'll bring you and Andrea with me."

The hair stood up on the back of Kara's neck at the venomous way she said Andie's name. "Do you really think any hick-ass lawyer you can come up with can play ball in the same league as the million-dollar team of lawyers at George Royal's disposal?" Kara hated playing the money card, but Tammy should never have brought up Andie's name. "And if any of your crap falls on Andie... Andrea, I will set you up for more than just the nickel-and-dime embezzling you've done. Don't think for a minute that I won't." She leaned closer to Tammy. "Leave Andie alone, or I will mess you up. Understood?"

Tammy took several steps backward.

Kara struggled to regain control. Where did all that come from?

"Hey, tiger." Joel slipped between the two women. He stroked his goatee and winked at Kara. "You doing okay tonight, doll?"

"Yeah, Joel. I'm fine."

He turned toward Tammy. "Hi. You a friend of Kara's?" He gave her a big smile. "Any friend of hers... you know the saying."

"I was just leaving." Tammy stomped across the barroom and out the door.

"I love it when a woman sticks up for her—well, her woman. But I figured you didn't really want an ugly situation in here, huh?"

"Are you the bouncer tonight?" Kara asked.

"No." He took a long swig off his beer. "I wanted you to know I got your back. As long as you got Andie's."

"Of course I have Andie's back." Kara sipped her drink. "You won't say anything to her about me causing yet another scene in here, will you?"

Joel made a show of locking his lips with an invisible key.

"Thanks... doll," she said as she stood to leave.

Chapter 14

Andie stood outside the truck, staring into the cab. She was thinking about what Joel had told her. He said Kara had been at The Cave the previous evening, before Andie's shift. When Andie was on duty, she'd kept one eye on the door, hoping Kara would come back. Even though seeing Kara created a lot of tension, Andie had grown to crave the flutter in her belly at the sight of the beautiful woman. She'd started to yearn for the increase in her heart rate when Kara's hand accidentally brushed hers. Kara hadn't come to The Cave, and now Andie was out in the field again, lost in thoughts of the enigmatic Kara Travis.

Her mind drifted to the look on Kara's face out on the loading dock when she told Andie to relax. When Kara's eyes locked onto hers, she felt her entire body tingle. She'd never wanted to hold someone so much in her life. She'd never wanted to just be near someone so much.

She pushed the driver's seat forward and ducked her head behind it. Rummaging around, she looked for the extra box of latex gloves she was pretty sure she had stuffed behind the seats.

Someone grabbed her shirt from behind and yanked her backward. The breath was knocked from her as her body slammed against the cab of the truck. She was spun around and slammed again.

"Where is it?"

Andie stared at the unshaven face of a man she didn't recognize. "What?"

"I saw you yesterday. I saw you coming from there. Now where the fuck is it?"

She couldn't speak. If she could just reach her cell phone. She cut her eyes to the truck and tried to gauge if she could reach it.

"What?" he asked. "It's in the truck?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He backhanded her, and she tasted blood.

"I swear I will rip your heart out if you don't tell me where it is." He slammed her harder against the truck.

Pain raged through Andie, and she grew light-headed. She wondered if she disappeared... or died... would someone think to go let Xena out? Who would look out for her faithful dog? And would Xena know it wasn't her choice to leave her?

The man grabbed her by the collar and lifted until she was eye-to-eye with him. "Tell me where you hid it, or I'll kill you."

He jammed the end of a gun under her chin, jarring her teeth together. Her ears rang. The gun's hardness bit into the soft flesh. She feared it would go off, whether he meant it to or not.

And what about Kara? Would Kara know that those few nights together meant more to Andie than just the incredible orgasms? Would Kara know that Andie had fallen in love with her that very first night?

The man released her shirt, and she stumbled to the ground. He kicked her in the stomach. She gasped and grabbed her gut just in time to catch the next impact of muddy boot against her wrist. The pain that ricocheted through her made her heave. She vomited violently.

"Bitch." He kicked her again. His boot careened off her shoulder and grazed her face.

The heat of tears seared Andie's cheeks. She couldn't take much more of the pain. Her head grew foggy. Was she registering the roar of the truck engine? Or was that blood screaming in her brain? Gravel sprayed her face, and she made a weak attempt to shield herself.

"I don't want to die," she said and surrendered to the blackness.

Was her alarm going off? Was Xena rousing her? "Not yet, baby, let me sleep."

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

Someone's hand went to her shoulder, and pain shot through her. It hadn't been a nightmare. She'd been attacked. Was he back?

She flailed her arm at her attacker and tried to yell, but words wouldn't come out. She struck out again, but her arm was caught in the air.

"Oh, dear," a woman's voice said.

A woman? "Oh dear" was what a woman would say.

Andie tried to open her eyes. The right one wouldn't cooperate and the other looked through dust and tears.

"Hold still, dear. We've called for help."

Andie struggled to sit up. "I don't need any help." She slumped back down.

"Shh," the voice said. "Can I call someone for you?"

She wanted to say Kara's name. She wanted to cry out for Kara, but she didn't. How could she let the woman she adored see her dirty and tear-stained?

"Andie?"

She concentrated on focusing and made out Bennie Manning's face.

"An ambulance is on its way," Bennie said. "Andie, who did this to you?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Who can I call for you?"

Again, she thought about Kara. "Call Marla." But she couldn't remember her best friend's phone number. She was vaguely aware that Bennie was calling his wife, Jill, and getting Marla's number from her. It paid to be friends with cops' wives.

She tried to stand but had to lean against Bennie.

"Whoa," he said, his voice soft and low, unlike the voice he'd used so often to reprimand her for speeding. "Sit tight."

* * *

Andie stood rigid in the sterile white hospital room, the stiff exam gown held closed with one hand. Her other hand shook as she held the phone, waiting for someone at the lab to pick up. Linda answered. "No, Andie, Rob's on the other line, but Kara's standing right here."

"Wait—"

"I'm sure it's no problem."

When Kara said hello into the phone, Andie blurted, "I've been car-jacked, and the truck's gone and—" She tried to control her voice.

"What's that about the truck?" Kara asked.

Andie's face throbbed, and her head pounded. "What?"

"The truck. Do I need to rent another one?"

"They're still looking for it." Ask me how I am, Andie's thoughts screamed. "I have to go. I just thought you'd want to know about the fucking truck."

"Wait. I'll come get you."

"Don't bother," Andie said.

"How else will you get back here?"

"I'm not coming back today. Marla's bringing clothes here to the hospital, and she'll—"

"The hospital? Andie?"

"Yeah, the hospital." She looked up as Marla burst into the room. "I'm sorry about the truck, okay. But I have to go." She ended the call and meant to throw her cell phone onto the floor, but the movement caused her pain. She stopped and held it loosely in the hand that hurt less.

Marla was across the floor in seconds. "Oh, Andie." Marla started to put her arms around her but stopped short when Andie recoiled. "Oh, sweetheart," Marla whispered.

Andie's shoulders sagged, and her head bent forward. "Kara didn't even ask how I was. All she cares about is the damn truck," she said, motioning to her cell phone.

"Oh, sweetheart," Marla repeated. She took the phone from Andie.

"You brought clothes?" Andie asked between sobs. She pulled the hospital gown tighter around herself.

"Yeah. These should fit you. I did like you said and brought you some of mine so I didn't have to go to your house and worry Xena."

"You think I'm being silly about Xena."

"Yeah. I mean no, of course not." She looked her over more closely. "Are you okay? Really?"

Andie started to nod, but it morphed into a shake, and she collapsed into Marla's embrace. "Ouch," she said and rearranged herself to take the pressure off her bruised side.

"He didn't... you know... um..."

"No," Andie said, "he didn't."

Marla sobbed. "I'm so glad it wasn't worse. Oh, God, how does something like this happen?"

They both jumped at the sound of a throat clearing behind them. "Excuse me, ladies."

"Hey, Bennie," Marla said. "Or should I call you Officer Manning?"

He shuffled his feet. "I need to ask Andie a few more questions, Marla."

Marla stood closer to Andie. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Look here, Andie." Bennie opened his notebook. "Did you do something to piss the guy off?"

"I don't even know that guy."

“Out on the road? Did you maybe cut him off? I mean, come on, Andie, you’re an assertive driver. Maybe you triggered his road rage somehow.”

Andie thought about it. Yes, she drove fast. Lord knows Bennie could have given Andie plenty of tickets for speeding over the years, but he didn’t. He knew his wife liked Andie and would give him hell if he did cite her. Bennie had even once told Andie that he thought his wife had a bit of a crush on her.

“Nothing stands out in my mind,” Andie said.

His face twisted in doubt.

“I might drive fast, but I don’t drive stupid,” Andie said.

Bennie scowled. “There’s one other thing.”

“What?” she asked.

“Did he say anything... um, derogatory?” He stared at his notebook while he asked.

Marla stepped between them. “Are you asking if this was a gay bashing?”

“Well, we don’t know.” He looked away from Marla and back to Andie. “Did he call you any names?”

“Jesus, Bennie, I don’t remember everything he said. I think he called me a bitch, but that’s it. Like I told you out where it happened, he thought I had something of his. And I sure as hell don’t know what it was supposed to be.”

“Okay, if you think of anything, give me a call. Anything.” He stopped and pointed with his notebook at the pile of dirty clothes beside her. “Remember, I need your clothes for evidence.”

Andie nodded, and immediately regretted it when her head started to pound. She turned to watch Bennie leave.

Kara stood in the doorway, staring. “Andie, I didn’t know—”

“Because you didn’t ask,” Marla screeched.

Kara ignored Marla and stared at Andie. “I assumed since you were calling that everything was all right. Oh, God, I didn’t realize...” She reached out to touch Andie but stopped when Andie pulled back.

“So, boss-lady,” Marla growled, “she’ll fill out the workman’s comp claim tomorrow, when she’s feeling better. But right now I’m going to take her home, fill her up with drugs, and let her forget all about anything to do with Royal fucking Environmental for a while. Is that okay with you?”

“Ah, yeah, of course. But I can take—”

“No,” Marla said. “I do believe you’ve done enough. Now, a little privacy while she changes her clothes, please.”

* * *

Kara waited in the no-parking zone for Marla's Ford Explorer to pull out of the hospital parking lot. She didn't care what Marla said; she wasn't staying away. The past hour flashed through her mind. She'd told Linda to have Rob cancel the lab meeting. She'd grabbed her briefcase and laptop without saying another word, bolted out the door, and had to go back in for directions to the hospital. She glanced down to where she planned to put her new GPS.

What Andie must think of her! The idea that Andie had been hurt hadn't even crossed her mind. Then when realization hit, she was floored by the gravity of what had happened.

She pulled out behind Marla and was thankful she hadn't fired Calvin yet, so at least she didn't have to stress over getting someone to replace Andie in the field. She could concentrate on Andie, not trying to figure out the details of getting the job done at RE's Bensonville facility.

Oh, God, Andie. Bile rose in Kara's throat at the thought of the swelling and abrasions on her face, the splint on her arm.

Marla's taillights blurred through the tears that filled Kara's eyes. What if she'd lost someone else she cared about? No, no, no. Not going to happen. She reminded herself that Andie was safe now. And she knew she'd do whatever it took to ensure she stayed that way. "Not on my watch," she said.

She pulled up to the curb in front of Andie's house and hurried to catch up to them before Marla had a chance to shut her out. She followed them into the mudroom, determined not to let Marla bully her into leaving.

Xena met them just inside the house, and the women had to give her a few moments to give Andie the sniff-over. Andie stroked her dog's head and told her in a calm voice that everything was fine. Xena followed her into the bedroom and sat at her feet when Andie settled at the foot of the bed.

"You want something to eat?" Marla asked Andie.

"No. But I know you're probably starving. Why don't you go pick something up?"

Marla glanced at Kara.

What? Kara wondered. Is she afraid to leave me alone with Andie?

"Yeah, sure," Marla said. "But take another pill before I leave." Marla went into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"Take my car so Xena can ride with you," Andie called to Marla.

Xena's ears perked up.

"Want to go bye-bye with Aunt Marla?" Marla asked the dog.

Xena's tail thumped, but when Marla tried to get her to go with her, she wouldn't leave Andie's side.

"Go on, baby girl," Andie cooed. "Go for your ride."

Xena followed Marla out of the house.

As soon as she heard the door shut, Kara fell to her knees at Andie's feet. "What can I do?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine. Or at least I will be when this pill kicks in."

"Hurts, huh?" Kara asked.

"Yeah." Andie nodded her head. "Shit, I've got to quit doing that." Tears spilled down her face.

"Oh, honey." Kara placed a hand on Andie's left cheek, one of the few places on Andie's face that wasn't swollen or discolored. Andie's hand covered Kara's, and Kara sighed when Andie didn't try to remove it.

Kara gently brushed her lips against Andie's. When Andie's lips parted slightly, Kara lingered a bit longer.

"I-I think the pill's doing something."

"What do you mean?"

"I feel swimmy-headed," Andie said.

"Why don't you lie down? Here, let me help you." Kara pulled the bedspread and top sheet down and helped Andie to settle onto her pillow. "Is that better?"

"Yeah," Andie murmured.

"What else can I get you?"

"Sit here with me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course." Kara brought Andie's good hand to her lips and pressed it gently to her. She lightly stroked the side of Andie's face until Andie's breathing settled into a relaxed, steady rhythm. "I love you," Kara whispered.

Andie's eyelids fluttered once then she was still, except for the slow breathing of sleep.

Kara smoothed her hand over Andie's cheek. So peaceful. She hoped Andie wouldn't have nightmares from the ordeal.

She ran her palm over the pillow beside Andie. It was the pillow Kara had slept on, the one she'd bit and clutched during moments of climax.

She felt the tears starting and knew she was helpless against them. She was helpless against so many things.

The pillow squished in her grasp. She held it to her chest and sank down to the floor. With her back against the wall and her knees pulled up, she wrapped her body around the pillow and held on.

Kara couldn't stop crying, and she couldn't stop staring at Andie.

She heard the rustling at the door and knew Marla and Xena were back. Xena came in, sniffed Andie's face, and plopped on the floor beside her.

Kara ignored the sounds emanating from the kitchen and stayed on the floor, eyes glued to Andie. She sobbed and was glad for the comfort of the pillow against her.

She felt Marla staring at her from the doorway, but couldn't pull her eyes away from Andie. If Kara allowed the tears to pool in her eyes long enough, she could almost pretend there were no bruises on the side of Andie's face, no stitches above her eyebrow. She could almost fool herself into thinking she was watching her lover sleep after making love.

A loud sob escaped Kara.

Without taking her eyes off Andie, Kara said to Marla, "I'll get out of your way in a minute." She swiped at her tears.

Marla towered over her. She held out a mug of tea. The offer made Kara sob even harder. Then she steadied herself and took the tea.

"I love her," Kara said, not sure if it was loud enough to be heard.

"Tell her, not me," Marla replied.

"I did, but it was too late." Kara didn't know if she meant because of Andie falling asleep, or because of the mess she'd made of their relationship.

Her thoughts raced back in time. In the end, it had been too late to tell Joanie she loved her, too. She knew Andie was nothing like Joanie, but the woman Kara was at that very moment was exactly like the Kara she'd been back then: giving too little, too late, and too self-absorbed to see the big picture.

She looked up and was surprised to see Marla crying, too.

Chapter 15

Andie woke to muffled sounds coming from the kitchen. She glanced around her bedroom and tried to clear her head, looking for hints of who was there with her. She wasn't sure which scared her more: the thought that it might be Kara or the possibility it was anyone other than Kara.

The pillow beside her was still warm. Or was that her imagination? Wishful thinking?

Marla stepped into the doorway with two mugs of coffee. Andie tried to hide her disappointment. Was it only a dream that Kara had said "I love you" as Andie drifted off? Had it not been Kara, but Marla who'd come to bed a few hours later?

"Changing of the guard," Marla announced as she held a mug out to Andie. "Can you handle this?"

"Yeah," Andie said as she took it in her good hand. "Changing of the guard?"

"Kara didn't want to wake you, but she had to leave. So you're stuck with me. Just don't expect me to spoon with you," she teased.

Andie smiled, but it quickly turned to a frown as she swung her legs off the side of the bed and groaned. "God, I hurt."

"We've got more good drugs."

"Just something to take the edge off," Andie said. She didn't want anything that would knock her out. If Kara came over after work, she wanted to be clearheaded. When she looked into Kara's eyes and said, "I love you, too," Andie wanted Kara to know she meant it.

Andie stared at the phone beside her bed, waiting for it to ring. For Kara to check on her. As if reading her mind, Marla said, "Kara's probably afraid she'll wake you."

Andie eased back against her pillow and watched the minutes fall slowly off the clock. She thought about how much she'd miss the tips that weekend at the bar. She couldn't bartend, considering

the amount of pain she was in. Never mind how little she could do with her wounded left arm.

She looked down at the splint protecting her wrist and relived the feeling of the man's boot delivering its blow. She smelled his sweat and saw the stubble on his dirty face. Bile burned in her throat, but she didn't realize what was happening until it was too late and she knew she'd never make it to the bathroom. She hung her head over the side of the bed and vomited.

When Marla started into the room, Andie held up her hand to stop her. "I'll clean this up," she said.

"Like hell you will." Marla went into the bathroom and came out with two damp washcloths. She draped one over Andie's forehead and cleaned up the mess with the other.

Andie choked back a sob.

"God knows how many times over the years you've cleaned up after me. Both literally and metaphorically," Marla said.

* * *

Kara sat at the small desk in her hotel room. She'd planned to grab a quick shower and dress for work, but once alone, the fear she'd felt for Andie resurged and overtook her. She cried for over an hour then did her best to compose herself before dialing Brooke on her cell phone.

"What a pleasant surprise," Brooke said.

"Hi," Kara managed to say, her voice raspy.

"You've been crying. What's happened? Do I need to come down there and knock some sense into that field sampler?"

With that, Kara started crying all over again. "Andie was attacked out in the field. Her face is all banged up, and her shoulder, and wrist, and oh, my God, what if it had been worse? What if I'd lost her? What if—"

"Slow down," Brooke said. "Andie was attacked?"

"Yeah. Beaten up." Kara shook uncontrollably.

"Start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Andie was out in the field sampling when she was assaulted and had her truck stolen. My God, Brooke, the bastard really did a number on her."

"Is she in the hospital?"

"They treated and released her. I followed her home and spent the night. I could have lost her. She could have been killed."

"But she wasn't. Focus on that."

"You should see her. And she's in so much pain."

"But she'll recover, right?"

"Yeah." Kara felt a little calmer acknowledging that. "She'll recover."

"Do you have her job covered while she's recuperating?"

"Somewhat. Good thing I hadn't let the other sampler go yet. He's lazy, but he'll do for now."

"Keep him for a while longer. Then what?" Brooke asked.

"Right now, I just need to concentrate on taking care of Andie. I need to find her a job inside the lab."

"Temporarily?"

"No. Something permanent. It's best for her."

"And what's best for Royal Environmental?"

"Screw Royal Environmental."

"Screw Royal? Who are you and what have you done to my Kara?"

Kara didn't answer.

"What does Andie want?"

The tears came harder. "I don't know. But as long as they don't know who did this to her, or why, it's not safe for her out in the field."

"Assuming she'll go along with your plan, is there even something available for her inside the lab?"

"I can probably shuffle things around a bit." She put her elbow on the small desk and rested her head in her hand. "I wish we had a Metals Department here. Wait." Kara sat up straight. "Hey, I need to go. I'll call you later."

"What are you up to?"

"I need to call George Royal and convince him we need a Metals Department in the Georgia division. Let me go organize some data and plan my argument."

* * *

Andie had drifted off to sleep. The ringing of the phone woke her. She heard Marla answer it.

"Andie," Marla whispered from the doorway. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," she said, trying to sit up. "Is it Kara?"

"No. Paul Young."

"Paul?" Andie hadn't talked to her college buddy in years. Not since his graduation, the one that was supposed to have been their

graduation. They'd taken classes together at UGA. Unlike Andie, he'd stayed to get his journalism degree. Then he'd returned to Bensonville to edit the local weekly newspaper.

She reached for the receiver Marla held out. "Hello?"

"Andie Waters. How are you?" He gave a nervous chuckle. "I guess you've been better."

"News travels fast."

"That's the goal. Seriously, are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Andie presumed Paul was calling in his role as editor of the newspaper, but the concern in his voice was classic, caring Paul. "No, I don't need anything. Marla's taking good care of me."

"Can I ask you a few questions about what happened?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to talk about the details. It's an open investigation."

"Just a few yes-or-no answers? Please?"

"You can ask, and I'll answer if I think I can," Andie said.

"Do you think this was a hate crime?"

"No." She remembered Bennie had asked her the same question.

"Do you hold your employer in any way responsible for this?"

"No."

"Do you think the police are doing enough to solve this?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise." Andie gingerly pivoted to sit on the edge of the bed.

"When the investigation is over, will you sit down and talk to me about this?"

"If I talk to anyone, it'll be you."

"Fair enough. And I'm really sorry this happened to you."

"Thanks."

"We really shouldn't let so much time go by without hanging out."

"I agree."

After hanging up, Andie took her cell phone from the bedside table and retrieved Paul's number from caller ID on the landline phone beside her bed. She programmed it into her cell so she wouldn't have an excuse not to call him sometime after this mess was over.

Andie made room for Kara to sit beside her on the sofa. "Hello," she said.

"Hello yourself. How you feeling?"

Andie smiled. Kara had come back. She hated that she'd even doubted that she would. "Better now. How was your day?"

"Busy. Lots of questions. Everyone's worried about you."

"Tell them they shouldn't be. I'm in very capable hands."

Kara feigned concern. "Is there something you and Marla need to tell me?"

Andie gave her a playful swat. "I meant your hands, and you know it."

Kara smiled. And kept smiling.

"I missed you today," Andie said. She flashed back to Kara's whispered "I love you." She was about to say the three magical words back to Kara, when she got distracted by her goofy grin. "Okay, Kara, what are you up to?"

"George Royal has agreed to open a Metals Department at the Georgia division. And for you to be trained on the ICP."

"What?"

"ICP. Inductively Coupled Plasma. A mass spectrometer for metals."

"I know what an ICP is. What I don't know is what you're thinking. I'm a field sampler. I don't know how to run an ICP."

"Corporate is willing to train you." She clasped Andie's good hand in hers. "This is great news."

Andie slipped her hand free. "But why bother with all that training when I'll be well enough to return to the field in a couple of weeks, at the most?"

"No, Andie, I've arranged for a permanent metals position for you."

"Permanent?"

"Yes. We've been trying to decide if Colorado should be set up for metals or if Maine would be better. We're pulling an almost-new ICP from the Tennessee division, and I've convinced George Royal to set up the new Metals Department here instead of one of the other labs."

"Kara, I'm a field tech. I like being a field tech. Look, I know you mean well, but there's no way I'm going to be tied to a damn machine, day in and day out."

"This is a great opportunity for you." She took Andie's hand in hers again. "Get some rest. Once you're feeling better, you'll see this is a good thing."

"Once I'm feeling better, I'll be too busy to think about metals and the ICP because I'll be back in the field doing my job." Please, Andie thought, please don't do this to me.

"Andie—"

She moved away from Kara. "Don't 'Andie' me." She knew she was whining but also knew she couldn't give in. She wasn't a lab rat. She had nothing against the folks in the lab, but she was a field tech. "My job is in the field."

"No, it's not. Not anymore. This is done, Andie."

"So, undo it." She crossed her arms over her chest then quickly removed them from her bruised side. "Damn it," she said through clenched teeth. "No way. Period."

* * *

Kara stood in the parking lot of the Bensonville Sheriff's Office with Bennie Manning. She stared at the ink smudging her fingers. She'd been called in to have her fingerprints done since she'd been in the truck not too long before it was stolen. They'd already printed Andie and Calvin.

"The truck is a mess," Bennie said. "Inside is all carved up. No doubt the perp was looking for whatever it is he thought Andie had that belonged to him. But now we have prints to run through the system. That's why we wanted yours and the others. For exclusionary purposes."

"And you're sure my firing Tammy didn't prompt her to have someone retaliate against Andie?"

"I already had her checked out. She's been gone from town since the day after her altercation with you. I really don't think she had anything to do with beating up Andie and stealing the company's truck," Bennie said.

Kara thanked him and headed back to her hotel room. She curled into a fetal position on the bed. She was exhausted. And alone. Andie had told her not to bother coming by until she rectified the job situation. Why was Andie so adamant about staying out in the field? Couldn't Andie see that she was just trying to keep her safe?

She looked at the last traces of ink on her fingertips. She hadn't gotten Andie's reaction to any of it since she refused to talk to her until she convinced George Royal to allow her to remain in the field.

Not only did she not want to change George's mind, she wasn't sure if she could. Besides, with a little time, Andie would come around... wouldn't she?

Kara rolled toward the bedside table and grabbed her ringing cell phone. She and Brooke chatted for a few minutes then Brooke said, "What's going on? You sound like shit. Is Andie okay? Nothing else has happened, has it?"

"She's okay. She hates me, but she's fine."

"She doesn't hate you. Give her time."

Kara was surprised to find herself remembering how many times Joanie had told Kara she hated her. She was thankful those weren't the last words they'd exchanged.

"I've never told anyone this," Kara said. She stopped before saying anything more. Do I really want to go there? she asked herself. Want to? No. Need to? Perhaps. "Joanie threatened to kill herself after one of our monumental arguments. I came home from a head-clearing walk to find Joanie sitting at the kitchen table with a gun to her head."

"Oh, Kara."

Joanie had sat at the table, elbows planted on the sleek, wooden surface, gun clutched in both hands. After Kara begged her for several moments to put the gun down, Joanie gave her most dazzling, disarming smile. "Just kidding," she had said.

"I begged her to get help," Kara said. "But she only went to the therapist once. She justified that by insisting she hadn't been serious with the gun to begin with. 'Besides,' she'd claimed, 'Women are socialized to kill themselves neatly. A gun would have made way too much of a mess.'"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. "Brooke? Are you still there?"

"I'm here," she said. "Why didn't you tell me about that before?"

Shame and guilt seared her. "I don't know. I was confused. I thought I was being the good girlfriend by not discussing it." She let out a big sigh. "Like I thought I was doing the right thing by setting Andie up with a metals position."

"If you think it's the right thing with Andie, I'm sure it is."

"Spoken like a true best friend."

"I mean it. So, why the thoughts about Joanie?"

"I'm thinking I'll never get loving someone right." She considered Brooke's feelings for her. "I'm sorry. I'm being pretty callous aren't I?"

“You’re keeping it real. No one can fault you for that. So, how much longer before you come home? I miss you.”

“I don’t know how much longer. And I miss you, too.” And she did. Just not in the exact way Brooke would have liked.

Chapter 16

Andie plopped onto her sofa, the phone pressed to her ear for the usual three-way conversation with her friends. “Okay, okay, I’ll come out and play with the lesbians. Even if I have been in a relationship with four out of the five available women who live in the tri-county area.” Serial monogamy coming back to bite her in the ass, Andie thought.

“Oh, but we’ll import some fresh lesbians just for you,” Cindy said.

“Don’t bother. Besides, I’m a mess. My face is still puffy, I have stitches, and a splint on my wrist.” It had only been a week-and-a-half, and some days, Andie felt better than others. This wasn’t necessarily one of those feel better days.

“You still have one hand and a pussy that work, right?” Barb asked.

“Don’t be common,” Cindy said.

“I’m not,” Barb said.

“You are all right, though?” Cindy asked, growing serious.

“I’m fine,” Andie insisted.

“When Sue called and told us she’d seen you at the hospital, we couldn’t believe it,” Cindy said.

“Were you even going to tell us?” Barb asked. “Damn, we haven’t seen you in weeks, and we have to hear from Sue that you’ve been car-jacked. Car-jacked, for crying out loud.”

“Leave her alone, Barb. Please come tomorrow night,” Cindy said.

“Okay, okay, I said I’ll come. But I have to go now.”

“Hot date?”

“No. Marla’s coming to get me. We’re going to the bar for—”

“*The* bar? Say no more. At least I know you’ll be soaking up good, lesbian energy over here soon enough. Be careful, okay?”

“Of course.”

* * *

Andie paused while her eyes focused to the dimmer light in The Cave. The place was unusually busy. Then she saw the banner. “Welcome Back, Andie.”

Her eyes shot to Marla and Chuck. “What’s going on?” Andie asked.

“Oh, we wanted you to feel needed.”

Her next thought was that she’d never make it through such a busy night. Her friends meant well, but what Andie really needed was a quiet night to ease back into her routine, not one that rivaled even her busiest Saturday night. She wasn’t ready for all of this.

“Don’t be turning all pale and panicky on us, girlfriend. Chuck and Tony and Joel and Julia are going to help us get you through your shift.”

“Marla,” Andie warned. Her good hand automatically went to her bad wrist, protectively cupping the splint.

“Shut up and get to work. And by ‘work’ I mean get behind the bar and start bossing us around,” Marla said.

Nadine—security guard, customer, friend—flashed Andie a peace sign as she sat on a stool. “Hey, stranger. I think your goofy-ass replacement thought I was flipping him the bird as he passed through the gate the other day.”

Andie laughed. “God, I miss you and all the others on my run. I can’t wait to get back out there.”

Nadine looked from Andie to Marla and back to Andie again. “Oh. I didn’t think you were going back out on your route.”

Don’t take it out on innocent by-standers, Andie reminded herself. “I *will* be back out in the field. It’s only a matter of time.” She wished she felt as confident as she sounded.

Andie served what felt like a few thousand beers and let the others haul ice and wash dishes and mix the drinks that needed shaking or blending. She talked with all her well-meaning customers and friends, pretending that pain didn’t assault her shoulder every time she reached into the cooler for a beer. She hid the fact that her right arm was exhausted from doing the work of both her arms.

And she camouflaged her disappointment when every few minutes her glance around the bar didn’t turn up Kara’s wild blonde hair, her sexy-hot smile, those clear blue eyes seeking hers.

Toward the end of the night, Marla told her to sit. "Here," she said, handing Andie the large pitcher serving as a tip jar. "Go count your bounty."

"I can't take all this," Andie said.

"Think of it as payment for future advice," Nadine said, plopping beside her.

"And payment of back tips with interest," a man whose name escaped Andie's memory added.

"Marla, was this your idea?"

"Actually, it was Joel's."

Joel threw a pretzel at Andie. It bounced off her chest and landed on the bar. "Originally, I'd wanted to have some kind of benefit for you because I hear those are a really lesbian thing to do. You know, being that I'm a lesbian trapped in a man's body."

Andie threw the pretzel at Joel.

"The next person who throws food is in charge of sweeping up," Chuck said.

Marla tossed several pretzels onto the floor. She pressed up against Chuck and gave him a big kiss. "And you're going to make me?" she asked.

Andie was glad to see that her friends were still getting along.

"Only thing I'm going to make you do is marry me," Chuck said.

Marla turned white. Joel stopped talking. Julia quit wiping down the bar. Tony froze in front of the beer cooler. Silence.

"Shut up, Caveman." Marla gave him a little shove.

Chuck didn't budge.

Andie wanted to do or say something to save the big man from humiliation. Her mind searched and searched, but she came up with nothing.

"You'll have to do better than that if you're going to catch me. And it better not be done in a crowded bar, either."

Chuck smiled. "Does that mean..."

"That means get to work so we can get out of here," Marla said as she flounced away.

Julia sat beside Andie. "You survived," she said.

"Yes, I did."

"Listen, I wanted to say thanks."

Andie gave her a questioning look.

"For all the times I came on to you and you didn't—"

"Take you up on it? That's kind of a strange thank-you."

“I didn’t mean it like that. I meant thanks for not rubbing my face in your disinterest. Or... I don’t know. I’ve been real confused about my sexuality. I don’t think I’m a lesbian, but sometimes I get curious. Anyway, thanks for being so sweet. And for being a friend.”

Julia gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Too bad she’s not gay, Andie thought. Too bad she’s not Kara. Stop, stop, stop, her inner voice shouted. Stop that nonsense and look around at how lucky you are to have such great friends.

Joel caught her eye and gave her a little wink. She winked back, comfortable in their friendship. She looked over to where Marla was sweeping. Yes, she was very lucky to have such friends.

Chapter 17

"I can't believe you're here. What a wonderful surprise," Kara said.

Brooke glanced around Kara's hotel room. "I was afraid you'd decided to stay down here. I wanted to make sure you hadn't been brainwashed."

"No, nothing like that."

"You look tired," Brooke said.

"It's all the lab drama. One thing after another down here. I demoted the lab manager today. I had his resignation ten minutes later. I did get to promote someone from within who really deserves it, though. But I have to admit, it's all starting to wear me down."

"It's more than just that."

"Yeah." Kara felt tears threatening. "Andie still doesn't want to see me." She sobbed. "God, I miss her so much."

Brooke held out her arms. "Come here." As Kara stepped into Brooke's embrace, Brooke joked, "And for once I won't even try to cop a feel."

Kara laughed.

Brooke stepped back. "That's more like it. And if Andie can't recognize an incredible woman when she sees one, then screw her. Okay, bad choice of phrasing. Forget about her. Now let's plan our evening."

"Can't we stay in and order Chinese?"

"No, we can't. I have procured an invitation to a dyke party tonight."

"A what?"

"You know, a party with lesbians? You remember what parties are, don't you?"

"Quit teasing. How did you get invited to a party? You've been here twenty minutes."

"I've been here with you for twenty minutes. I've been in town for two hours. While you were working, I went to all the usual

lesbian habitats—Home Depot, PetsMart, Target. And it was at the latter that I met our hosts for the evening.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“In more ways than you know, love.” She gave Kara a suggestive smile. “Now get changed. You can’t go to a party looking like that.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Kara glanced down at her khakis and polo shirt.

“The pants will do, but wear something more flirty with them. Have you got a tank top?”

“I didn’t pack one.”

“I guess we’ll have to stop somewhere for a new shirt.”

* * *

The house was in a neighborhood crowded with large stucco homes accented with stone, squatting on small lots. Kara imagined not many fights went unheard in this subdivision.

“Ready to get your party on?”

“It’s not too late to just go to dinner instead,” Kara said.

“And waste that hot new tank top on me? I won’t allow such nonsense.” Brooke checked her face in the rearview mirror. “Come on, hot mama, let’s get the party started.”

Kara followed Brooke to the front door, which opened before Brooke’s knuckles made contact.

“You did come,” a wiry, somewhat butch woman said.

“I always come when I say I will,” Brooke replied with a grin.

Kara resigned herself to the fact that it was going to be one of those nights where Brooke flirted with everyone and lectured Kara about being a wallflower when she didn’t follow suit.

“Hi, I’m Barb,” the woman said as she extended her hand. “And this is my partner, Cindy.”

Kara shook their hands and it wasn’t lost on her that, given the size of the town, her name might be ringing a bell to the two women.

“We’re glad you could join us. We’re expecting a few other new faces here tonight, and lots of dear old friends, too.” Cindy nodded toward the dining room. “Anita is playing bartender.”

Kara glanced around. She somehow knew she’d see Andie before the night was over. She just didn’t know if her heart could take it.

"Let Anita know what you're drinking and shout if you need anything else," Barb said.

Brooke wasted no time acquainting herself with Anita and two margaritas. "No sissy Cape Cods for you tonight," she told Kara.

Halfway through her drink, Kara was occupying herself with dunking ice cubes with her straw when she felt it. Just like the morning after their first night together when Kara felt Andie's presence behind her, she knew if she looked up she'd be there. She just didn't know what expression would meet her. She couldn't stare into her drink all night, so she steeled herself and looked up.

The dark eyes that met hers stole her breath. And the look Andie didn't hide quickly enough hijacked Kara's heart. No matter what Andie said she was feeling, Kara saw the warmth in her expression in that split second.

* * *

Andie looked away from Kara when a woman stepped between them.

"Even without the splint I would have known you were Andie." The woman extended her hand. "You *are* gorgeous," she said.

Andie cautiously took the offered hand. "I... um..."

"Hi, I'm Brooke. Kara Travis's one and only best friend in the whole wide world."

"Behave yourself, Brooke," Kara said as she approached the two women. "Uh, hi," she managed to say to Andie.

"Hi." She wondered if she was on some mess-with-your-head reality show. "I'm a little surprised to see you," she said to Kara. Her gaze swept over the bare shoulders and breast-hugging tank top, and she bit her lower lip.

"I didn't plan... I'm sorry if my being here—" Kara struggled to respond.

"Ah-ha! Andie, you've met our new friends Brooke and Kara." Cindy stood with the group, not even trying to hide her victorious grin. "I love parties."

Barb joined them and put her arm around Andie's shoulder. "I'm stealing you for a moment. There's someone I want you to meet." She turned to the others. "Y'all don't mind if I sweep her away for a while, do you?" She didn't wait for an answer.

Barely out of earshot, Barb asked, "That's the blonde, isn't it?"

"Shh," Andie said.

"I thought it was over."

"It is."

"Good." Barb stopped short and positioned Andie in front of a pretty brunette. "Andie Waters, meet Leanne Kennedy."

The smile that spread across the other woman's face was genuine. And infectious, Andie thought as she smiled back. "Nice to meet you," Andie said.

"Leanne's new in town," Barb said. "And single."

Andie talked to Leanne for the next thirty minutes, doing a pretty good job of only glancing over at Kara a few dozen times. Diane, Anita-the-barkeep's partner, was on DJ duty. She played everything from Pink to the Dixie Chicks to Sheryl Crow.

"You probably don't feel up to dancing," Leanne said, gesturing to Andie's splinted arm.

"No, not really," she half-lied and glanced at Kara, who she caught sneaking one of her own looks at Andie.

Andie had hoped she could use her workman's comp time and sick days and avoid seeing Kara before she returned to Baltimore. Or until Royal Environmental's powers-that-be saw the light and agreed to let Andie back out into the field.

She never in a million years expected to run into Kara at her friends' shindig. Maybe it was fate, Andie thought. Fate's perverse sense of humor.

But seeing her now, she knew she had missed Kara even more than she'd admitted to herself. She stuck a finger between the splint and her left palm to alleviate the tickle growing there.

Andie excused herself and went to the bathroom to throw some cold water on her face. Being in the same room as Kara had made her temperature skyrocket.

When she rejoined the party, she was glad Leanne had her back to her, talking to two women from Barb's bowling league. Andie worked her way around the periphery of the den, stopping to talk to several friends she hadn't seen in quite a while. She assured them her injuries were healing nicely and promised to get together for dinner or coffee soon.

Several couples were dancing on the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the large room when Andie tentatively wandered over to Kara and Brooke.

Sheryl Crow's "I Shall Believe" came on, and Brooke drew Kara toward Andie. "You two should dance."

Andie stared. Kara reached for her left hand, stopped before touching the splint, and took her by her right one.

As they swayed to the music, Andie's hands rested lightly on Kara's waist, barely touching her.

"What?" Kara asked, her hot breath caressing Andie's ear.

"Nothing."

"You're still really mad at me," Kara said.

"Yeah." Really mad and really missing you, Andie thought.

"I don't know why you're being so damned stubborn."

Andie stiffened.

"Let me finish." Kara pulled away just enough to look Andie in the eyes and let her eyes lower to Andie's mouth, where they lingered for several long moments.

"You were saying?" Andie asked.

"Um." Kara gave a nervous chuckle. "I got distracted. I guess I want to say I'm sorry about everything."

"Everything?"

"You know."

"Do I?" Andie inhaled deeply, savoring Kara's scent. "Are you sorry enough to call corporate and get me back into the field?"

Kara didn't answer.

"That's what I thought." Andie took her hands from Kara's waist and stepped back. They stared at one another as people around them started moving to a much faster beat.

Andie walked into the kitchen, and Kara followed her.

"Wait up."

Andie stopped by the stove and spun around. "And there I was, when we first met, thinking, 'Hey, Kara gets me. She really gets me.' But you don't get me at all. That you would pull me out of the field for something out of my control, without any consideration of my feelings, tells me exactly how much you don't get me. And I absolutely will not work inside the lab, tied to that goddamned metals instrument. That's it. End of discussion."

"Andie—"

"No. Do what you have to do with corporate to guarantee I'm back in the field as soon as I can lift the compositors, or I quit." She stormed out the door without a thank-you to her hostesses or a good-bye to anyone.

Chapter 18

"You have to get her back," Brooke said as she plopped onto the stiff hotel chair.

"Are you crazy?" Kara asked.

"You two fit. Really fit. And you look at her the way I've always wanted you to look at me."

"Brooke, don't. It's too early in the morning for this."

"No, let me say this. You two look right together. I've never thought that about you with anyone else. Not Joanie, not any of your other dates all the years I've known you. You and Andie are right together."

"Stop. It's over. Andie is done with me."

They both jumped at the knock on the hotel door. Then Kara opened it, and they both stared at Andie standing there.

"Is this a bad time?"

"No," Brooke blurted.

Andie shuffled her feet.

"Invite her in," Brooke said.

"Actually, I was hoping to kidnap Kara. Have you got time to go for a little drive with Xena and me?"

Kara was silent. Brooke nudged her. "She'd love to be kidnapped," she said. "Wouldn't you?"

Before Kara could answer, Brooke was pushing her out the door. Kara got into Andie's Prius and shut her eyes as she fastened her seat belt. She laughed when Xena's tongue found the side of her face.

"Hey, baby girl," Kara said. "How's my favorite hound today?"

Xena answered with a rapid thumping of her tail.

"Thanks for coming with me." Andie pulled from the parking lot. "Even if Brooke didn't give you much of a choice."

"That's Brooke for you."

"I like her."

Kara turned to watch Xena settle down into the back. "You left the party so angry last night, I'm surprised to see you."

Andie shrugged.

She gave Andie a few moments to respond, and when she didn't, Kara said, "Where are we going?"

"To my friends' place. Gayle and Dana."

"The dog people?"

Andie smiled. "Yes, the dog people."

They drove in silence for several minutes.

"Can I ask you something?" When Andie nodded, Kara asked, "Why are we doing this?"

"Doing what? Driving each other crazy? Denying what we feel?"

"I meant, why are we going to Gayle and Dana's?"

"Because these people are my friends. Shouldn't I want my friends to all meet?"

Kara wondered what Andie was really up to.

"You'll like them," Andie said.

"Can I ask you another question?"

Andie gave her a nervous nod. "I guess."

"Why do you have so many toothbrushes?"

Andie almost choked. "What?"

"The first night we met, you gave me a toothbrush to use. You pulled it out of a drawer full of new toothbrushes and packs of floss. Didn't I even see dental dams?"

Andie chuckled. "I used to date a woman who sold oral hygiene products. It became a running joke with us for her to always bring me stuff."

"So, one turned you vegetarian, and one hooked up your oral hygiene for life. Does your health always benefit from your relationships?" She immediately regretted asking the question. Andie would be more than justified in asking her personal questions in return.

"What about you? Do you have drawers or closets full of the wares of your ex's?"

Kara looked out the passenger window. See, she told herself. It's your own fault she's inquiring now.

"Give something up on one ex, and we can drop it."

"Joanie taught me how to eat without just taking the meat out of meals."

"What do you mean?"

"She taught me not to skip the meat part of everyone else's dinner, but to cook with meat-like stuff. Like those veggie crumbles. She got me adding them to pasta sauce, soups, chili."

"Tacos?"

Kara made a face. "I'm not too fond of that. I guess I prefer it... submerged in stuff."

"Submerged," Andie said.

"And tofu. And marinated portabella mushrooms," Kara added.

"You are adventurous." She stole a quick glance at Kara. "What happened between you and Joanie?" Andie asked in a near-whisper.

The color drained from Kara's face, and she felt her defenses building. "What do you mean, 'what happened'?"

"Why aren't you still together?"

Here we go, Kara thought. "Because she died."

"Oh, Kara. I'm so sorry."

For several minutes, they were silent. Andie kept glancing over, opening her mouth as if to speak, and closing it again.

"What?" Kara asked.

"Were you and Joanie still together when she died? I mean, you hadn't broken up before that or anything?"

Kara felt the familiar queasiness that assaulted her whenever she had to address the subject. She knew she could just say "Yes, we were together." But a different response washed over her. "I guess I should have taken it that way. Nothing says 'I don't want to be with you anymore' better than suicide."

"I... um... oh, God." Andie turned pale. "I'm sorry."

Kara immediately regretted her callousness. Dropping Joanie's suicide into the conversation so coldly wasn't fair to Andie. She searched her mind for the right thing to say, but before she could try to put Andie at ease, Xena sat up and started whining. "Is she okay?"

"She knows we're getting close," Andie said.

Andie pulled down a long driveway, and Kara grew anxious when they parked beside an old station wagon. Dozens of dogs barked. Xena's tail thundered against the backseat. Kara looked at Andie with wide eyes.

"Relax," Andie said.

They got out of the car and were greeted by Dana and Gayle. Andie made quick introductions, and Kara hoped she would remember who was who.

"Shall we get the tour under way?" Gayle asked.

"Kara has the exact same expression you had the first time you came out here," Dana said to Andie.

Before Kara realized what was happening, Gayle had steered her down the side of a fence, away from where Dana and Andie were petting a dog that looked much like Xena.

"This here's Hank," Gayle said. "He's a special boy." She smiled. "They're all special, but there's something extra about Hank."

The black-and-tan hound rolled onto his back.

"Stick your hand on in there and rub that belly. It wouldn't be polite not to take up the invitation."

Kara ran her fingers along the soft flesh. "He's sweet." She glanced over to where Dana and Andie stood.

"Yep." Gayle touched Kara's elbow and drew her attention to the next group of dogs. "See Rascal rounding up his pack?"

Kara watched as an Australian shepherd circled several mixed-breed dogs. The dog barked and picked up his pace around the others, and Kara looked over to Andie. When Gayle caught her eye, Kara knew her attention on Andie hadn't been lost on the woman.

Gayle threw a stick toward the shepherd and said, "Fetch, Rascal." The Aussie didn't respond; he just kept circling the others. Gayle leaned against the fence and looked Kara in the eyes. "You can't make a herding dog into a retriever." Gayle looked over at Andie and said, "It's not fair to try to make someone into something they aren't."

Kara stared across the yard at Andie and nodded. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that she'd known all along that trying to change Andie was selfish.

Dana waved them over, and Gayle led the way back to them. They had a nice visit with the cats inside the house then packed Xena and themselves into the car to leave.

"I love your friends," Kara said, still smiling from their hugs and well wishes.

"I knew you would." Andie beamed.

Kara turned in her seat to face her. "Are you sure you want to stay in the field?"

"Absolutely."

"You won't be nervous?" Kara asked. "You've been through a traumatic experience. You may not be able to move past the stress of it and keep doing your job. You—"

"I'll be okay. I'm over it. I want to stay in the field. I need to."

Kara worried that Andie's passion on the subject was as much to convince herself as it was to convince Kara. "If you're sure, I'll talk to Mr. Royal. But I can't make any promises."

She thought about how convincing she'd been when talking them into putting Andie in Georgia's new Metals Department. She wished then that her powers of persuasion weren't so well honed. It crossed her mind that maybe she should have been a lawyer after all.

* * *

Kara sat in the conference room with the door shut. She held the line while she waited for George Royal to pick up. She wondered if he was busy tapping a golf ball into a cup in his office.

George had taken over the business from his father, but he was more interested in playing golf than the bottom line; therefore, the bottom line was sagging. But his drive and short game were on fire. And he had a deep, leathery suntan to prove his dedication.

"Kara," George said. "Please tell me there haven't been any more crimes committed by or against Royal personnel in Georgia."

"No, sir, no crimes." She cleared her throat. "But I do have a minor issue down here."

"Give it to me."

"Andrea Waters wants to remain in her position as field sampling technician."

"But she's going to be in charge of the new Metals Department."

"She doesn't want to leave the field." Kara fidgeted with a pen.

"I don't care what she wants. What else do you need today, Ms. Travis?" he asked in his trademark dismissive tone.

"She's determined to stay in the field." She bent the stubborn pen, amazed by how far she could force it. "I think we should allow her the chance to prove she can still do it. After being cleared by her doctor, of course."

"You're the one who convinced me she shouldn't be out in the field. Are you telling me you made a mistake?"

She bent the pen farther, and it snapped, spattering ink across the conference room table. "Yes, I made a mistake."

"If I let her back out there and something else happens... Hell, a woman has no business working that position to begin with. It's a liability. I want her running the ICP. Something else happens, and she'll probably sue."

A woman has no business? Kara seethed to herself. A liability? She watched the ink pool onto a financial report she'd been perusing. She stared at it until it all blurred together. "If you don't let her stay out in the field, you might get sued."

"What?"

"I'm saying she would have a good case for discrimination if you pulled her out of the field just because she's a woman."

"Has she indicated to you that she's considering that?"

"No, sir. But she's an intelligent woman. I'm sure she knows that's an option."

"And what do you say about that?"

Kara closed her eyes and said what she had to. "She would be perfectly justified."

"I'll pretend you didn't say that. As a matter of fact, one more word about it, and you are finished with Royal Environmental," George said.

Kara wanted to say "Screw Royal Environmental," but instead she let him continue. "Hold the line," he said in a huff.

"Yes, sir." What are you doing? she asked herself. This was not the Kara Travis she knew. The real her didn't waffle on personnel decisions. The real her wouldn't even dream of threatening George Royal.

"Kara," George said in a no-nonsense tone, "tell your girl to meet with her new lab manager first thing tomorrow morning. And I want you back up here immediately, ready to finalize your report before going out to Colorado." Then he hung up, as he was famous for doing, without saying good-bye.

Kara quickly dialed Andie's cell phone. When it went to voice mail, she hung up. She dialed Andie's home number. It, too, went to voice mail.

Her heart pounded at the sound of the leave-a-message tone. "Hi, it's me. Kara. I wanted to say good-bye. I have to leave for Baltimore today. You guys are finally getting rid of me." She paused. "You have a meeting with Sidney in the morning. Nine o'clock. I'm not sure what will happen, I just want you to know that I tried. And that I—"

The machine cut her off. She redialed the number. After the beep, she rushed through the rest of what she needed to say. "If they let you stay in the field, you'll need to be extra careful. Be totally by the book because they'll be looking for an excuse to yank you out of there. At least Sidney likes you. I don't think he'll screw with you. And I can see corporate getting over it once the dust settles. So, I

guess this is good-bye. Good luck, and—” Spit it out, she told herself. “Good-bye now.”

Beep. Would it have killed you to ask her to call you sometime? Kara chided herself as the call was disconnected. But what was left to say, anyway?

Chapter 19

“What do you mean Ms. Travis is gone?” Andie asked Sidney.
“She’s back in Baltimore.”

Andie replayed Kara’s message in her head. She hadn’t let the part about her leaving for Baltimore actually register. She hadn’t believed it could really be over. Over, with only a recorded good-bye on her machine.

Once she found out she’d be allowed to continue field sampling, she only half listened to the speech Sidney gave her about letting her return to it only when cleared by the doctor. Until then, she would be on light duty, doing filing and reception work in the lab. Andie wasn’t concerned. She knew Dr. Reynolds would clear her as soon as Andie asked her to. And Andie wasn’t going to wait too long. She didn’t want to give corporate the chance to change their minds.

“Go ahead and take this for when you do go back out in the field. It’s a logbook that Kara Travis wants all field personnel to use. Record times and places and things like that. It should be pretty self-explanatory.”

Andie took the bound logbook from him. She opened it and ran a finger over the columns and rows.

“Feel up to a little filing today?” Sidney asked.

Andie brought her attention back to her boss. “Sure.”

Sidney spoke over his shoulder as he started out his office door. “Have you met Kristine yet?”

“Tammy’s replacement?”

“Yes. She transferred in from the Tennessee division. You’ll like her.”

Andie followed him to the front of the lab.

“Kristine Jones, meet Andrea Waters, field sampler extraordinaire.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” she said in a playful voice.

“Don’t believe it all,” Andie said. “I’m at your mercy for the rest of the day.”

“Andrea,” Sidney said, “we all have new passwords. Log in under your old one and change it immediately. No one is to work on any terminal unless they’re signed on under their own name.”

Andie nodded. That had Kara written all over it. She held her new logbook tight to her chest, smiling at the thought of the woman, and was met with Sidney’s quizzical expression.

“How can I be of assistance?” she asked Kristine.

“Well then,” Sidney said. “I’ll leave you two to it.”

Sidney had barely left the reception area when Kristine leaned closer and asked, “Is it true you threatened to take Royal to court if they didn’t put you back in the field?”

“Don’t be shy,” Andie teased.

Kristine laughed. “I’m trying to figure out how big your ovaries are.”

“I didn’t threaten anything. So what needs to be done?” Andie wanted to steer the conversation back to filing.

While Andie filed completed work orders in the back room, she kept reaching for her cell phone then pulling her hand away. She pulled it out and dialed Kara’s cell number. Before the first ring finished, she hung up.

She wasn’t sure what to say. She wasn’t sure if Kara wanted to hear from her. She wasn’t sure of anything. Except she missed the hell out of that woman. And filing was getting old very fast.

* * *

“Here’s to Andie, the field sampler. And to you being on this side of the bar with me for a change,” Marla said as she lifted her glass.

Andie mirrored the gesture with her virgin cocktail, and they both drank.

“You excited about getting back into the field?” Marla asked her.

“Can’t wait.”

“You’re going to love that new truck, aren’t you?”

Andie wondered if that was Kara’s doing. She was willing to bet it was. “The truck is gorgeous. It’s so clean, I hate to put samples in it.”

“And it’s free of memories,” Marla said.

Andie nodded.

"So, tell me about this new woman you met at the party. Leanne something, isn't it?" Marla asked.

Andie didn't want to talk about someone she didn't really care about seeing again. She looked around the almost-empty bar.

"She's a friend of Barb's?" Marla asked.

"Yeah." She played with the napkin under her drink.

"Have you called her yet?"

"Nah." The napkin ripped where it had gotten wet from condensation on her glass. She rolled the paper between her thumb and forefinger.

"What are you waiting for? I hear she's cute."

Andie shrugged.

"Oh, that's right. You're waiting for Kara-fucking-Travis to sweep you off your feet so you can live happily ever after. Girlfriend, that isn't going to happen, so you better get over it already and get on with your life."

"Screw you."

"No, screw this Leanne chick. It'll be good for you."

"That's what you said about Kara at first."

Marla downed her drink.

"I have a confession to make," Andie said in a low voice. "I stopped by the hotel when I left the lab. Cruised the parking lot and saw for myself that her car was gone."

Marla shook her head.

"Then I went by the driving range because Kara told me she went there several times while she was here. I sat in the parking lot and watched some old man hit ball after ball."

"So when you showed up here, you were chasing Kara's ghost, not looking to hang out with me, huh?"

The word ghost made Andie think about Joanie, but Andie would never repeat what Kara had confided to her. She still hadn't wrapped her head around what Kara had told her about Joanie killing herself.

"Of course I came in here to see you," Andie said.

"Liar." Marla rested her elbows on the bar and quickly pulled away. "You have to teach Tony how to clean better." She ran the palms of her hands over her elbows for emphasis.

Andie absently ran her finger along the edge of the bar, not fully registering the stickiness.

Marla nudged Andie's arm. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something." She studied Andie a moment. "It's about your brother."

“What about Jack?”

“You know how Jack and Chuck have always stayed in touch because they’re such good friends? Well, Chuck knows things.”

Andie gave her full attention.

“And Chuck tells me things. You know, pillow talk.”

“Go on.”

“If Chuck and Jack’s friendship is so sacred, then ours is, too. And if I knew something you wanted to know, shouldn’t I just tell you?”

“You’re damned right you should tell me.”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“Tell me,” Andie said.

“I mean it’s not like Chuck can get mad at me for telling you, right? He had to have known I tell you everything.”

“Marla, please.”

“Well, Auntie Andie, maybe I shouldn’t tell you after all.”

Andie’s mind reeled. “Auntie?”

“Yup.”

“I’ve often wondered. Is this the first?”

“Yeah. A niece.”

“A niece I’ll never meet.” Andie didn’t quite know what to do with that idea. She started to ask Marla if she knew the baby’s name but stopped herself. The more she knew, the more it would hurt. She was pretty sure of that.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Maybe I shouldn’t know anymore than that.”

Marla squeezed her shoulder. “Should I have kept my mouth shut?”

“Absolutely not. Thank you, Marla. Really.”

* * *

Kara walked into the corporate office of Royal Environmental, not knowing if she’d still have a job at the end of the day. She wasn’t sure she cared. She had to admit, though, that not knowing was unnerving.

What she did know was that she wasn’t prepared for all of the pats on the back.

“Great job, Kara. Heard you worked wonders for the Georgia division,” John East said.

Kara smiled at him. She liked John. She knew he would rather be doing her job than his own handling quality control in the two Maryland labs, but she didn't feel threatened by him.

"Congratulations, Kara. Another job well done." Wanda leaned against the door to her office and smiled. "Usually I don't envy you all that travel, but I admit with this job in Bensonville having an IT slant, I was wishing I was there with you."

"Thank you for all your help. Things wouldn't have gone nearly as well without your IT ingenuity. Thanks," Kara said. "Is George in?"

Wanda shook her head. "He's playing golf. Of course."

Kara wasn't surprised. "So he may or may not make it in today."

"One never knows with him," Wanda said.

Wanda ducked back into her office, and Kara felt eyes on her. She turned to find Hugh Sampson, the VP of finance, glaring at her. She forced a smile, and he looked away quickly. She didn't know what she ever did to that man, but his only reaction to her was to glower disapprovingly.

Kara went into her office and cautiously glanced around the small, sparse space. She was fine with the size of her office. She didn't spend a lot of time there, anyway. Everything was exactly as she'd left it: desk tidy, paper clips where they belonged, pens in their place. Neat and orderly, her office was the polar opposite of the thoughts bouncing around in her head.

She checked her computer's e-mail box for new messages. There was nothing there that would indicate George's current opinion of her. Was he purposely letting her sweat it out another day? It wouldn't surprise her.

Debra, George's executive assistant, stuck her head into Kara's office. "Lots of action down there in Georgia, huh?"

"You can say that again."

"A wrecked truck, a car-jacking, embezzlement. They at least showed you some good southern hospitality, didn't they?"

Yes, Kara thought, Andie sure did. In the beginning, before things got so messed up. She realized Debra was waiting for a response to something. "I'm sorry, what?"

"So you think Mr. Royal did the right thing by returning that tech to the field after she was assaulted?"

Now Kara knew. "Let's hope so." That was as much as she was willing to say about it.

* * *

Home sweet home, Kara mused as she set her briefcase on her dining table with the two bags of groceries she'd picked up. She put all but the cranberry juice away. She stared at first one, then another, of the Pier One prints on her walls. She'd liked them when she bought them. She still did, but they didn't give her the visceral feeling she got when she looked at the photographs on Andie's walls.

She slipped her new CD into the stereo. Brandi Carlile's magnificent voice wafted through the room, and Kara could almost feel Andie there with her. She'd broadened her musical horizons through Andie. She'd broadened more than just that in the brief time they'd known one another.

Kara mixed herself a Cape Cod, plopped onto her sofa, and let her free hand run along the soft fabric. She loved her very expensive hemp sofa. Her eyes settled on the built-in bookshelves. They'd been the deciding factor when determining whether or not to buy the condo. That and her beloved ten-foot ceilings. Okay, the shelves and the ceilings and the gourmet kitchen and the top-of-the-line appliances she swore she'd spend plenty of time with but never really followed through on doing. Did she really like her material things that much?

Then she stroked the sofa again and thought about how Andie would appreciate her penchant toward natural fabrics and renewable woods.

Her bamboo floors. But hadn't she read somewhere that bamboo's recent popularity was causing its own environmental issues?

Don't start, she warned herself. The next thing you know you'll be debating the environmental impact of leather versus pleather. Or how the run-off from corn crops is killing the gulf critters because of increased ethanol demand.

She wondered what Andie thought about that. She gave herself a mental slap upside the head. "Stop it," she said. "Just stop it."

Kara sipped her drink. All of her nice stuff meant nothing if it meant being alone. She walked up to the CD player and changed disks. She hit the forward button over and over until Sheryl Crow started singing "I Shall Believe."

The memory of holding Andie and dancing to that song washed over her until she became almost breathless. She played the song through three times. Then she dialed Andie's number.

When the answering machine clicked on, she said, “Hi, Andie. I guess you’re at the bar working tonight. I wanted to say... damn, I don’t know what I wanted to say. I guess just that I’m thinking about you. I hear you’ll be back in the field. Congratulations. Take care of yourself. Good-bye.”

Kara drained the rest of her drink. She rested her head back against the soft fabric of her sofa.

“You are a mess, Kara Travis,” she said.

Chapter 20

Andie threw the bags of ice into the large cooler in the bed of the new truck. She was excited and nervous about her first day back in the field. But even more than that, she kept thinking about Kara's message the night before. The sound of her voice haunted Andie. Kara sounded tired. And... lonely.

Andie had considered calling her back when she got home from the bar, but it was so late and Andie was afraid. Afraid, but of what she wasn't sure. Afraid she'd hoped too much that Kara was calling because the ache in her matched the one in Andie? Afraid she'd find out for sure that it wasn't, and Andie would be left wanting and missing someone who'd obviously moved on?

She watched her speed as she drove through downtown. By-the-book, Kara had warned her. She glanced at the ace bandage that had recently replaced the splint. Her wrist still hurt, but she wouldn't admit that to anyone. She'd told the doctor it felt fine. She was afraid to wait too long before going back into the field.

Maybe Kara's call was about alleviating guilt, about letting Andie go one inch at a time. Damn her.

But her voice. Something in the tone grabbed hold of Andie's heart. And squeezed. Tightly.

She tried to shake off the feelings as she turned right onto Old Powell. She smiled at the thought of seeing Hector Lansing again and wondered how he'd been doing. She'd missed him, and the old, one-armed guy at Grunes', and Nadine. She'd missed the people, but had she really missed the job?

After being buzzed into the lobby, Andie saw a young guy sitting behind the desk. She reached for the pen to sign in and tried to act casual as she asked, "Hector on vacation this week?"

"No, Mr. Lansing retired. Who are you?" The man flipped the sign-in sheet around to read Andie's name. "You new at Royal?"

"No. I've just been out. But now I'm back," she said, a bit defensively.

Retired? As she unlocked the gate and jumped back into the truck, she asked herself how Hector Lansing could just retire.

She checked the rearview mirror as she made her way to the pond. Then she rechecked behind her before slipping the truck into park and turning off the engine.

She grabbed the wide-mouth glass jar for the quarterly Oil and Grease sample. HEM, she corrected herself. Now that the method had changed, it was no longer Oil and Grease, but Hexane Extractable Material. “Whatever,” she said out loud. She would collect that before setting up the compositor for the other samples. She thought of James Moore, who had trained her in the field seven years earlier. He’d explained to her that an O&G sample needed to be skimmed off the surface, not dunked, and not taken from an effluent stream. And it wasn’t to be composited or put in a plastic bucket or plastic bottle. A week later, he cheated and used some of the 24-hour composited sample from the bucket. He’d done it right in front of her and chuckled and said, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Andie was careful to skim the surface of the pond, because that was the proper and accurate way to grab an O&G—or HEM—and she also knew to be careful not to scoop up a minnow.

She looked over her shoulder as she screwed on the lid.

It was easier to justify being the hired gun for industry when you sampled properly. She’d always rationalized that when she was out in the field, she didn’t take shortcuts that would cut industry any slack. She wouldn’t dream of sabotaging anyone, but she sure wasn’t going out of her way to help them.

Not like James. She cringed at the thought of it. How sheer laziness had shaped his sampling procedures. And Calvin wasn’t much better. He was too lazy, especially in the winter, to get ice to correctly preserve the samples. At least Andie did everything properly, she told herself again.

Still, she had a hard time stomaching the fact that the industrial clients always knew when they would be sampled. What was to keep them from discharging the really bad stuff only when they weren’t being tested? How could she say she wanted to help the environment, yet be involved in an industry that often hurt it? And what about the amount of waste her company created? She cringed.

She wasn’t even supposed to have a membership in the Sierra Club, or Green Peace, or any other environmental group. That was considered a conflict of interest. My God, Andie thought, my job makes me a big hypocrite.

She looked over her shoulder again and was struck by a thought. What if she was using all that eco-crap as a possible reason to leave her job without having to admit that being alone in some of the areas she was in made her nervous?

Some of the anxiety would dissolve over time, wouldn't it? What if it didn't? What if Kara put her job on the line for Andie, and Andie couldn't even follow through?

* * *

Andie piddled around the house, packing up whatever she hadn't worn recently for Good Will. She planned to go to their store and see what she found that she actually needed. The Good Will store was a great place to find cheap jeans for work. She went through jeans frequently when she prepped bottles or pulled samples because of splashing acid, or worse, sodium hydroxide, onto them. Nothing was worse than putting her favorite jeans into the washing machine, thinking they were fine, and pulling them out and finding that the water reacted with something she'd splashed on them, riddling them with holes.

She snatched her torn lazy-pants from the end of her bed and sat down on the sofa to mend them. She struggled to thread the needle, cussing as she missed the hole over and over. When she got started with the sewing, she thought about her reckless ultimatum to Kara about not working inside the lab. What if Kara hadn't come through for her, and RE had let her quit? Then she'd never have gotten her debts paid off.

Xena nudged her arm.

"Is it walk time already, baby girl?"

The old hound jumped up and down. Okay, maybe not a jump but a definite move upward. Andie grabbed her leash, and they headed out.

Xena sniffed and Andie let her do so for as long as she wanted. She was lost in thought about all that had happened.

Andie had put it out there, threatened to quit if Kara didn't get her back into the field. Then she'd played Kara by bringing her to meet Dana and Gayle. And Kara responded by getting her back out in the field. But then she'd left.

That wasn't the only thing weighing on Andie's mind. It was also knowing that Kara's lover had killed herself. That Kara had been dealt such a blow. Kind of put things in perspective, huh?

Did that account for Kara's seemingly unusual protectiveness toward Andie?

Did Kara carry guilt over Joanie's suicide? By extension, did she feel guilty that Andie had been injured at work? No, that was out of her control. But keeping Andie in the lab may have felt like control, or at least protection, to Kara. Andie pondered both situations but couldn't make sense of any of either of them.

How did someone even come close to understanding how it would feel to have a lover commit suicide? She wished she'd had the time—or the courage—to ask Kara for more information about Joanie's death. And she wished even more fervently that she'd found a way to ask Kara about how things had ended between the two of them.

Andie fingered her cell phone. She should try Kara. Or not. "What should I do?" she asked Xena.

Xena wagged her tail and moved on to the next clump of grass that needed to be sniffed.

What I should do, Andie mused, is get on with my life. Turn the page. Hell, shut the book.

Move. On.

She quickened the pace after Xena relieved her bladder. The phone rang as Andie unlocked the front door. Caller ID said it was Kennedy, L. Leanne from Barb and Cindy's party. She almost didn't answer it, but she reminded herself she was moving on.

"Hello."

"Andie, hi. This is Leanne Kennedy. I don't know if you remember me, but I met you the other night."

"Hi, Leanne." She rescued the woman from going on and on. "Of course I remember you."

"Oh. I mean good. I mean... sorry. Let me start over. Hello."

"Hello," Andie said. And when Leanne asked her out to dinner, she said yes. She was moving on.

As soon as she hung up, thoughts of Kara flooded her. It's not cheating when you'll probably never see each other again, right? Damn all the confusion. She'd call Kara. And if she gave Andie even a sliver of hope for them, she'd call Leanne back and cancel.

Andie quickly dialed Kara's cell number. The ringing was distorted and brief. Then the line went dead. She stared at the receiver in her hand.

"I guess that's not even the tiniest sliver of hope, huh, Xena?"

Chapter 21

Kara merged her Mini Cooper onto the exit ramp. It felt nice to be driving her own car again. She'd rescheduled her trip to audit the Colorado lab. She didn't care if she might be pushing her luck with George Royal. For the first time since Joanie's death, she took a couple of much overlooked vacation days.

Her phone vibrated against her hip, and she slipped it from its holster. The screen was black. She tapped it against the palm of her hand but it remained dark. Even though nothing was lit up, she pressed the call-answer button. It was obviously not going to cooperate with her. "Not again, you piece of junk," she said. She tossed it into the passenger seat.

She turned onto the road to her parents' house and took in the scenery. The neighborhood looked exactly as it did when she was growing up. The same brick two-stories with the same hedges and flowerbeds. The only real difference was that the old oversized cars were replaced with tank-like SUVs.

She'd lived her entire life in Virginia, first here, then away at college, until Royal Environmental seduced her into foregoing law school to relocate in Baltimore, Maryland. Meeting Joanie had been the extra nudge she'd needed to make the plunge. But the fun and games didn't last long. She'd learned soon enough that, with Joanie, they never did.

Kara pulled into her parents' driveway. She got out of the Mini and slowly walked down the sidewalk. By her third or fourth step, she was transformed into the awkward teen she thought she'd shed years earlier. Each step increased her feeling of not belonging, not measuring up. That she'd had a stable, nonviolent childhood did nothing to alleviate her sense of dread.

Kara's dad met her in the foyer and offered her a drink.

She had to look up slightly to make eye contact. "Ginger ale is fine."

Richard Travis gave her a quizzical look. "You're old enough to drink in front of me, you know."

"I know. I'd rather keep a clear head."

"Sounds serious."

"Where's Mom?"

"Upstairs, changing her clothes."

No doubt her perfectly tailored clothes, Kara thought. Her mother's clothing and makeup and hair were always just right. And the older woman still had trouble accepting that Kara couldn't care less about all those things.

"I'm thinking about going to law school," Kara blurted.

"Your college funds are still there," Richard said as he mixed himself a drink at the wet bar.

"I didn't come to ask for money."

"It's your money." He handed her the ginger ale and motioned toward the den. He folded his tall, thin body and settled onto his leather recliner. Once they were both seated, he continued. "So tell me, what's on your mind."

She felt like a kid again. She clenched her jaw.

"Relax, Kara. Everything doesn't have to be a struggle between us, you know." When she didn't respond, he said, "You do know that, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"When did it turn into you-against-us instead of all-of-us-together?" he asked.

"I don't know." What she wanted to say was she never felt like a part of all-of-us-together.

"When you were a kid, I figured you'd grow out of it, that you were going through a rebellious phase."

"It's not just me, you know," she said, feeling ten years old again. "I never felt like anything I did was good enough, so why bother? And the worse I acted, the more I expected you to step in and make me stop. But you never did."

"I wanted you to be independent. To behave because it was the right thing to do, not because I made you."

Kara didn't respond.

"Do you remember when you were twelve or thirteen and Amy-next-door gave you that permanent wave?"

She smiled at the way Amy Simpson was always Amy-next-door. And at her dad's use of the words "permanent wave." "Not in particular," she said in answer to his question.

"Half your hair fell out. You were horrified. You wanted your mom and me to tell you what to do, but instead we asked what you wanted to do about it."

Kara fidgeted with her glass.

"We wanted you to understand that your actions would always require some thought on your part." He sipped his drink. "You shaved the rest of your hair off."

That wasn't how Kara remembered it. She'd always recalled it as an act of rebellion, not a calculated decision supported by her parents.

"Bottom line, you learned a lesson in thinking for yourself."

"I learned a lesson all right." Kara ran her fingers through her curls. "Let the professionals do the perms."

Her dad smiled. They sat in silence for several moments.

"Okay," Richard said. "Let's talk about now. What's going on with you now?"

"Work's leaving me feeling a little cold lately."

"And you think becoming a lawyer will warm you up?"

"I think I can do better. Be better."

Richard held up his glass as if to toast her. She mirrored the gesture.

"You still won't be coming into my firm, though, will you?"

"No," she said. "I want to go into environmental law."

He nodded. "As long as you're happy. Despite what you may think, the bottom line is that your mom and I just want to see you happy."

She heard her mother coming down the stairs. "Mom wants to see me straight and happy."

"That's a parent thing." He grinned. "Get over it."

"Kara, dear," Carla Travis said as she swept into the room. She was small in stature but always gave the impression of being formidable. Carla looked her daughter up and down. "Don't you look... comfy."

Kara glanced down at her T-shirt and jeans. She refused to apologize or justify dressing for comfort on her days off. "I am, thanks." She glanced at her dad, and he gave her a wink.

"Will you be staying for dinner?"

"I'd love to," she answered with more enthusiasm than she had expected to feel.

Chapter 22

Andie glanced at her phone. Should she try Kara again? She wasn't sure whether the phone had gone dead the other day or Kara had hung up on her. She wouldn't have done that though, Andie was certain. Or would she?

She wondered how many miles separated her from Kara. She could go online and look it up. Or call Kara. Andie was certain she would know the distance. It was just a silly number, but she really wanted to know.

Her heart pounded as she dialed Kara's number. She almost cried at the pleased sound of Kara's voice when she answered.

"How many miles away are you?" Andie asked.

"Six hundred seventy-nine," Kara said without pause.

"That's a lot."

"Yes, it is."

"Do you think you'll be coming back down to our division anytime soon?"

"I don't know." Kara cleared her throat. "Sorry."

Andie swallowed hard. "Don't apologize. It's not like I didn't know your being down here was temporary."

"Oh, Andie," Kara said in a ragged voice.

"So," Andie said, trying to lighten the mood. "Where are you off to next?"

"Grafton, Virginia. I leave in the morning."

"Is that near your folks?" Andie asked.

"You remembered they live in Virginia?"

"There's nothing I don't remember." So much for lightening things up, Andie chastised herself. "Will you get to see your parents?"

"I just saw them, so probably not this trip. They're about an hour from Grafton, which wouldn't be too bad if it weren't for the tunnel traffic. And the fact that I have a ton of work to get back to at the office."

"Is everything going okay for you with Royal?"

"Yeah. Not too bad. George was a little guarded with me when I first got back up here, but he seems to be mellowing some. How about with you?"

"Things are fine."

"Your wrist is okay?"

Andie massaged it and winced at the ache that didn't seem to want to go away. "It's okay," she said. "I miss you," she added before she could stop herself.

"I miss you, too. I've been thinking a lot lately. How would you feel if I—"

Andie jumped at the knock at the door. Xena appeared from the bedroom, her deep bark reverberating through the house.

"If you what?"

"Do you have company?" Kara asked.

"How would I feel if you what?"

Xena barked louder, more insistent.

"I should let you go," Kara said, raising her voice over the racket.

No, Andie wanted to scream. "Okay," she said instead.

"Take care of yourself."

"You, too. Good-bye," Andie said, feeling alone and empty.

There was another knock, and Xena barked again. Andie peeked out the window beside the door, and Leanne waved.

Andie nudged Xena out of the way as she opened the door.

"Hello," Leanne said. "Hope it's okay that I dropped by, but I was in the neighborhood. Really, I'm not just saying that."

"Come on in," Andie said.

Leanne used her hands to hold Xena at bay when the dog tried to get closer to sniff her. Andie contrasted the woman's stiff discomfort to Kara's humor the first time Xena wanted to check her out up close and personal.

"Can I get you something to drink? I have water and apple juice."

"I'd kill for a beer," Leanne said, dodging Xena and making her way to the sofa.

"Sorry, no beer. Just juice and water." How lame, Andie berated herself. Then when she realized Leanne's lip had actually curled in distaste, she fought against growing defensive.

"I'm fine," Leanne answered.

"I could run out and get some beer."

"Nah, that's okay. But you could come sit with me," she said.

"Sure," Andie said.

"What a sweet house," Leanne said as she glanced around the room.

Andie knew that "sweet" meant old and small, but thanked her anyway. She was also pretty sure Leanne was fishing for a tour, but there was no way she was showing her where the bed was.

Xena brought her rawhide over to Leanne, and the woman sat back, increasing the distance between herself and its slobber-swollen end.

Andie immediately thought about Kara that first (and only?) morning they'd woken up together. Kara had been so patient with Xena, so understanding of Andie's attention to her old hound.

Andie noted Leanne's body language. "Go to your bed, baby girl," she told Xena.

The dog's head lowered, and she went to the thick bedding in the corner of the room. Andie hated the dejected way she moved.

Her mind jolted back to her earlier thought that she and Kara had only woken up together once. That first morning. The only other time they had spent the entire night together, she realized, was after her assault. But Kara had been gone when Andie awakened. And then they'd fought about the ICP.

Andie turned. Leanne was looking at her expectantly.

"I probably should have waited for our date tomorrow night, but I was anxious to see you again." Leanne leaned forward and let her lips brush Andie's.

Andie pulled away. She was so not ready for this. She glanced at Xena, and the dog's ears shifted. Andie wanted to invite her back over to the sofa and spend a quiet evening alone with her old hound.

"So, Andie Waters, I've yet to figure out how I managed to land a date with you." Leanne smiled. "I can't believe my luck." She leaned closer and kissed Andie again.

Andie let her mouth linger on Leanne's, knowing it was wrong. All she wanted to do was to tell this woman the only reason she was there with her was because the love of her life was 679 miles away. Six hundred and seventy-nine miles. And what was Kara about to say before they were interrupted?

Leanne studied her face and gave her a little wink as Andie unsuccessfully tried to hide a yawn.

"Am I keeping you up?" Leanne asked.

"Sorry. Busy week." She kept to herself how she hadn't been sleeping too well. The closer she got to the day she'd have to go

back to the site where she'd been attacked, the harder sleep came at night.

"Should I be going?"

"Yeah," Andie agreed. "Sorry," she said halfheartedly.

"That's okay. Sleep well tonight, and we'll play hard tomorrow night."

Andie didn't want to know what that was supposed to mean.

After closing the door behind Leanne, Andie gave Xena a big hug. "She'll get used to you, baby girl. You'll win her over like you do everyone else." She let Xena out for her last potty of the night and got herself ready for bed.

Andie pulled her vibrator from the top dresser drawer. She sprawled on her belly and twisted the toy to medium speed, slipped it under herself and bore down on it. She didn't even attempt to not think about Kara as the vibration tore through her and she pressed harder and harder against it. She pretended Kara was holding her down, telling her, "Take it inside. Take it for me." Andie shifted her hips and gasped as the tip of the vibrator slipped into her wetness. "Oh, God, Kara... Kara... Kara..." Her body went rigid, and she hungrily took in more and more of the toy until she came, crying out Kara's name again and again.

Chapter 23

Kara pulled the company car into the deserted parking lot. The sun was barely visible in the eastern sky. The last time she'd been to this building in Grafton, Virginia, the mission was to close it down. George Royal's orders. She was still pretty green back then and nervous as hell.

The keys to the building fanned across her briefcase in the passenger seat. Inside the case was a stack of resumes. She wondered if George would ever admit he'd made a mistake closing this division down. No way. He would maintain that it was industrial-strength cleaning, something that had to be done. She doubted that. Had he given her time to closely examine all the employees, she could have identified who was worth holding on to. Now he'd given her the directive to take the first steps in reopening the lab.

She checked her watch and hoped that Tim Mailer, the operations manager she was to meet with to go over the building and equipment needs, wouldn't be late.

Also in her briefcase was a list of all ex-employees from that division. George wanted Kara to know who they were so they couldn't slip into the interviewing process unnoticed. There was one employee whom Kara remembered well, a woman named Rachel Hershey. She was one ex-employee Kara wouldn't hesitate to rehire. She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel as she thought about meeting Rachel's girlfriend and about how Kara hadn't been very open with them when they tried to pry into her personal life.

Should she call this woman to see if she was interested in applying? It had nothing to do with the woman being gay, right? And so what if it did?

She knew George Royal would question that choice. He'd been questioning a lot of her choices since her return from Bensonville.

Kara recalled her recent conversation with George about getting Andie a new truck. It certainly wasn't her first capital

decision, so what was his problem? And he'd questioned her about Calvin still being there part-time. She wasn't about to let on that she left him there to help ease Andie back into her position. Calvin would pay for his sins soon enough, but not until Kara was sure Andie had slipped comfortably back into her routine.

With the thoughts of Andie came a quickening of her heartbeat. Their brief conversation the night before had left Kara wanting much more of Andie than was possible. She shut her eyes and let the vision of Andie form in her mind until she could no longer take the need that was drumming up inside her.

She let herself into the sleeping building. It still held the faint aroma of an environmental lab—a mix of waste and chemical odors that were indistinct enough to keep you guessing. She flipped on the lights.

The front desk stood sans computer and covered in dust. An old cooler leaned against the far wall, its lid propped open and a moldy film coating the bottom. She hoped that Tim Mailer was bringing a good-sized cleaning crew with him. George's insistence that she be there from the very beginning, instead of waiting until after cleanup, felt a lot like punishment.

She didn't wait for Tim before giving herself a tour of the building. It was just as they'd left it when they closed it down. Luckily there didn't seem to be any sign of anyone sneaking in. Maybe the biohazard sticker on the front door had been enough of a deterrent. She chuckled.

Tim arrived with two burly men to help with the cleanup. It was mostly dust, but grimy dust. Seven hours and several calluses later, Kara said to herself, "Law school's looking better and better."

As the men left for the day, Kara opened her laptop onto the newly cleaned desk in the manager's office. Their Internet service wouldn't be hooked up until the following day, but she could take a few minutes to review some employee files. Or not, she thought, as she grew more and more distracted.

It had been eight days since she'd told her father she wanted to go to law school. Eight days, and she hadn't contacted any schools for applications. But she knew where she wanted to go. She didn't care if the University of Georgia didn't have the environmental law program that the University of Virginia had. She could always tailor UGA's Juris Doctorate with a Master's in Public Administration to be close enough. Yes, both schools had great reputations, but UGA had proximity to Andie.

She gave herself a mental kick for not broaching the subject with Andie the night before. Why hadn't she finished what she was going to ask Andie? Why didn't she just ask her how she would feel about Kara moving to Georgia to go to law school? What was she so afraid of?

She grabbed her cell phone and dialed Andie's number. She tried to keep her voice light when the answering machine picked up. "Hi, Andie, it's Kara. And hi, Xena. How's my favorite pup?" She tried to steady her faltering voice. "So, Andie, I guess you're out. I wanted to say hello. And that I miss you. I really miss you. Please call me back. I need to talk to you about something. Please."

"Hello?"

Kara wanted to crawl into a hole when she heard an unfamiliar voice.

"Hello?" the voice repeated.

"Hi, is Andie there?"

"Hang on. I'll see if she can come to the phone." The voice grew muffled then continued with, "Hey, babe, can you talk?" There was a giggle, and the voice said, "Sorry, she's a little busy right now. Can I take a message?"

Kara swallowed hard several times and managed to croak out, "No thanks."

She stared at her cell as she disconnected the call. "What in the hell just happened?" she asked herself. If only she could erase that begging message. She cringed at the thought of Andie playing it back in front of the woman who'd answered her phone, the woman who'd called her "babe."

* * *

Andie stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself. Had she heard voices? She stuck her head out of the bathroom and glanced at the answering machine, but the light wasn't blinking. "Was that someone on the phone?"

"You probably heard me talking to Xena," Leanne said.

Strange, Andie thought. "Give me a minute, and I'll be ready to go." She shut the bathroom door. She'd been running late at work because she had to resample a client whose BOD had exceeded its limit. "Damn biochemical oxygen demand," she mimicked Kristine mimicking Sidney, mimicking the client. She smiled at the thought of her new coworker and friend, Kristine. What a character she was.

She towed off her hair. She had refused to skimp on Xena's walk after working late, and Leanne had shown up early. Oh, well, she thought, at least if we start early we might finish early. She couldn't believe she hadn't even gone out on their first date yet and was already wishing it over. She swiped at the condensation on the mirror and stared at her reflection. "Don't be a bitch," she said to the image looking back.

She dressed and smoothed lotion over her face. At least her hair was short enough not to require blow-drying. She opened the bathroom door and came out with a smile.

Leanne was standing only a few feet away. "You know," she said, her voice husky, "maybe we should rethink our plans to go out. Maybe stay in?"

Andie glanced again at the dormant answering machine.

"I'm teasing," Leanne said. "We should probably get going. And by the way, you look great."

She looked down at her khaki pants and sleeveless blouse. "Thanks. So do you." And she did, in her just-tight-enough jeans and girl-cut T-shirt. "All set? Let me get Xena a treat."

"Am I the only dyke who isn't obsessed with a pet?"

Andie wanted to suggest that wasn't something to brag about, but kept it to herself. She gave Xena a treat and washed her hands. "Okay, let's go," she said with more gusto than she felt.

Leanne insisted on treating Andie at the most expensive steakhouse in town. Andie was just thankful it wasn't one of the restaurants with all the animal heads mounted around the walls.

Andie ordered the angel hair pasta with roasted vegetables. Leanne got the steak, medium rare. They spoke about their mutual friends, Barb and Cindy, about the price of gas and oh, wasn't Andie the smart one with her Prius. Andie wanted to comment on being green before green was cool, but didn't.

With each glass of wine, Leanne's propensity to talk with her hands escalated, and she kept using her fork for punctuation. Andie might have found it endearing had it not been for the hunk of dead cow her date was waving in her face as she spoke.

"Tell me about your job at the hospital," Andie said as she sipped her soda.

"Oh, Lord, if I have to hear one more person whine about their aches and pains, I'm going to scream."

"You're a nurse, right?"

"I know. I have a horrible bedside manner. I think I'd be better if I just worked with the coma patients." She grew serious. "I

haven't always been so jaded, you know. Once upon a time I actually dreamed of helping people. One bedpan at a time."

"So, what changed?" Andie asked.

"Burnout, I guess. You ever feel burned out?"

Andie nodded. She was getting more and more acquainted with that concept.

"How so?" Leanne asked.

She didn't feel up to telling someone she barely knew about her work doubts. Maybe one day she would feel differently, but at that very moment, the only person she could imagine talking to about it was Kara. But even that was out of the question, after Kara had put her own job on the line for Andie.

"We should go by that bar where you work," Leanne said, changing the subject.

"Ugh. The Cave is the last place I want to go on my night off."

"I can understand that. I'd rather go back to your place anyway." She licked her lips in a way Andie imagined someone not consumed by thoughts of Kara Travis might find extremely sexy.

Whatever happened to you moving on? Andie asked herself.

"We wouldn't have any privacy at my place with all my roomies milling about," Leanne said. "Makes me want to get my own apartment all the more."

Then, as if trying to prove something to herself, Andie heard her voice come out all warm and flirty as she said, "Yeah, let's go back to my place."

After the amount of wine Leanne drank at dinner, Andie was glad they'd taken her car to the restaurant.

Andie let Xena into the backyard, with the promise of a long walk in the morning. She didn't look at Leanne as she spoke to the dog, because she knew if she saw the woman roll her eyes at the gesture, she'd tell her to leave. Xena came back in only moments later and went to her bed in the corner as if she were a kid on restriction. It broke Andie's heart.

"I'm going to have some water. Would you like anything?" Andie asked from the kitchen, fully aware she could have stocked her fridge with a better variety of beverages since Leanne's last visit, had she really wanted to.

"Water's fine," Leanne answered.

Andie knew she shouldn't be so hard on the woman. She brought in two glasses of water and set them on the stained and scarred coffee table she'd bought at the Good Will store years

earlier. Just as she turned to face her date, Leanne's mouth found hers.

She tried to relax into Leanne's touch, closing her eyes and concentrating on the feel of the woman's lips against her own. She ran her fingers through the straight brown hair and was only half-aware that she was contrasting it to Kara's wild blonde curls.

"My God, you're hot," Leanne said into Andie's neck.

Andie knew the flutter she felt wasn't desire, but something else. Guilt? She knew what she was doing wasn't right but still let Leanne kiss her. She parted her lips and welcomed Leanne's tongue into her mouth, all the while telling herself she wasn't hurting anyone, yet knowing she was lying to herself.

Leanne's hand found its way up Andie's shirt, cupping a breast, and for a brief second Andie feared she'd moan Kara's name instead of Leanne's. She pulled Leanne's hand away.

"What's wrong?" Leanne asked.

"Nothing. I... Can we slow down? Please?"

Leanne pulled farther away. "Sure. Whatever you want. Come here," she said as she pulled Andie closer.

"I mean, slow way down," Andie said.

"Oh." Leanne's eyes widened. "Slow like I should leave?"

"No, slow like maybe we could just talk."

"I should go," Leanne said.

Andie walked her to the door where Leanne kissed her sweetly, briefly on the lips. The gentleness of her touch felt nice and left Andie even more confused.

Chapter 24

Kara sat in the office that would soon belong to the new Virginia division manager. She stared at her cell phone, lifeless on the desk in front of her. She'd hoped Andie would call her back last night. "Maybe today," she said. "Who am I kidding?"

At the knock on the door, she stood. "Rachel, thank you so much for agreeing to see me." She extended her hand.

Rachel Hershey gave Kara's hand a firm shake. "I must admit you were the last person I expected to hear from."

Kara gestured around the room. "Bring back memories?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah." She sat in the chair Kara motioned her to.

"So, what have you been up to?" She purposely kept the question open-ended. She didn't want to ask specifically about her girlfriend. Was it Anne, or Anna? Her face grew warm. She knew how much she dreaded people from her past asking how Joanie was. Thankfully, Rachel didn't know enough to ask.

"I've been running a doggy-daycare." She smiled. "My partner Annie and I opened the business after you fired me."

Kara returned her smile. Annie, she told herself. Remember that. "I really was sorry about having to deliver that bad news."

"Of course you were. But Royal dumping me was the best thing that could have happened. We love our new life. We love our doggy clients."

Kara thought about Andie and how good she would be at doggy-daycare. She felt her breath catch slightly and tried to push her from her mind.

"I admit I'm surprised you're still with Royal Environmental. I thought for sure they would have chewed you up and spit you out by now."

"No, I've survived," Kara said. But her thoughts were saying, "so far."

"You seemed devastated when you closed us down."

“I was devastated.”

“But you got over it.”

Kara played with the stack of resumes on the desk. “I got very good at compartmentalizing. Too good, some would say.”

Rachel nodded. “So, why am I here?”

“I was going to offer you a job, hoping you’d come onboard as lab manager. I think I know your answer, but I’m still going to give you the chance to say, ‘Go to hell.’”

“Royal Environmental can go to hell,” Rachel said. “But you—you should join Annie and me for dinner.”

“Dinner? That’s the best rejection I’ve ever had.”

“Is there anyone you want to invite?”

“No, there’s no one.” She rested her hand briefly on her quiet cell phone.

Chapter 25

Andie sat in the truck and inhaled the new-car smell. She could never thank Kara enough for not making her get back in the old truck with its memories of the attack. Ah, Kara. It had been two weeks since Andie talked to her. Two long weeks.

She ran a trembling finger along the steering wheel. She should have known that, even with a new truck, she couldn't completely escape memories of that horrible day. Paralyzed, she sat staring out at the sidewalk where she'd been left semiconscious and bleeding. She started to shake and couldn't stop. A large sob escaped her.

She'd taken an Ambien to get to sleep the night before. Better living through chemistry, she mused. She fought to remember who had said that to her. Oh, yeah, the pharmacy tech she dated a few years back. Was there a magic pill that would keep her hands from shaking or her stomach from churning?

Bennie's patrol car pulled up across the street. He gave her a half-wave and she waved back. She grabbed her clipboard with the chain of custody on it.

She stared straight ahead as she lugged the compositor to the side of the manhole. She knew Bennie would keep watch until she was done at the site, and she was determined to at least appear confident. She looked at the cover, secure on the hole. When she maneuvered it off, she peered into the hole and thought about Kara's ball cap. Looking at the top rung of the built-in ladder, she was struck by the realization that the guy who attacked her had said something about seeing her come up out of there. Had he really said that? Had her almost-descent into the confined space been the reason for the attack?

Her hands shook so fiercely she had to stop programming the compositor's computer and take several deep, cleansing breaths. She squeezed her eyes closed and fought to regain her composure.

Ten minutes later, she waved at Bennie as she climbed into the truck. He waved back and pulled away from the curb. She guiltily

watched him leave, wondering if she should say something about the guy thinking she'd been in the manhole. Would it help them find and arrest him to know that? Was it worth admitting that she'd even considered entering a confined space?

Andie quickly drove to her next site. She started to give Nadine a peace sign and drive through the gate when the woman signaled her to stop. Another change in protocol?

"Hey, stranger," Nadine said through the truck window. "Nice ride."

"Yeah, it's nice for now, but we both know it won't stay that way for long."

"It's so good to see you back out here," Nadine said.

"It's good to be here."

Nadine pulled a Snickers tied with red ribbon from behind her back. "Welcome back."

"Thank you so much," Andie said.

"You're welcome." She flashed a peace sign. "Now get to work, slacker."

* * *

"LSDAS, LSATs, application deadlines, letters of recommendation, establishing residency in Georgia." Kara stopped in her tracks on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. "I can't do all this. What was I thinking?"

"You're thinking you want to do great things. You can do this," Brooke said.

Kara couldn't believe she was even considering going to Bensonville, Georgia, to challenge some other woman for Andie's affections. But worse, she couldn't believe she still hadn't told Brooke about that woman answering Andie's phone.

"Okay, one thing at a time." Brooke held the door to the restaurant open for Kara. "Georgia residency and in-state tuition. Tell me what your plans are."

"I have some money left in my college fund. So, Tuition Equalization Scholarship for the first year, and by then I'll have residency for in-state tuition for the next two years."

"Where will you live? How will you live?"

Before Kara could answer, someone grabbed her arm. "Kara? I haven't seen you in forever," Trudy Smith said.

Yeah, Kara thought, not since I caught you sleeping with my lover.

“What’s it been? Four years?” Trudy gave her an exaggerated once-over. “You look well.”

“I am well,” Kara said.

“I guess I expected guilt to have exacted some toll on you. But you look really good.” Trudy kept appraising her.

“Guilt?” Kara’s fists clenched and unclenched at her sides.

“Over poor Joanie.” She made tsk-tsk sounds. “It was such a shock. After all those years of you threatening suicide if she ever left, and then for her to be the one who actually did it.”

Kara’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

“You bitch,” Brooke growled at Trudy. “You know damned well Kara never threatened any such thing.”

“I know only what Joanie told me. For years, she couldn’t consider leaving Kara for fear of what she would do.”

“How could you listen to such nonsense from someone as crazy as Joanie?”

“Brooke, stop it,” Kara said.

“I will not stop it. But this bitch is going to stop it. Don’t you ever repeat those lies again, you hear me?” Brooke was dangerously close to Trudy.

“Excuse me, ladies?” The manager’s face was pale.

Kara glanced around and was mortified when she saw they had an audience. “Let’s go,” she murmured.

“Let’s stay and eat.” Brooke turned to the manager. “Is our table ready yet?”

“Uh... yeah. I mean, yes, ma’am.”

Kara lagged behind as they made their way across the dining area. She felt eyes on her and wondered how many other people Joanie had told her lies to. Would she ever know the extent and nature of it all? Did she want to? Her stomach soured, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to eat.

They sat, and Brooke began a nervous chatter about the menu items. It was obvious to Kara she was attempting to distract her from the unpleasant encounter with Trudy, but that wasn’t necessary. In her mind she had already moved past that. She recalled a scene between her and Joanie’s parents right after Joanie’s death.

She stared at the menu as the memory assaulted her.

Joanie’s parents had swooped in immediately to reclaim their daughter’s body. After hardly any contact for years, they wanted control over her remains. Kara was in too much shock to clearly register what was happening, so when they gave her an hour to get

her personal belongings out of Joanie's house, she stood there in her living room and fought to ask what in the world they meant. Just like her reaction to Trudy's accusation, Kara had simply stood there with her mouth open and no words coming out.

"What?" Kara had eventually managed to ask.

"I want you out of here." Joanie's mother glared at her.

"Out of my house?"

"Out of Joanie's house. You've done enough damage. I want you out." She'd stood straighter then, and the evil look she gave Kara would have wilted her if it hadn't angered her more.

"Whoa." She'd looked around for Brooke or anyone else who could help her. "This is my house. As is everything in it." She found the police officer who had responded to her 911 call. An hour later, Kara was waving her mortgage papers around and shoving three trash bags of belongings at Joanie's parents. That was the last she'd heard from them.

By the end of the month, she'd put her home on the market and made an offer on a condo closer to the office and farther from memories of her life with Joanie.

Kara's hands trembled as she held the menu and tried to fake perusing it. She didn't see the sandwiches or platters; she didn't notice the prices or the choices of sides. The image that assailed her was of the last time she'd seen Joanie.

Her lover's once beautiful body lay pale in the bathtub. Vomit crusted the front of her, and blood trailed from long gashes on both forearms to pool beneath her, its darkness in sharp contrast with the tub. Kara would learn later that Joanie had used large doses of various drugs as a contingency plan in case the razor blade didn't do the job.

Kara vaguely recalled the police officer rousing her from the corner of the bedroom where she'd tucked herself away after dialing 911.

"Kara? Hey, are you with me?" Brooke asked.

Kara opened her eyes. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Forget about that moron."

She struggled to follow what Brooke was saying. "Who? Trudy?" She gave a dismissive flick of her hand. "I already have."

* * *

"Now's not the best time to sell," Ramona Morales said as she looked around the condo. "But I'll do my best to take very good care of you."

Kara wondered if the real estate agent was flirting with her.

"You've been here how many years? Three?"

"Yes," Kara said.

"I absolutely love the floor plan." She nodded her head. "Yes, I think I can take very good care of you." Ramona's eyes bored into Kara's.

Kara decided that a little goodwill couldn't hurt in such a depressed market.

"How fast do you need out?" Ramona asked.

"I'm not desperate. I can wait a little while for the right offer."

"So, we'll still call you motivated." She smiled. "That will make some buyers feel like you've got your game on."

Kara wasn't sure about all that but figured if it sounded good to Ramona, it sounded good to her.

"Where are you looking to buy?"

"I'm probably moving to Georgia."

"What's down there?" Ramona asked.

"Law school, I hope." And Andie Waters, she thought. Kara had applied to UGA, UVA, and a half-dozen others, but hoped with all her being that UGA would come through for her.

"Baltimore's loss is definitely Georgia's gain. In the meantime, I'll bring over the contract tomorrow. Will you be available then?"

"Yes, that'll be fine."

"And I'll need to take pictures." She looked around. "Usually this is where I tell the client to put away their cutesies and personal photos, clean off countertops, etc, but I see you've already done all that."

She would let Ramona think what she may. She didn't need to know that her condo always looked that not lived-in.

"After we get business taken care of tomorrow, would you like to have dinner?"

Kara wondered if a dinner date was taking goodwill too far. The woman's voice answering Andie's phone ricocheted through her mind. What the heck. It was just a meal. "Yeah," she said, "dinner would be nice."

After showing Ramona out, Kara settled into the softness of her hemp sofa. Her next step would be a furniture sale. She still had to figure out about work. She kept vacillating between taking a leave of absence and giving her notice.

Again, that woman's voice calling Andie "babe" played in her head. "A leave of absence," she told herself. "Just in case."

Chapter 26

Andie paused in front of the glass door leading into the Bensonville Sheriff's Office. She hadn't been there in a very long time, not since she had to pick up Barb after she'd clocked a guy who'd spewed homophobic rhetoric at her and Cindy. The guy ended up not pressing charges because he was embarrassed that a woman had decked him. Even if, according to him, it wasn't a real woman.

She stared at her reflection in the glass. She looked as tired as she felt. She needed to finally get all of this assault and car-jacking stuff behind her.

She pulled open the door and had to wait a minute for her eyes to adjust after being out in the sunshine. A balding man she'd never met was sitting behind a huge, cluttered desk.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi. My name is Andrea Waters. Officer Manning asked me to come by to look at some photos."

"Waters... Waters... oh yeah. The assault. I'll let him know you're here."

Moments later, Bennie came out from a door to the right of the reception area. "Hey, Andie, how you feeling?"

"Tired and ready for this to be over."

"I hear you." He nodded his head toward a door leading to a side office. "I've got a photo lineup for you to look at."

"What, no dramatic look-through-the-one-way-glass thing?"

"Maybe they do that in Atlanta. Here, I just show you pictures."

"Good," she said, relieved to not have to see her attacker in person.

They went into the office, and he placed the photos on the table in front of her. Bile burned her throat as she instantly recognized her attacker in one of the photos. The picture looked like it was from a driver's license. He wasn't stubble-faced like he'd been the day he

assaulted her, but there was no doubt he was the one who'd beaten her up and stolen the company's truck. She raised her hand to point, but it shook so hard she immediately lowered it.

"You okay?"

"That's him. The third from the right."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely," she said, her voice rising with the stress.

Bennie put his hand on her shoulder. "Good job, Andie."

"I don't have to see him in person right now, do I?"

"No." Bennie looked away before continuing. "He doesn't particularly look like himself right now. It seems someone worked him over pretty good. We found him seeking treatment in the emergency room."

"Can't say I feel sorry for him."

"Just tell me you don't know anything about his condition," Bennie said.

"What? You think I had someone rough him up?"

"I have to ask. It's part of my job."

"I honestly don't know anything about any of that. I swear."

Bennie smiled. "No swearing until court. You working today?"

"Soon as I can get there."

"Okay, go on. I'll let you know when we need you again."

Andie hesitated. "Hey, Bennie?"

"Yeah?"

"The day that guy beat me up, I was running a test on the manhole there. I had noticed the cover was dislodged. Maybe that had something to do with it."

"I'll check it out. Thanks, Andie."

* * *

"You look whipped," Kristine said.

"I am whipped." Andie thought about her morning and cringed. "They've picked up a suspect in my case."

"In your car-jacking?"

Andie nodded. "I had to go to the police station this morning to do a photo ID on him."

"Ick. But it's got to be a relief. You should call Kara Travis and tell her."

Andie's pulse quickened. She'd been thinking the same thing. She leaned against the front office desk and caught herself caressing the new logbook again. Since it was implemented by Kara, and she

had to use it throughout the day, she repeatedly caught herself staring at it or touching it.

When she found herself lost in the memory of Kara that the logbook evoked, she'd humor herself briefly, then call Leanne for a distraction. She shouldn't use Leanne like that but couldn't stop herself.

"Andrea?" Kristine said as she gave her a little nudge.

"Huh?" She quickly put the logbook down on the desk.

"You haven't heard anything I've said in the past two minutes, have you? I was saying that everyone in Tennessee called Kara Travis an Ice Princess."

"Must be universal," Andie said, struggling to keep her voice neutral.

"Yeah, typical insult when they know she's brilliant and her very capabilities are what threatens to make them obsolete."

"Brilliant?"

"Oh, come on."

"What?" Andie asked.

"Don't even act like you didn't see it. The woman is spot-on in her assessment of people, dynamics. She correctly reads a lab from day one and goes about pulling together the spreadsheets and charts to illustrate what she knew the second she walked in the front door."

"You speak as if you're in awe."

"Awe may be a little strong, but I've always respected her. She's aloof, so people are quick to call her icy. I, on the other hand, have it pegged. She's too guarded."

"Guarded against what?"

"Probably something irrelevant to anything regarding Royal Environmental. Who knows? Who cares? All I really care about is that she got me transferred out of Tennessee."

"Yeah, so what's up with that, anyway? The rumor mill has really been churning."

"Between you and me?"

"Absolutely," Andie said.

"When Ms. Travis was at the Tennessee division, I approached her about a transfer. Anywhere. As long as I got out of there and somewhere my ex-husband wouldn't easily find me." She waved off Andie's look of concern. "That's a story for another time. Ms. Travis told me there weren't any openings, but that she'd keep my request in mind."

Andie nodded.

"But after she fired so many of my coworkers, I figured a transfer was a dream. I was just glad I still had a job at that point."

"Then you ended up here."

"Yep. I couldn't believe it when she called and asked if I'd be interested in coming to Bensonville. I was shocked she'd come through for me."

Andie wasn't shocked. Kara was no Ice Princess. Quite the opposite. And she had come through for Andie, too.

"Oh, good, your logbook."

Andie grabbed it off the desk.

Kristine gave a chuckle. "Relax, I'm not taking it forever." She pointed at it. "I just need to scan the used pages and e-mail them to Ms. Travis. I've already sent her Calvin's, and she's waiting on yours."

Andie's heart started pounding. "Uh, yeah, sure." She handed it to Kristine. "I'll come back for it after I finish cleaning my equipment."

She made a point of hanging around for a few more minutes while the pages were scanned. She couldn't think of an excuse to wait any longer, so she went to the back of the building to get to work scrubbing buckets and hoses.

Two hours later, she wandered back to the front office. She took her logbook from Kristine and leaned against the file cabinet, trying to look casual. "So," she said and cleared her throat. "Next time you have Kara Travis on the phone, you should let me talk to her."

"Hope it can wait," Kristine said.

"Oh?" the question came out high and squeaky.

Kristine studied Andie for several seconds. "Yeah, I just heard that she's taking a leave of absence."

"Oh?" Andie asked again.

Calvin burst out of Sidney's office. "Look, it's the teacher's pet," he yelled at Andie. "That Travis bitch didn't have the backbone to fire me herself. She had to get Sid to do her dirty work."

Andie watched as Calvin stormed out, his baggy pants barely hanging on, his shirt untucked, his stubbled face set in anger. Turning to meet Kristine's questioning look, Andie stood there, not knowing how to respond and not sure if her throat would open up enough for any words to come out.

Andie reached across the bar and held on to the Budweiser bottle as Joel wrapped his fingers around it. He gave it a slight pull, but she didn't let go. "They've made an arrest in my car-jacking and the assault," she said as she studied Joel's busted knuckles a moment longer before releasing her hold on his beer.

"Yeah? Cool," Joel said.

She thought about what Bennie told her about finding the guy all beat up. "An anonymous tip led the police to the hospital where the guy was getting patched up."

"You don't say?"

"You wouldn't know anything about that, now, would you?" she asked as she stared again at his badly bruised knuckles.

Joel shrugged, downed half his beer, and gave her a cocky grin.

She wasn't totally convinced that she wanted to know whether Joel had played a part in her attacker's medical issues, but she hadn't planned to let him off the hook too easily, either. She decided to let it go for the moment when Marla sashayed up to the bar wearing a tight blouse and a grin so wide that Andie feared for her friend's face.

"I'm not done with you," Andie told Joel, wagging her finger at him. She turned to Marla. "What's up?"

"Nooothiing." Marla dragged the word out as she waved the fingers of her left hand in Andie's face. "Nothing but this rock on my finger."

"Ugh," Joel said as he left. "Time to go shoot pool."

"I'll be damned. Chuck asked," Andie said.

"And I accepted." Marla clapped her hands and held out the left one to show the ring again. "So, what do you think?"

"You know I have nothing against straight people. I just don't think they should be allowed to get married." She gave a forced smile and wiped at the bar.

"This isn't about straight people. It's about me," Marla said.

Andie put two shot glasses on the bar. She filled one with tequila and the other with club soda. "Okay. Here's to you." They tapped their shot glasses lightly and downed them. Andie exaggerated a reaction to her shot of soda.

Marla wiped her mouth. "You know how I voted."

"I know. Always my champion. But I should have known I couldn't hold you to your vow not to get married until I had the right to. I'm only letting you off the hook because I know I'm destined to be single forever."

“What about Leanne? She’d marry you in a heartbeat.”

“For the past week and a half, she’s been hinting she should move in with me.”

“And?”

“We’ve only been going out for a little over a month.” She gave Marla a stern look. “Now is not the time for lesbians and U-Haul jokes. We haven’t even had sex.” She leaned closer. “And Leanne’s just not crazy about Xena.”

“You mean she’s just not Kara Travis.”

“There’s that, too.”

Chapter 27

Kara's head reeled over the events of the past few days. The day after she'd requested a leave of absence and George had approved it, he decided the time wasn't right for Kara to take off after all. Then he gave her a schedule of labs to visit and the dates he expected her at each one.

She, in turn, gave him her resignation. She would stay on long enough for them to hire a replacement, even though she was pretty sure they would promote John East from within. Whoever it turned out to be, Kara was willing to take her replacement, be it John or someone else, with her to the Colorado division to train there.

"Kara?"

She looked up to find Hugh Sampson with a smirk on his face. "George wants me to escort you off Royal Environmental's property."

"Give me a break," she said to the biggest jerk of all the Royal VPs.

"This is serious. I'm to supervise your removal of personal items from your office and show you off the premises."

Kara was sure she was making this guy's day by giving him the satisfaction of watching her leave. It was probably making his whole sorry year.

It was her turn to smirk as she picked up an engraved pen and pencil set, a gift from Brooke, from her desk. Besides her purse, they were her only personal items in the office. She silently thanked the Universe that she didn't have to lug a cardboard box overflowing with pictures and an oversized nameplate past the entire Royal clan.

She plucked her purse from the desk drawer and didn't give Hugh a chance to ask. She took the items out one by one, identifying them out loud for him as she went.

"My house and car keys." She set them on the desk. "My driver's license and cash. Lip balm. Personal cell phone." Everything on top of the desk. "And my tampons. Any questions?"

Hugh turned red and looked away. Kara shoved it all back in her purse.

She tossed the keys to the company car at Hugh and held back a chuckle when he dropped them. Then she slid her company cell phone across the desk.

"Come on. If you're escorting me out, I don't have all day."

"I'll get one of the girls in the office to drive you home."

"Don't bother. And they are women, not girls." She walked several steps in front of him. She didn't look at anyone, even though she really wanted to say good-bye to Debra and Wanda. Don't make eye contact, and maybe you won't crumble, she told herself.

She squared her shoulders, looked straight ahead, and counted her steps until she was at the front door.

"Kara, your final check will be in the mail," Hugh said, much louder than necessary.

She nodded as she walked out the front door.

Once across the street and out of sight of the office, she started to shake. She pulled out her cell phone but didn't dial right away. She kept walking, even if her head wasn't as high.

George's voice kept taunting her. "I don't know what happened in Georgia to make you go soft, but it's very disappointing," he'd said the day before.

"Screw you," she whispered now, her belated response.

She quickly dialed Brooke. "Please meet me at the Taco Bell by the office. I need a ride, and no, I don't want to hear how you told me so."

"I did tell you not to give notice," Brooke said.

"It was the right thing to do."

"The right thing and the best thing are usually not the same thing."

"Please come get me." She hung up. She could always work in her father's office in Virginia until school started, if she had to.

At least Ramona Morales had shown several people her condo, and one couple had even scheduled an appointment to come back the next day for a second look. She felt encouraged on that part of her life anyway.

She thought about her conversation the other day with Ramona. "There's a ten-month absorption rate for units in your price range in this area," Ramona had said.

"Which means it might be a while," Kara conceded. She perked up and added, "But it only takes one buyer."

"That's the spirit," Ramona said. She squinted slightly as she watched Kara. "I hope she's worth it."

"Who?"

"The woman in Georgia. And don't look at me that way. It's written all over you. Not to mention how hard you've been working to keep me at arm's length."

"She's worth it," Kara said to herself as she went inside Taco Bell for a soft drink while she waited for Brooke.

* * *

Kara wrapped a plate in newspaper. She wondered if packing was her way of willing the sale of her condo. Or working off her anger at Brooke.

She thought about her conversation earlier with her. Her concern over Andie not calling her back, even if it was just to tell her she'd moved on, led her to telling Brooke about the other woman answering Andie's phone.

"I want an explanation," Kara had said to Brooke.

Brooke stared at her for a long time before she'd said, "Do you want one from Andie, or do you really want one from Joanie?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The nerve of her. Kara seethed as she wrapped another plate. It was one thing for Brooke to say "told you so" about work, but she'd gone on to suggest that Kara wanted to lose at love. And that she was sabotaging herself by wanting Andie as a form of self-flagellation for how things ended with Joanie. How dare Brooke?

Kara tried to focus on packing rather than stoke her anger at Brooke. She rose up on her tiptoes to reach something at the back of the highest cabinet. She pulled out a coffee mug. Joanie's coffee mug. Was this the last thing she had of Joanie's? Had she really forgotten it was stashed up there? She would have had to be the one to put it there. What did it mean that she'd saved it? And that she'd forgotten she had?

Ah, Joanie. Had she really told people that Kara threatened to kill herself if Joanie ever left her? Again she wondered what other lies Joanie had told, and to whom, over the years.

When Joanie told Kara her dad often locked her in the basement for days when she was a child, had she been lying about the abuse? And when Joanie claimed her parents had long ago

disowned her for being a lesbian, had she really been in touch with them all those years?

“Lies!” Kara screeched as she hurled the mug against the wall. Shards of ceramic shot out in all directions. She stared at an indentation in the plaster and cursed herself for the damage. Breaking stuff was Joanie’s MO, not hers.

Kara grabbed the broom and dustpan and swept up the mess. She’d swept up so many messes throughout her years with Joanie, what was one more? She chastised herself for losing control. Joanie was always the one overreacting to every little thing. Her mood swings were legendary with the few people who hung around for any length of time.

Joanie was a demanding lover, but an even more difficult friend. Her casual acquaintances and flings never stayed around long enough to see the huge downs that always followed the exciting highs.

Until recently, Kara had effectively filed away all of this old baggage from her time with Joanie. What was different now?

Andie Waters. Andie had begun to melt the ice around Kara’s heart, and the time had come for Kara to accept the fact that the only way to complete the thawing was to face the memories of Joanie head-on, without blinking, without sparing herself.

An unanswered question nagged at her. But she’d only find the answer if she knew the question.

Kara closed her eyes. She could almost feel Joanie’s breath on her ear, even though she could barely make out Joanie’s desperate words. “Why haven’t you already left?” The wonder in Joanie’s voice had made Kara want the answer for both of them. But then, as now, Kara was afraid of what the answer might be.

Why had she stayed? The bad so obviously far outweighed the good. Why didn’t she leave?

She grabbed the putty she’d bought to fill in the nail holes left behind from the Pier One prints she’d donated to Good Will after her return from Georgia. She set about patching the dent in the wall.

You were waiting me out, Joanie’s voice whispered in her ear.

“Yes, I was,” Kara had said. “I was hoping you’d leave and spare me a loud, messy breakup. There it is. I took the lazy way out by waiting.”

But nothing with Joanie could be that easy.

“You didn’t always know what you were doing, Joanie. I know you were sick. You weren’t a bad person, just an ill one. And I hope

that wherever you are now, you've found your peace, because I am more than ready to find mine."

When the putty was dry, she slowly, deliberately sanded it smooth. She marveled as her residual anger and sorrow over Joanie dissipated more and more with each swipe of the sandpaper.

After showering, she curled under her cool, soft sheets and thought of touching Andie again. She rolled over and reached into her nightstand for her vibrator. One hand held the toy taut against her clit while the other tweaked one nipple, then the other. She arched her back and whispered, "Yes, Andie, yes."

She pinched her nipple hard, sending delightful pain through it. The vibrator whirred on, and she clenched her muscles over and over until her hips thrust up one last time and she came. "Andie, please don't let us be over. Please, baby."

The vibrator, now still, rested between her legs. Contentment enveloped her. Yes, she would go to Georgia and fight to win back Andie. And yes, she wanted Andie more than anything, but if it didn't work out, she wouldn't be devastated. Yeah, she thought, keep telling yourself that.

She rolled out of bed. In the bathroom, she washed the vibrator with soap and water. The phone rang, and she followed the sound until she found the receiver on the kitchen counter.

Ramona told her another realtor's client wanted to see the condo. Kara threw on some clothes and made up her bed. She opened all the blinds and turned on the lights and fans before leaving to let the Realtor Goddess or God work their selling magic. At least she hoped it would be magic.

Kara ordered a double mocha latte and an orange-cranberry scone at the corner coffee shop. She'd just sat at a window table when her cell chirped. "Hello."

"Kara, hi, it's Debra."

"I'm so glad you called."

"Sorry I didn't call sooner. I thought maybe you wouldn't want to hear from anyone at Royal Environmental."

"I always want to hear from you. Unless it's bad news. I'm not in the mood for bad news." She fidgeted with her fork, poking at the scone.

"I thought you'd like to know that we heard from the Bensonville office. The police have made an arrest in Andrea Waters's assault."

Kara felt a moment of breathlessness. "What a relief. Thanks for telling me."

After staring out the window of the coffee shop for an hour and a half, thinking of how much she missed Andie, Kara returned home. The realtor's card was on the counter, and the lights had been turned off. She worked her way through the condo, turning off ceiling fans and shutting blinds. She walked past the bathroom, and a splash of red caught her attention. Her vibrator sat on the vanity, right where she'd left it.

"No, no, no," she said. "Please, this can't be happening."

* * *

The next day, Ramona called to let her know that the client loved the condo and asked several times if all appliances were included. Did Kara sense a playful edge to Ramona's voice?

When the client made an offer, Kara decided it must have been her lucky vibrator. She figured she better bring it to Bensonville with her. She'd need all the luck she could muster. Her mind wandered to thoughts of using her lucky vibrator on Andie...

Chapter 28

Andie glanced through the treetops as she slowly drove down the textile mill's pitted back road. Her eyes drifted down. The red-shouldered hawk was perched on a branch even lower than he'd been when she'd taken the photo that adorned her wall at home. She stopped the truck twenty feet away from where she usually parked the company truck and grabbed her camera.

Andie remembered how Kara had commented on the framed photo on Andie's wall. She'd love this one even more. She zoomed in on the bird. Her hand shook slightly in anticipation as she took the picture. The bird glared. A look of total contempt pierced her, and she lowered the camera. She took a step closer, and the bird pivoted its head to look down. Andie also looked down. Then she saw it. A viscous, turquoise discharge oozed from the end of a small pipe peeking out of the bank of the stream. The mill was discharging directly into the water. She looked back at the bird, and she'd have sworn its eyes asked her what she planned to do about it.

She walked closer, and the hawk opened its wings but didn't fly away. With some effort, she tore her eyes from the powerful sight of the sun filtering through the hawk's feathers. She took several shots of the polluting discharge before bringing the camera back to the hawk. Its expression stopped her from snapping the picture.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, I'll do something."

Andie drove the truck to her usual sampling spot, got out, and quickly set up the compositor to pull two liters of sample over the next twenty-four hours. When she got back into the truck, she wrote down the date and time on the chain-of-custody form and stared at her contact's name and phone number. Not the way to handle this, she told herself.

She scrolled through the numbers in her cell phone until she came to Paul Young's listing. She had promised him she'd be in

touch, after all. She cleared her throat several times before pressing the call button for the editor at the local paper.

* * *

Andie pulled off her work boots in the mudroom as Xena wagged her entire body over to her. “Hey, baby girl.”

She marveled at how wonderful it was to be loved so unconditionally. “How can anyone not love you back?” she asked her companion. Leanne still hadn’t warmed up to the dog, and Andie doubted that would ever change.

She avoided the framed photo of the hawk hanging on the wall. The image of the bird’s glare at the mill was still vivid in her mind. So many questions nagged her. Should she call someone with environmental protection? Maybe e-mail Green Peace or any of the many watchdog organizations she couldn’t hold memberships with because it would be a conflict of interest? Or was it enough that she’d contacted Paul at the newspaper?

What she wanted to do was call Kara. She wouldn’t be too far out of line if she called her at home and talked shop, would she?

She glanced at the blinking answering machine light and figured it was probably Leanne. Andie had given up on hearing from Kara. At least she’d quit comparing Leanne to Kara. Well, mostly. And she’d pretty much convinced herself that her discontent with Leanne had nothing to do with the wild-haired blonde with clear blue eyes and killer kiss.

She rubbed Xena behind her ears and promised them both she would break it off with Leanne. There was no sense prolonging the inevitable. “But not tonight,” she said. “Tonight I want to make it through my shift at The Cave as quietly and uneventfully as possible.”

* * *

Kara sat in her Mini Cooper, staring across the parking lot at Andie’s Prius wedged between two pickups. Just like that first night. She shivered at the thought of all that had happened since then. She checked her hair in the rearview mirror, tried briefly to smooth it with her hands, and gave it up as a lost cause.

She glanced at the GPS mounted to her dash and was thrilled that it had gotten her from her hotel in Athens to The Cave without a hitch.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked herself. She entered the bar and felt more than one pair of eyes on her as she made her way across the floor. Then, in what seemed like slow motion, Andie turned and saw her.

Kara tried to read Andie’s reaction as she neared the bar, but her expression was unlike any she’d ever seen. She feared she’d made a huge mistake going to The Cave. Too late, she chastised herself. Say something...

She extended her hand across the shiny, red bar. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Kara Travis, ex-corporate Ice Princess and soon-to-be law student.”

Andie smiled.

Thank you, Universe, Kara thought when Andie didn’t tell her to go away.

Andie took the offered hand. “I’m Andie Waters, bartender and field sampler.”

“You look great,” Kara said.

“So do you.” She locked her eyes onto Kara’s. “Why are you here?”

Right to the point, Kara thought. She was trying to decide how to best tell Andie she was there because she was madly in love with her when a woman bulldozed past her. She bit back any idea of professing her love when the woman leaned over the bar and planted a kiss on Andie’s mouth.

“Hey, babe. You going to introduce me to your friend?”

Andie stammered, “Kara Travis, meet, uh, Leanne—”

“Kennedy,” the woman finished for Andie without missing a beat. “Leanne Kennedy.” She squinted at Kara. “Didn’t I meet you at Barb and Cindy’s party? Not that I noticed much about anyone other than Andie that night.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kara said, not at all eager to relive the fiasco of the party Brooke dragged her to.

“Can I get you a drink?” Andie asked Kara. “A Cape Cod?”

Kara felt great pleasure watching Leanne bristle at Andie’s knowledge of what she drank. “I would love one.”

Andie mixed the drink and waved away Kara’s offer of money. Again, Leanne’s raised hackles were evident.

“How do you two know each other?” Leanne asked.

Kara and Andie stared at one another. Kara smiled when she noticed the blush creep up Andie’s neck.

“Work,” Andie managed to croak. She grabbed her bar rag and started buffing the shiny red surface. “They made an arrest in my case,” Andie said.

“I know. That’s great.” In response to Andie’s quizzical look, she added, “Debra called me from corporate to let me know.”

“So, you don’t live here, do you?” Leanne asked Kara. “How long are you in town for?” She fixed a laser-like glare on Kara.

Kara wanted to say “forever” or “long enough to win Andie back,” but decided to behave.

“Where are you staying?” Andie asked.

“In Athens. I’m at the Comfort Inn while I look for an apartment near UGA.”

“Hey, doll,” Joel said as he sauntered up behind Kara.

“Hey, yourself,” she answered. In her peripheral vision she saw Leanne entwine her fingers with Andie’s. Now it was her turn to feel the prickle of ignited ire.

“Come sit with me. You can watch me kick ass on the pool table.”

“You really do know how to show a woman a good time, I don’t care what anyone says,” Kara said.

Even as she was agreeing to join Joel, she wondered if she should leave the bar. But she didn’t. She sat and drank and observed. She unconsciously smoothed down her hair as she noticed every strand of Leanne’s was in place. And, she asked herself, what’s with that fake smile plastered on the bitch’s face?

The longer she watched Andie with that woman, the more convinced she became that it was all wrong. Wishful thinking? Perhaps. But the body language... The way Andie stiffened when the woman leaned closer. The way Andie didn’t even glance over at Kara. She’d watched Andie at work and knew she was always aware of who was where and doing what. It wasn’t business as usual for Andie to not even look in her direction.

Joel placed a Cape Cod on the table in front of Kara. “Not that I mind waiting on you hand and foot...”

“I didn’t ask you to bring me a drink.”

“Not with words.” He studied her as he stroked his goatee. “Listen here. What I was going to say was just go over there and tell that needy bitch to leave Andie alone.”

Kara laughed loudly. When Andie and Leanne both looked over, she stifled it.

“Seriously,” Joel said.

“I gave up all rights to her affections a long time ago.”

“And here I’d pegged you as a fighter. Guess I was wrong.”

“Guess so.” Kara belted down half of her drink. “Good night, Joel.”

With great effort, Kara managed to make it out of the bar without looking back at Andie. Or the needy bitch with her.

Chapter 29

The driving range was relatively quiet, as Kara knew it would be at seven o'clock on a weekday morning. She'd grown tired of tossing and turning on the lumpy hotel mattress as she fought against images of Andie with Leanne.

"And the nerve of Joel." Kara swung at the golf ball and smirked her approval at its distance. "To say I'm not a fighter." She thought about fighting for Andie's job. And fighting for her dignity in the wake of Joanie's betrayal and the lies still finding their way to her.

She set up another ball. "I." She planted her feet. "Am." She gripped the club. "A." She swung. "Fighter." The last word came out strained and unconvincing.

She grabbed another ball and wondered what Joel expected her to do—challenge Leanne to a duel?

No. She would sit back and wait. Andie and Leanne were so wrong for each other, and when Andie figured that out, Kara would be there.

* * *

Andie's head was filled with thoughts about Kara, including the shock and confusion of seeing her at The Cave. Should she risk getting hurt again? Did Kara even want her?

She was so distracted by images from the night before that she almost rammed her truck into the shiny, brand-spanking-new, locked gate blocking the old mill road.

As she braked to a stop, she saw the rent-a-cop by the newly erected gate. It dawned on her that Paul Young's brother-in-law worked at the mill.

"Son of a bitch."

The security officer escorted her to her sampling site, standing only feet away as she poured up the composited sample into her

bottles and packed up her equipment. He made a big show of locking the gate behind her as she drove off the premises.

Two hours and three stops later, she was still fuming when her cell vibrated against her hip. She pulled up to the loading dock at the lab as she pressed the answer button. “Yeah,” she said.

“Andie, it’s Paul,” he said.

“Thanks a lot, buddy.”

“I know how it looks. All I did was contact the mill—”

“And give them heads-up.” She pushed open the truck door and jumped out.

“It’s called investigating. I had to get the facts.”

“I’m sure they’ve got it all cleaned up by now.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Paul asked.

She lowered the tailgate and hoisted herself into the bed of the truck. “Until the next time. And there will be a next time.”

“Then we’ll be ready. You said you have pictures?”

“For what it’s worth.” She sat on the cooler. “Industry will always catch all the breaks. It’s time I grew up and accepted that.”

“Listen. If you find out anything else, let me know.”

Andie grunted.

“I know you’re thinking that because I have family at the mill I’m on their side. But I’m not. I believe in doing the right thing.” He paused expectantly. “Regardless.”

“I know, I know.” And she did. Paul was a good guy. He just followed the story she’d given him, and it led to a dead end. Or a locked gate, anyway.

Her cell beeped, and she looked at the screen. Leanne was calling.

“Hey, Paul, I have to go.” She said good-bye, hesitated only a second, and turned off the phone without answering Leanne’s call.

* * *

Andie pulled her legs up under her on the sofa and thought for the millionth time about Kara walking into The Cave the night before. She’d been thrilled to see her again—thrilled until Leanne started pissing on her territory. Kara’s demeanor changed drastically from the moment she reintroduced herself to Andie to the moment when she sat at a table with Joel and watched as Leanne played girlfriend.

She stared at the number she’d looked up online for Kara’s hotel. Not wanting to give herself time to change her mind, she

quickly dialed the number and politely asked to be connected to Kara Travis's room.

"Hi," Andie said. "You busy?"

"Hi, yourself. No, I'm not busy. How's your day been?"

"Pretty crappy, actually." Andie needed to talk about what had happened. "Mind if I vent?"

"Not at all."

Andie told her about seeing the hawk the day before and the textile mill's illegal discharge into the stream. "I know it was on purpose because there was a freaking pipe. It wasn't accidentally seeping out from somewhere. It was being discharged."

"What're you going to do about it?"

"You mean what did I do? I called a buddy at the newspaper. Then I went back to pick up the sample and equipment today and was escorted to the sampling site by security."

"Ouch."

"And now I'm waiting for Sidney's summons." She wrapped her arms around her knees and pulled her legs closer to her.

"You think your contact will complain?"

"I don't know." Andie took a deep breath. "I still feel like I should do something about this."

"What are your options?"

She told Kara about her conversation with Paul Young. She reached for the photos she'd set on the coffee table. "I have pictures, but it's not obvious where they were taken."

"That's a tough call." Kara paused for several seconds before asking, "What does Leanne think?"

"In general, that it's a job that I need to do. Think less about it and just do it."

"And specifically?"

"About the mill? I haven't told her." Andie sighed. "Leanne doesn't always get me."

"We don't always understand the people we're with. Lord knows Joanie and I didn't get each other most of the time." There was a long pause in the conversation. "Sorry, I guess I shouldn't bring her up."

"You can talk to me about her if you want to. You can talk to me about anything. You know that, right?" Andie asked. "I'm done venting. Thanks for listening. Anything you want to tell me about?" Like, Andie thought, how much you missed me.

Kara cleared her throat and spoke slowly, deliberately. "I'm not sure why, but I feel like I need to talk to you about what happened with Joanie. If I don't do it now, I doubt that I'll ever do it."

"I'll try to understand."

"There's this feeling of defeat... of betrayal... of inadequacy when your lover commits suicide. Most people are too polite to say so, but you can tell they're wondering what about you made your lover's life so miserable that they'd rather be dead."

Andie was quiet. Her pulse beat hard in her neck, and her palms itched. She was clueless as to what to say.

"It's only natural to think like that, especially if you've never personally known someone who's suicidal," Kara said.

Andie couldn't deny that she'd always thought people who tried to kill themselves, whether they succeeded or not, were cowards.

"Are you still there?" Kara asked.

"Yeah."

"I'm being a real bumner. Sorry."

"No, don't say that." Andie unsuccessfully searched her brain for the right words. "I really appreciate that you feel you can talk to me about this."

"You listening means a lot to me."

"Same here. I mean listening about the textile mill. But compared to what you've been through..."

"Apples and oranges," Kara said. "You can't compare. And don't minimize what you're feeling about work."

"Tell me more?" Andie asked, wanting desperately to understand Kara's past.

"In the beginning, what I call the Early Joanie Era, it was damned near magical. She could be so sweet and so passionate. But after the first year or so, the magic was replaced with mood swings and anger."

"Like overnight, boom, she was different?"

"No, like a slow unraveling that spiraled out of control," Kara said.

"Did you go to therapy after she died?"

"For a few visits."

"You're a quick healer." Andie tried to keep her voice light.

"Maybe not so much. Those sessions left me feeling guilty for not feeling enough."

"It wasn't your fault," Andie said with conviction.

"I know that in theory. And I've just recently figured out that I felt more anger than guilt. The other day I realized I forgave her. And right now, talking to you, I realize I'm on my way to forgiving myself."

"I think that's great." Andie swallowed hard. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"I'm sorry for unloading all this on you."

"Don't be. I love talking to you."

"On the phone, maybe. But you weren't too keen on talking to me at the bar."

"Yeah," Andie said. She thought about how desperately she'd wanted to talk to Kara all night, but Leanne had turned into Velcro-girlfriend the second she laid eyes on Kara. "Sorry about that."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. I shouldn't have blindsided you like that. I was afraid if I called to tell you I was coming, you'd tell me to get lost. Or worse, just not return my call again."

"Again? What are you talking about?"

"You know, several weeks ago when I called and left a message and your girlfriend picked up the phone in the middle of it."

"Whoa, back up. You called and talked to Leanne?"

"Yeah, at least I presume it was Leanne. I've got to tell you, that was awkward, to say the least."

"Damn it. She never told me. It's not like she's ever in my house without me. When was that?"

"Right after you called and asked me how many miles separated us."

Andie remembered she had heard Leanne talking to someone when she got out of the shower the night of their first date. Damn it, why hadn't she listened to her gut and looked at the answering machine or caller ID? "Why were you calling?"

"It doesn't really matter now, does it?"

"Please tell me."

"To ask you how you'd feel if I came to Georgia to go to law school."

Andie squeezed her eyes shut. "If I thought for a second you'd be coming back here, I never would have started dating anyone."

"But you have. And I have to respect that."

Andie didn't know how to respond to that. So, she changed the subject. "There's something I need to tell you. It's been eating at me."

“Oh?”

“The day before that guy beat me up and the car-jacking, I almost went into the manhole at that site.”

“What?” Kara asked.

“I dropped your ball cap into the manhole and started to go down to get it. I’d only put my foot on the top rung before I came to my senses. Confined space, you know. The cops found out the guy who attacked me did so because he thought I’d taken some drugs he’d hidden in the manhole.”

“Holy shit.”

“He thought I’d taken his stash, but apparently it had dislodged and washed downstream.”

After a pause, Kara chuckled. “You took my hat?”

“Yeah,” Andie said. “Sorry.”

Chapter 30

Kara sat in her Mini Cooper in the hotel parking lot. Okay, maybe waiting patiently for Andie would be harder than she originally expected. She recalled the ease with which they spoke on the phone the day before. Was feeling that level of comfort with one's partner too much to ask for?

She glanced at the GPS and wished she had an address to punch in. She tried to recreate in her mind the drive she'd taken with Andie to meet Dana and Gayle. It wasn't like she thought the Guardian Angels of Hounds, as Andie called them, could (or would) help her in her quest to win over their friend. She couldn't shake the feeling that they could help her process all that was happening.

She cranked the engine of her Mini. "How hard could it be to find them?" The memory of getting lost when forced to detour the last time she was in Georgia seeped into her mind. "Help me, Universe," she said as she pulled onto the road.

Andie's voice toyed with her thoughts. "I love talking to you," she'd said. After talking to Andie, Kara had obtained even more closure concerning Joanie than she'd ever known. It had been the first time she'd admitted her feelings of defeat to anyone. It felt good. She wondered if she'd also been looking to prove to herself that she could, indeed, say anything to Andie.

Her thoughts were in a whirl. Forgiving herself felt wonderful. Talking it out with Andie was terrific. Learning that Andie hadn't purposely not called her back made her feel better and worse at the same time.

Thirty minutes into the drive, Kara grew anxious at how the pine-lined road looked exactly the same as it did ten minutes earlier. Then she recognized the red barn across the road and turned down the driveway. A few hundred feet later, she was parking beside the old Buick station wagon, just as Andie had when she'd brought her here. She opened the car door to the sound of barking. A black-and-tan coonhound met her, tail wagging, ears swinging. "Hank? You

are Hank, right?" He rushed up to her and left a trail of slobber down the side of her jeans.

"Oh, Hank, now that's pretty. No wonder the women never come by to see you." Gayle put her hands on her hips, faking exasperation with the hound. Then her eyes met Kara's. "Hello, stranger."

"Hi," Kara said, suddenly shy over what Andie may have told her friends. "Sorry about just dropping in."

"Don't be silly." Dana put down the bucket of water she'd been carrying and rushed over.

Kara returned Dana's warm hug.

"Hank, come here," Gayle called to the dog. He held his head low as he slowly complied. She lifted his lip and looked around in his jowls. "Where are you hiding that opposable thumb, huh?"

"Hank's become quite the escape artist. We keep adding to the locks on his gate." Dana looked at her lover. "Gayle teases that no dog should be able to do what he does without the assistance of hands. But I know if any kind of dog could, it'd be a black-and-tan hound."

Kara rubbed Hank's long, silky ears when he ventured back over to her.

"You want to say hello to the rest of the family?" Dana asked.

"Absolutely," Kara said.

Dana caught up to them after putting Hank back in his fence. She took Kara's arm. "How long have you been back? How long are you staying? Have you seen Andie?"

"Good God, woman. If she wants to tell us about her and Andie, she will in her own time. You're acting like a—"

"Don't go there," Dana warned.

"Acting like a dachshund," Gayle said.

Dana shook her head. "We have this ongoing acting-like-a-dog joke. It used to be funny, but Gayle's been relentless with it lately." She pointedly looked over at Rascal, the Australian shepherd. "It's been getting on my nerves a bit like a dog constantly nipping at your heels would."

"Okay, okay, I get it," Gayle said.

"Oh, where are our manners?" Dana asked. "Would you like some sweet tea?"

Kara declined and allowed herself to be led from one grouping of dogs to another. She particularly liked the Treeing Walkers. They reminded her of Xena, which made her smile.

A tornado of images spiraled around her mind. She thought of the look on Andie's face when she walked into The Cave... the way Leanne had pushed her way past her to kiss Andie... the way Andie barely looked at her after that.

"I really messed things up with Andie, and I don't know what to do about it." Kara's words rushed out. "I guess you know she's seeing someone."

Dana and Gayle exchanged glances.

"I've met her." Kara wrapped her arms around herself. She shivered at the new knowledge that Leanne had played her that day she'd called Andie and left a message. "I've met her once, and I hate her. I shouldn't say things like that, but she's not right for Andie."

"She hasn't brought her out here yet, you know," Dana said.

Gayle nudged her. "Dana, stay out of it."

"All I'm saying is that she isn't a big enough part of Andie's life to warrant bringing her out to meet the family." Dana opened her arms in an expansive, inclusive way. "These babies would tell us what type of person that woman is."

"I keep telling myself to sit back and be patient. That if I just wait it out, it'll be okay," Kara said.

"You know what breed Kara reminds me of?" Dana asked.

"Don't say poodle," Kara warned as she ran her fingers through her unruly curls.

They all laughed.

"I was going to say boxer because they're lively and loyal and patient. But poodle would fit, too. Athletic, graceful, intuitive, attentive."

Kara was embarrassed by the description. "What would Andie be?" she asked.

"Andie's a Labrador retriever," Dana announced.

"How clichéd," Gayle said.

"There's a reason why things become clichéd. It's because they're true. Andie's intelligent, loyal, devoted, reliable..."

"Okay, we understand." Gayle nodded. "I think Andie's more of an Afghan hound."

Kara remembered the picture of the disheveled dog on Andie's wall. "She had one once," she said.

"Buffy," Dana and Gayle responded in unison. Gayle went on, "Sweet, loyal, sensitive."

The three women watched as two redbone hounds paced the length of a fence. "Our high-energy pups," Dana said.

Gayle gave Dana a playful swat. "Dana here is a Newfoundland. Newfies are the friendliest breed."

"What about Gayle?" Kara asked.

"Sometimes she's my bulldog—faithful, loyal, guarded. And sometimes she's my beagle—mischievous and eager to please," Dana answered, staring at Gayle as she spoke.

Kara looked away, feeling slightly voyeuristic. "What breed should I be if I want to win Andie back?"

"A mutt," Dana answered without hesitating. "Be the best of all the breeds. Now are you ready for that sweet tea?"

An hour later, complete with caffeine and sugar buzz, Kara started up her car.

"Remember, be a mutt," Dana said. "Go see her. Tell her how you feel."

"Be a mutt," Kara repeated.

Dana winked and stepped back from the Mini Cooper.

* * *

Andie's resolve to end things with Leanne crystallized when Xena didn't rush off her bed to greet Leanne when she came over that afternoon. No one else in Andie's circle, Kara included, could make it through the door without a hearty welcome from the old hound.

She turned her head in time to deflect all but a slight grazing of Leanne's hello kiss on her cheek.

"I... uh... we need to talk," Andie said.

Leanne sat on the sofa. "Don't much like the sound of that." She patted the place next to her. "At least sit."

Andie sat but didn't let Leanne take her hand when she tried. "I think you're a wonderful woman, but—"

"And I like the sound of that even less," Leanne said. "Look." This time she didn't give Andie much choice as she quickly snatched up her hand. "I know you're having doubts about us." She kissed the top of Andie's knuckles. "We just need to take it to the next level."

Andie slipped her hand out of Leanne's and scooted slightly away. "No, Leanne, we don't. I do like you as a friend. But not as a girlfriend."

"You haven't given us a fair chance."

"Oh, but I have." Andie folded her hands into her lap, making them less accessible to Leanne. It took everything she had to keep

from telling Leanne that she knew how she'd intercepted that phone call from Kara weeks earlier. Instead, she simply stated, "I'm very sorry."

Leanne got up and started pacing. "It's the blonde who showed up at the bar, isn't it? Or worse, your friend Julia. Please tell me it isn't Marla."

"Stop. Please."

"I should have known something was up when we didn't sleep together that first week," Leanne said.

Andie almost choked. She was about to say sleeping with someone right away wasn't her style, but she was ambushed by the memory of making love to Kara the first night they'd met.

"I'm not interested in being in a relationship with you," Andie said.

* * *

"So what else did Leanne have to say when you broke it off?" Marla asked as she plopped down on Andie's sofa.

Andie cringed at the thought of Leanne's last attempt at a good-bye kiss, too clumsy, too hard. She involuntarily wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and decided to keep that part to herself. "Not much. She said she'll wait for me to change my mind." She rolled her eyes. "I told her that was sweet, but she really shouldn't."

Marla studied her engagement ring, something she did so much it was starting to get on Andie's nerves. After several moments she said, "You should have given things longer with her. What would it have hurt?"

"It wouldn't be right for me to keep seeing her when I know we don't have a future." Andie patted the arm of the sofa, and Xena lumbered over. "Isn't that right, baby girl?"

"If you're going to let your dog choose your mate for you, you deserve to grow old alone."

Andie responded by swatting her with a throw pillow. "That's easy for you to say. Xena adores Chuck." She rubbed her dog's ears. "Don't you?"

"How long are we going to ignore the real issue here?" Marla asked.

"I knew you'd jump to conclusions," Andie said, knowing full well what Marla was referring to. "Kara showing up has nothing to do with my decision to end it with Leanne."

“Bullshit.”

“No, not bullshit. I hold out no expectations of getting together with Kara.”

“Oh, am I to believe the thought didn’t even enter your mind?” Marla asked. “I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“I plan to be very cautious.”

“Have you been with her?”

“What?”

“Have you been to bed with Kara Travis since she came back?”

“No. I saw her at the bar, and I’ve talked to her on the phone.”

“Phone sex?”

“No. It’s just that I can talk to her about stuff I wouldn’t even try to talk to Leanne about.”

Marla’s cell phone buzzed against her hip, and she jumped. Giggling, she said, “I’d recognize that vibration anywhere. Hey, Caveman, how are you?”

She squinted at Andie. “Yeah, I’m here with her now. Okay, be there in a few minutes.”

“What’s up?” Andie asked.

“Your girlfriend is up at the bar making a scene. And by girlfriend, I mean Leanne. Come on. I’ll drive you out there, and you can drive her car back.”

“Back here?”

“Yep.” She got up and put both hands on her hips. “You broke her heart, now you have to go clean it up. You know the routine.”

“Yeah, but it’s usually your routine.” She contrasted the dozens of times that Marla left men’s hearts scattered about town to her own meager offenses. The most recent time she’d been called was for Kara, and she wouldn’t even accept Andie’s offer for a ride.

“Shit,” Andie said, knowing damn well Leanne would let her drive her home.

“Look at the upside. You could have some great break-up sex.”

“Sloppy, drunken sex? I didn’t want to have sex with her before, why would I want to now?”

“What was up with that? Even if you don’t want to spend the rest of your life with her, that shouldn’t stop you from getting some action.”

Andie stared down at the carpet. “We’d make out. A lot, actually. But every time Leanne tried to go farther, I shut down. I can’t explain it. I just shut down.”

“This is about Kara,” Marla said.

“Let’s go and get this over with.”

Twenty minutes later, Andie was pleading with Leanne to tell them her home address. Leanne just laughed, leaned into Andie, and breathed the stench of alcohol in her direction.

Andie cast a pleading look at Marla, but Marla only lifted her open palms upward in a show of defeat.

"Where's your driver's license?" Andie asked.

"Don' know," Leanne slurred. "Maybe you should check my pockets."

"Knock it off, Leanne," Chuck said, obviously aware of Andie's frustration and eager to get the drunk out of his bar.

Leanne leaned closer to Andie. "My license is in my panties. If you want it, you got to get it."

Crap, Andie thought. She gave a stern look that only caused Leanne to laugh. "Okay, come on." Andie grabbed Leanne's arm a little rougher than necessary and steered her toward the door leading to The Cave's parking lot.

"Hey, Andie," Chuck called. When she turned, he lobbed Leanne's car keys to her.

Andie half-dragged, half-pushed Leanne into the passenger seat of her car. She opened the glove box and looked for registration or insurance papers that might have her address on them. No such luck.

Leanne gave her a smug look and settled deeper into the passenger seat.

The idea of voluntarily bringing Leanne in any condition, let alone stinking drunk, into her home was not at all appealing, but Andie didn't see where she had much choice. She cranked the ignition and looked straight ahead as she barked, "Put on your seat belt, Leanne."

* * *

Kara decided to do as Dana suggested and tell Andie how she felt. "Be a mutt," she reminded herself. She sat in her car across from Andie's house and stared at the front door. Andie hadn't answered the doorbell, but Xena gave her quite an exuberant hello through the window.

She smiled at the thought of the sweet old hound dog.

When a Honda rounded the corner, Kara sank into the car seat. Her heart pounded in her chest as the car pulled into Andie's driveway and Andie got out of the driver's side.

Then she cringed as Leanne got out of the other side and hung all over Andie.

She watched as they made their way up to the door, and Andie struggled with the keys. The woman was clinging so hard to Andie's arm, she made her drop the key before she could get it in.

She wondered about Andie's posture after she picked up the key. Was her stiff stance a result of not wanting to be with Leanne, or was it a physical necessity given how drunk the woman obviously was? The show they put on would have almost been humorous, if one of the players wasn't Andie.

As soon as the two were in the house, Kara started her engine. "So much for telling her how I feel," she said.

Kara drove around until she found herself at The Cave. At least she knew Andie and Leanne wouldn't be there. They were getting busy at Andie's. She cringed.

"Hey, Kara, I heard you were back."

"Hey, Chuck." I'll bet you did hear about it, Kara thought as she threw a glance toward Marla, who was holding court at the other end of the bar. Oops, she'd made eye contact. Rule number one, don't make eye contact with the wild Marla unless you're willing to risk her approaching.

"Hello, Kara." Marla perched on the stool next to her. "Caveman, two shots of tequila, *por favor*."

Chuck glanced over his shoulder then looked down at his dusty hands. "I guess Tony's taking another break." He washed his hands and poured them each a shot. "I'm going to go hunt Tony down. I got work to do in the back."

"Chuck's remodeling the kitchen," Marla explained as she studied her engagement ring. "Now that he's got a woman with good taste around to help him choose colors and materials."

Kara glanced at the shot in front of her and wondered how long she'd have to sit with Marla in order to be polite. When Marla lifted her shot glass and waited for her to do the same, Kara took a deep breath. She hadn't intended to drink. She was terrified that if she did, she'd be tempted to go to Andie's and interrupt the lovebirds. The hell with it, she thought as she lifted her shot glass.

Marla offered no toast, just kept her eyes trained on Kara as she downed the shot. Kara mirrored the gesture.

They both turned at the sound of a low whistle. Chuck stood in the doorway to the kitchen holding up a sample of tile in each hand. He shrugged his question, and Marla pointed toward the pale green in his left hand. He nodded and winked, and she blew him a kiss.

Ugh, Kara thought. No one should be allowed to be that happy when her insides were reeling over the idea of Andie being with Leanne.

Chuck was back in the doorway with the tape measure tucked under his chin. He was struggling to write measurements on the back of the tile.

"Hey, Caveman," Kara called to him. He looked up and almost dropped the tape measure, and she added, "They make notebooks for that now, you know?"

Chuck gave a sheepish grin. "Ha, ha."

"Ah, witty," Marla said. "A glimpse of the Kara we first met. Welcome back."

"It's good to be back," Kara answered, cautiously.

Marla sat back on her bar stool. "So, what are your intentions with Andie?"

Chuck approached, wiping his hands on his jeans. "Went from laughing to serious over here pretty darned quick. You girls behaving?"

"I was asking Kara what her intentions are with Andie."

"And?" Chuck said.

"I was just about to tell her they are quite honorable," Kara answered.

Marla raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe quite decadent, too, but definitely honorable."

"Hey," Joel said as he plopped on the stool on Kara's other side. He looked at her then at Marla. "Didn't I see Andie in here earlier?"

"Ah, yeah," Marla said. "She had to leave." She fidgeted with her empty shot glass.

"Kara, Kara, Kara," Joel said.

Kara stared at the glossy red bar. So, she thought, Marla knew Andie was up here earlier with Leanne, yet still spoke to Kara as if she had a chance with Andie. She wondered what Marla's intentions were. To rub Kara's face in the fact that she'd screwed up with Andie?

She leaned into Joel's arm. "I tried," she said as she stood to leave.

Joel caught up to her at her car. "Hey, doll, wait up."

"Why? So you can lecture me again about not fighting for her? I've really had quite enough of the bullshit."

"Look here. No bullshit. Andie broke up with Leanne earlier today."

"But she's with her right now," Kara said, aware that her voice held a hint of a whine.

"Oh." He stroked his goatee. "That isn't anything. Look, I'm no rocket scientist, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that Andie has feelings for you."

"So what am I supposed to do? Go barge in on them?"

Joel gave an exaggerated shudder. "No, God, please don't do that."

"So, what's the plan then, doll?" she asked.

"Come in tomorrow night. Drop on one knee, give her a rose, and tell her you can't live without her." Again, he stroked his goatee. "On second thought, maybe we need to consider there's a reason I'm still single."

* * *

Andie crawled under the sheets. She could hear Leanne in the den, snoring the way drunk people often do. She hated dealing with drunks. It was bad enough having to at work, but now at home, too? Ugh.

At least Leanne gave up after only a few drunken passes at Andie. She was thankful for that.

She tried to clear her mind. Maybe with Leanne out of the way, she could wrap her brain around what Kara's being back in town meant.

She smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

Andie awoke, sprawled on her stomach, her head to one side. A hand pressed between her shoulder blades, pinning one of her arms beneath her own weight. Like in her favorite masturbation fantasy—exactly like she imagined it would be when Kara finally held her down.

A soft moan escaped Andie.

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

A knee slipped between Andie's legs and spread them a little farther.

"I knew you'd come back," Andie said.

"Of course."

"I've wanted this for so long. I've missed you so much. Oh, Kara."

"Shhh." She lifted Andie's ass and buried her face into Andie's neck and her fingers into her wetness.

Andie reached behind her with her free hand to stroke Kara's wild curls. Her fingers brushed against feather-fine hair. She opened her eyes and tried to twist to the side.

"What the hell?" Andie asked. "Who?"

"You're so wet," Leanne said.

"Leanne?" She bucked her hips, trying to throw the woman's weight off of her. "Stop. What are you doing?"

She tried to twist herself free, but Leanne's hand had left her shoulder blades and was pushing against her neck, forcing her head into the mattress.

"Stop," Andie said and sobbed.

The fingers of Leanne's other hand pushed farther inside her.

"Please stop."

Then the drunken groans from Leanne and her own crying disappeared, and all Andie heard were growls. The bed jolted, and Leanne froze.

"Get her off of me. Get her off," Leanne cried as she rolled away from Andie.

Andie jumped out of the bed. "Xena, come," she called out. When the hound came to her, she grabbed her by the scruff around her neck and buried her face into the short fur. "Are you okay, baby girl?"

"Is she okay?" Leanne shrieked. "The goddamn dog practically mauls me, and you ask if she's okay?"

"Are you bleeding?" she asked Leanne.

Leanne looked her leg over closely. "No. She didn't break the skin."

Andie grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around herself. "Then get dressed and get out of my house. Now."

Leanne's mouth dropped open. "Come on, Andie, you know you—"

"Get out," Andie screamed. "I never want to see you again. Out!"

"I'll call you tomorrow. Once you've settled down."

"Don't call me ever. I'm serious. Stay away from me."

Leanne started dressing, not taking her eyes from Xena, who growled every time she moved. "That dog is dangerous. She should be muzzled or something."

"For protecting me from you forcing yourself on me?"

"Forcing myself? How can you say that when you were so wet?"

“That wasn’t for you. It wasn’t about you.” Andie shivered and her teeth chattered. “Get out right now or I’m calling the police.”

Andie stayed on the floor with Xena until she heard Leanne’s car start and pull out of the driveway.

Chapter 31

Andie heaved a case of beer onto the counter behind the bar. She unpacked the longnecks into the cooler and went for another case.

“Check you out, Super Bar Wench,” Chuck said.

She barely gave him a glance as she started unpacking the next case into the cooler.

“Andie’s in a mood,” Marla told Chuck.

“I bought you that new eco-friendly cleaner you’ve been nagging me to get,” Chuck said.

When Andie nodded absently, he returned to his mess in the kitchen.

Marla leaned closer to Andie. “You going to tell me why you’re so bitchy today?”

“I’m not bitchy,” Andie said between clenched teeth as she hung clean glasses above her head. “I’m working. Can’t a woman just do her job around here?”

“Whoa, mama, chill out,” Marla said, backing away. “Maybe I’ll just go hang with Joel for a while.” She walked across the barroom to the pool tables.

Andie hated herself for heaping her displaced anger on Marla. She needed some peace and quiet. The events of the night before kept gurgling up, making her nauseous, and angry, and so... so... so...

“Andie,” Leanne said in a low voice. She held out a rose. “I brought you this.”

“Leave,” she said. Then she said it a little louder, in case she hadn’t heard her the first time, “Leave. Right now.”

“I know you’re angry, but—”

Andie trembled. “Right now,” she repeated.

Chuck came up behind her, and she jumped. “Hey, chill. It’s just me. Here’s that... Andie, you’re white as a ghost.”

“Chuck, will you please ask Leanne to leave?”

“Don’t do this,” Leanne said. “We can work this out. You’ll see.”

“Chuck, right now or I’m leaving. I’m going in the storeroom, and when I come out she needs to be gone.” She turned without looking at either one of them and marched into the back room.

She came out five minutes later with a case of bar napkins.

“What was that all about?” Marla asked.

“It’s nothing,” Andie said.

“If it’s nothing, than why are your knuckles turning white?”

Andie relaxed her fists.

“And if it’s nothing,” Marla said, “then why’s your jaw all clenched up?”

Andie held up a hand to silence her. “Please shut up.” She placed a shot of tequila in front of Marla. She desperately wanted to talk to her about all that had happened, but not there. Maybe after work.

“Oh, girlfriend,” Marla said.

“Please, not now.”

“Yes, now.” Marla nodded toward the door.

Andie turned to look. And her breath rushed out as her eyes met Kara’s.

* * *

Kara strode confidently across the barroom floor. She squared her shoulders and cleared her throat in preparation for making her life-changing proclamation of love. Then Andie looked at her, and she felt her insides crumble. The look on Andie’s face told Kara that something was very wrong.

Her steps slowed, and her eyes remained riveted on Andie. Kara watched as gradually, almost magically, the distress etched across those fine, beautiful features melted away.

“Hi,” Andie said.

“Hi, yourself.” Kara saw the edge of something in Andie’s expression. Was it pain? Sadness? “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure.” Andie looked away. “Drink?” she asked as she wiped down the already spotless bar, a gesture Kara knew meant she was nervous.

“I’d love one,” Kara said. Forget the drink, her mind screamed, tell her you love her. “How about a ginger ale?”

When Andie returned with the soda, Kara asked her about the lab.

"No summons from Sidney about the mill fiasco," she answered. "Looks like there'll be no repercussions for me."

"How about for them?" Kara asked.

"I guess I'll let it go. For now, anyway. I'm too lazy or complacent to try to figure out what to do next."

"You're neither of those things. Sometimes you have to choose your battles," Kara said.

"Is that what you did? When you went to bat for me?"

"I suppose so." Kara glanced around. It dawned on her that Marla had disappeared when she sat at the bar. She saw her leaning against the wall near the pool tables. Marla gave Kara a discreet nod as their eyes met. Kara turned back around to watch Andie pour a row of tequila shots for a group of guys who'd wandered in.

After ringing up the order, Andie materialized once again in front of Kara. She reached up for a glass hanging overhead, fidgeting with it as she said, "Tell me about law school."

Kara told her about tailoring the degree at UGA to work for her.

"But UVA has a degree specifically for environmental law?"

Kara nodded.

"Wouldn't it be easier to go to school in Virginia?" She frantically wiped the bar, not looking at Kara. "I hope you aren't coming to Georgia for the wrong reasons."

Kara snatched the rag from Andie, causing her to look at her. "Just say what you're thinking."

Andie's mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Yo, Andie. Romeo? Can I have a Bud?" Joel flashed a grin and Kara fought hard to resist the temptation to throw the rag—or worse—at him.

She watched as Andie got Joel a beer. Right reasons, wrong reasons, who was to say what would ultimately fall into which category when it was all said and done? All she knew was she wanted to be around Andie, and if Andie told her not to come to Georgia on account of her, it would crush her.

She studied Andie, craning to her right, trying to figure out if something was smudged on her neck, or if it was a shadow. She looked away when she was caught staring.

Andie set another ginger ale in front of her. Kara knew the drink wasn't an offer of forever, but at least it bought her another hour or so. She would take it, gladly.

Andie beamed as she watched Kara with Xena. It did her heart good to see the old hound's tail wagging in double-time. And to see Kara as the catalyst. She would have to remember to thank Chuck for offering to close up for her.

Kara paused in front of the refrigerator where a photograph was held by a coffee shop magnet. "This is the mill's discharge?" she asked with her nose crinkled.

"Yeah. A little reminder and motivation. A reminder that, at least for now anyway, while I'm in the field no shortcuts will be taken and no one will be cut any slack. Add to that, motivation to start thinking about what I'd like to do with the rest of my life."

"Any ideas?" Kara asked.

"Photojournalism. And I already have an idea for an exposé." Andie looked away from the photo and at Kara. "Oh, yeah, I meant to tell you I'm an aunt. Of a niece I'll never see." She told Kara the whole story of Jack ignoring her in the bar and Marla getting the answer to the mystery congratulations remark from Chuck.

"If anyone could root out the details, it's Marla," Kara said. "I'm so sorry things aren't good with you and your family."

"Me, too, but there's nothing I can do about it."

Kara abruptly removed her hand from her back. "Andie?" she said. "Is that a bruise?"

Andie's hand went instinctively to cover the marks on her neck. Kara placed her hand over Andie's. "What's this?" she asked. She steered Andie's hand away. "Is that a handprint? Did someone—"

Andie's hands started to tremble. "It's nothing. Really."

"If it's the product of some consensual, kinky, no-holds-barred fuck-fest, then tell me to mind my own business."

Andie wanted to lie. She wanted to tell her to leave it alone. But when she looked into those concerned eyes and saw the tenderness, she began to shake then sobbed.

"Tell me what's wrong," Kara pleaded.

"First that car-jacking freak, and now this. What is it about me lately that makes people want to hurt me? I wish someone would just tell me so I could stop doing whatever it is I'm doing." Her lower lip trembled, but she was powerless to stop it.

"Don't blame yourself. And don't let anyone else blame you." She held Andie's hands in hers. "Who hurt you?"

Andie closed her eyes. "Ever since we made love and I held you down, I've been fantasizing about you doing that to me." She

paused. "Maybe something in my body language misled Leanne and made her think I wanted her to do that to me."

"Oh, honey," Kara said. She placed a hand on each side of Andie's face and made her look at her. "This is not your fault."

"I should have locked the bedroom door. She was drunk. I should have known better."

"No, Andie, don't blame yourself," Kara said.

Sobs wracked Andie's body. "All those weeks I wouldn't have sex with her because she wasn't you. Then I do because I think she's you."

Kara removed her hands. "What?"

"I was dreaming. I was dreaming about making love to you, and then, there she was." Andie shook. "I woke up and she was inside me. How did I not realize? How did I not wake up until then, unless I wanted it at least a little?"

"Look at me." Kara put her hand beneath Andie's chin and lifted her face until their eyes met. "You didn't know it was her?"

"No," she said, sobbing.

"And when you realized, you told her to stop?"

"Of course."

"And she didn't?"

"No, she didn't." Andie crumpled onto the sofa, and Xena ran over to her. "It's okay, baby girl." She patted the seat beside her. "Will you sit here with me so Xena knows it's okay? I don't want her to think she has to protect me again."

Kara sat. She put one hand on Andie's leg, and the other stroked down the hound's back. "Again?"

"Yeah, she was quite the warrior yesterday." Andie hiccupped as she spoke, and when she went to apologize, she did it again.

Kara leaned close and said into Andie's ear, "Boo."

Andie laughed then hiccupped. "Sorry." She took Kara's hand in hers. "Hell of a way to find out you've been the object of my fantasies, huh?"

"I am so sorry that happened."

"But it's over now," Andie said. "Right?" She punctuated her question with a hiccup. "Maybe if I eat something. I haven't much felt like eating today."

"You feel up to a smoothie? I could make us some."

"You're going to make them?" She leaned back on the sofa. "You know there's a method to it. If you're off even a bit on the ice-to-ice cream ratio, it's all over."

"I think I can manage," Kara said. "I did watch you make them that first night."

Andie smiled at the thought of what happened that first night after the smoothies. "Okay, but let me warn you, that blender is temperamental these days."

Kara disappeared into the kitchen, and Andie heard her getting the blender out of the drainer on the counter. She heard the refrigerator open and close, then the freezer door. She gave Kara a few minutes' head start before joining her. She stopped in the doorway when she saw what Kara was about to do.

"Stop," Andie shouted. "That top isn't on tight enou—"

Kara pressed the start button, the lid flew off, and smoothie spewed everywhere.

A flurry of paper towels and laughter ensued.

Once the counter and floor were cleaned up, Andie finished preparing the concoction and poured two glasses. She handed a glass to Kara and reached to Kara's cheek. "You've got a little right here." Their eyes met as Andie wiped it off.

Kara took a sip. "Damn, I do good work," she said.

Andie tried hers. "Yeah, not bad." She looked at Kara. "You're a mess." She reached for Kara's hair but left her fingers in the curls instead of wiping away the smoothie. "I've missed your hair," she whispered. Embarrassed, she pulled her hand away.

"Yeah?" Kara asked. She took a slow, sensual sip of her drink. "Miss anything else?"

Andie answered with a slow sip of her own. Then she licked the froth from her upper lip. "Your mouth. I've really missed your mouth."

Kara stepped closer. "I make a pretty awesome smoothie, don't I?"

"You wear it well, too," Andie said as she wiped another droplet from Kara's cheek.

Kara caught Andie's wrist and brought her hand to her mouth. She licked the smear of smoothie from Andie's finger. "Raspberry-banana. Yum."

Andie drew Kara to her, and their mouths met in a cold, fruit-infused rush. She pulled away just long enough to murmur, "Please make love to me."

Kara backed her against the counter. She took in a mouthful of smoothie and, with a wicked grin, lifted Andie's shirt.

She gasped when Kara's frozen mouth sucked in her nipple. The shock of the coldness sent a jolt of pleasure directly between her legs. "Oh, God," she said.

"Tell me what you want." Kara ran her cold tongue along Andie's neck.

"I want you to hold me against the counter. Really hold me there."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Please, Kara."

Kara leaned her body into Andie's, pressing her against the counter.

"Yes, yes, yes," Andie said.

"Tell me if I'm hurting you."

"Shhh." Andie glanced down at Kara's hand, still on the smoothie glass. "Fuck me," she said.

Kara shoved her ice-cold hand down the front of Andie's pants. Andie gasped, and Kara sank her fingers into the heat of her wetness.

Andie's legs buckled, and Kara supported her with a knee between the legs, the new leverage helping to drive her fingers deeper. Andie struggled to stand, struggled to keep herself open, struggled to keep from crying in sheer relief as her climax wracked through her body.

* * *

"Smoothies are very healthy," Andie said as she ran her fingers across Kara's clavicle.

"So is a post-smoothie workout." Kara stretched out farther on the bed.

Andie buried her face in Kara's neck so she couldn't see how serious she'd suddenly grown. "Was tonight a once-in-a-while kind of treat?"

"I personally would like to make it a regular part of our diet and exercise."

"I'd like that," Andie said. "Hey," she teased, "your frozen mouth was the best example of an Ice Princess I could have ever hoped for."

Kara chuckled then grew resolute. "Andie."

"Yeah?"

"I love you," Kara said.

"I know you do. Xena told me."

Kara brought Andie's hand to her mouth and kissed the knuckles, one at a time. "Oh? What else has she been saying?"

"That you and I should be together. Together-together. I personally think we should listen to Xena. And you should pay close attention to her when she tells you how much I love you."

"She's a smart old hound," Kara said.

"Brilliant."

Kara nibbled on Andie's neck.

"What are you doing?" Andie asked.

"Being a mutt." She laughed at Andie's quizzical look. "It's a Dana and Gayle thing. Surely you understand."

"Maybe you should show me," Andie said.

Kara wasted no time kissing and nuzzling into Andie's neck. Then she let her mouth drift downward.

"Oh," Andie gasped. "I like you being a mutt."



Author Renee MacKenzie

Photo Credit: Pam Bauserman

About the Author

As a Navy brat, Renee lived on three continents before her family settled in Virginia. She currently resides in Southwest Florida with her partner, Pam, and their Great Dane. Renee works and plays in the swamp, where she enjoys wildlife photography, kayaking, and hiking.

Even though Renee has been paid to do all sorts of jobs, ranging from dental assistant to data entry specialist, and field sampling to pet-sitting and general maintenance, she insists she's only had one job—writer—and all the rest has just been research.

Confined Spaces is her debut novel.

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