
HIS OBSESSION NEXT DOOR

CATHRYN FOX



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“**W**hat’s gotten into the puppies tonight?” Veterinarian Gemma Matthews asked her assistant as she finished securing the last howling pooch into its kennel.

Victoria gave a mock shiver and shot a nervous glance toward the shelter window. “It’s the moon. It’ll be full tomorrow night.”

Despite the uneasy feeling mushrooming inside Gemma, she laughed at her assistant and followed the long column of silver moonlight illuminating a path along the cement floor. She reached the front lobby of her clinic, now eerily quiet after a demanding day of surgeries, and turned to Victoria. She gave a playful roll of her eyes, and said, “You’ve seen too many scary movies.”

Victoria dabbed gloss to her lips, smacked them together and countered with, “Hey, it could happen.”

Gemma arched a brow, humoring the young girl she’d hired straight out of veterinary college. “You think?”

“Sure.” Victoria’s long, blonde ponytail flicked over her shoulder as she gestured to the no-kill shelter attached to the

clinic. “That’s why the dogs are barking.” Her green eyes widened and her voice sounded conspiratorial when she added, “They can sense the big, bad wolf out there, ready to shred a human’s heart into a million tiny pieces.”

“I hate to break it to you, Victoria,” Gemma said, grinning at her assistant’s antics, “but werewolves don’t exist.” Even though Gemma didn’t believe in the supernatural, there was nothing she could do to ignore the jittery feeling that had been plaguing her all day. The truth was, the dogs weren’t the only ones feeling antsy and out of sorts on this hot summer night.

Her assistant held her arms up and jangled the big, silver charm bracelets lining her wrists. “Well I’m not taking any chances, which is why I’ve armed myself with silver.”

Before Gemma could respond, the office phone started ringing. As Victoria turned her attention to the caller, Gemma dimmed the lights and made her way to the front door to stare out into the ominous night. She stole a glance skyward and took in the mosaic of stars shimmering against the velvet backdrop. Even though the Austin night was calm, with not a cloud to be found in the charcoal sky, deep inside Gemma could sense a strange new ripple in the air. It left her feeling ill at ease. She placed a hand over her stomach, unable to shake the feeling that all was not right in her world.

Honestly, she had no reason to feel apprehensive or troubled, considering she finally had everything she ever wanted—her own clinic in the city, a no-kill shelter to help re-home animals, and an upcoming banquet that would hopefully raise enough funds to expand her animal sanctuary before she had to start turning pets away.

Swallowing down her edginess, Gemma set the deadbolt and was about to switch the sign from Open to Closed when a tall, dark figure stepped from the inky shadows. She sucked

in a quick breath and felt a measure of panic as the very male, very *familiar* figure came into view.

Speaking of the big, bad wolf.

“Oh. My. God,” she rushed out breathlessly.

“Is everything okay?” Victoria asked from behind the counter.

Instead of answering, Gemma’s shaky hands went back to the deadbolt, certain she had to be hallucinating. The bell overhead jangled as she pulled the door open and the second she came face to face with the man from her past, the same man who’d rebuffed her seduction days after her seventeenth birthday, she feared nothing would ever be okay again.

Moving with the confidence of a man on a mission, he came closer, the long length of his powerful legs eating up the black sidewalk in record time. Even in the dark she’d recognized that hard body of his, developed from hardcore military training rather than endless hours in some sleek gym. Her gaze took in the leather motorcycle jacket stretched over broad shoulders before traveling back to his chiseled face. Dark, penetrating eyes—harder now from having seen too much carnage—locked on hers, and the raw strength of the impact hit like a physical blow.

He came barreling through her front door. “Gemma,” he rushed out breathlessly. The urgency in his voice had the fine hairs on the back of her neck spiking with worry.

“Cole,” she somehow managed to say around a tongue gone thick as she stumbled backward. “What...how...?” She choked on her words as she glanced past his shoulders to see where he’d come from. She’d been positive that after the funeral last year she’d never set eyes on this man again, and if she did, their chance meeting wouldn’t go down like this.

Worried eyes full of dark concern cast downward. “Gemma...it’s...it’s Charlie...he’s hurt...” Cole’s fractured words fell off and that’s when Gemma’s gaze dropped.

Her heart leaped into her throat and she instantly snapped into professional mode when she caught the silhouette of the Labrador Retriever bundled in his arms. "Follow me." Jumping into action she turned and found Victoria rushing down the hall toward Exam Room 1, already a step ahead of them.

Gemma moved with haste and worked to quiet her racing heart. "Tell me exactly what happened." She kept her tone low and her voice controlled in an effort to calm Cole and minimize his anxiety.

Keeping pace, he followed close behind her, his feet tight on her heels. "We were out for a run in Sherwood Park," he began. "A squirrel sidetracked him, and he veered off the beaten path. He was jumping a log and didn't see the sharp branch sticking up."

She stole a quick glance over her shoulder and when dark, intense eyes focused on hers, her stomach clenched. "It's going to be okay, Cole. I promise." She drew a breath and gave a silent prayer that it was a promise she could keep. Gemma pushed through the swinging door and gestured with a quick nod toward the sterile examination table while she hurried to ready herself.

Understanding her silent command, Cole secured the whimpering dog onto the prep counter. Gemma's heart pinched when he placed a solid, comforting hand on the animal's head and spoke in soothing tones while Victoria went to work on preparing the pre-surgical sedative.

Gemma scrubbed in quickly and put on her surgery gear. She gave the dog a once-over before she dabbed at the blood to assess the depth of the wound. Angling her head, she cast Cole a quick glance. "Why don't you take a seat in the other room. This could take a while."

"I'm staying," Cole said firmly, their gazes colliding in that old familiar battle of wills.

Uncomfortable with the idea of him watching while she worked, and fully aware that he was a distraction she didn't need during surgery, she urged, "It could get messy."

"I've seen blood before, Gemma." With his feet rooted solidly, he folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not leaving him."

"Cole—"

"I'm fine."

Not wanting to waste time with a debate and knowing Cole was a bomb expert who'd seen his fair share of blood in the field, she gestured toward the chair in the corner. Once Cole stepped away, she cleansed the animal's wounds and continued her assessment.

She checked temperature, pulse and respiration before evaluating Charlie's gums. She shot Victoria a look as her assistant secured the blood pressure cuff and waited for the go ahead on the pre-surgical sedative.

"He's already trying to crash," Gemma said. "We have to go straight to surgery."

Working quickly, Gemma hooked the dog to an I.V. catheter and induced anesthesia while Victoria began the three-scrub process to shave and sterilize Charlie's skin.

Once the dog was clipped and scrubbed, Gemma reassessed. "He's lost a lot of blood, but I'm not seeing any visible organ damage. We'll have to flush the cavity to clean out the debris before we stitch."

As Gemma sprayed the area with warm saline, Victoria called out, "Pulse ox dropping, heart rate down to forty-five."

Damn, this was not good. Fearing she was missing something, she sprayed the area again and gave the cavity another assessment. That's when she noticed the tree had nicked a vessel on the liver. Gemma's heart leaped and worry moved through her as she exchanged a look with Victoria. Keeping her fingers steady and her face expression-

less for Cole's sake, she worked quickly to tie the vessel off before it was too late. Once complete, she rinsed the area, and when the bleeding came to a halt, she exhaled a relieved breath.

She turned her attention to her suture. A long while later she glanced at the clock, noting that more than an hour had passed since Cole had first stepped foot in her door. Gemma secured the last stitch, wiped her brow and stood back to examine the dog.

"Vitals are good," Victoria informed her. Gemma gave a nod and took off her surgery garb. She quickly washed up and let loose a slow breath, confident that the dog would recover.

"Will he be okay?" Cole whispered.

Gemma's skin came alive, Cole's soft, familiar voice sending an unexpected curl of heat through her tired body. She turned to him and he stepped closer, the warmth of his body reaching out to her and overwhelming all her senses. As he looked at her with dark, perceptive eyes that knew far too many of her childhood secrets, she jerked her head to the right. "Let's go into the other room."

She pushed through the surgery doors and Cole followed her into the lobby where she could put a measure of distance between them.

"Is Charlie going to be okay?" Cole asked again, raking his hands through short, dark hair that had been cut to military standards.

Gemma rubbed her temples and leaned against the receptionist's counter. "He's lucky you got him to me when you did."

For the first time since stepping into her clinic, his shoulders relaxed slightly. "He's going to be okay?"

"Yes. He's going to be fine." She drew a breath and stared at the man before her, hardly able to believe that he was here in her clinic. Shortly after her botched seduction some ten

years ago he'd enlisted in the army and had gone out of his way to avoid her.

As she considered that further, she decided to brave the question that had been plaguing her since he'd darkened her doorway. She waved her hand around the front lobby. "Why did you bring him here? There are other clinics closer to Sherwood Park."

Silence lingered for a minute, then in a voice that was too quiet, too careful, he said, "Because you were here, Gems, and I wouldn't trust Charlie's care in anyone else's hands but yours."

Her throat tightened at the use of his nickname for her, and while her heart clenched, touched at the level of trust he had in her, her brain cells made the next logical leap. "You've been back for a while, then," she stated in whispered words.

An expression she couldn't quite identify flitted across his face as he said, "A week now."

"Oh." Gemma shifted slightly, trying not to feel wounded that he'd been home for seven long days and hadn't even bothered to say hello.

She averted her gaze to shield the hurt but when he added, "I wanted to come sooner," she knew she could never hide anything from him.

She held her hand up to cut him off. "I understand how difficult this must be for you," she assured him, her mind going back to the last time they'd seen each other. Even though he'd been in a tremendous amount of pain at Brandon's memorial service, suffering as he said good-bye to his lifelong friend and fellow soldier, Cole had tried to console her, watching over her and taking care of her the same way he used to when they were kids.

It warmed her heart to know her brother hadn't died alone in the line of duty and that Cole had been there to care for him until the end. Her gaze panned his face. She took in

the dark smudges beneath even darker eyes and couldn't help but wonder, who was taking care of him?

His eyes clouded as they stared blankly at some distant spot behind her shoulder. Hating the unmasked hurt on his face, as well as the awkwardness between them, she touched his arm. The air around them instantly changed. Cole flinched, his entire body tightening as if under assault. Gemma snatched her hand back, his rejection all too familiar. Even though she was all grown up now, a woman who wanted him as much today as she did all those years ago, he'd never see her as anything more than his friend's kid sister.

Just then the puppies broke out into a chorus of howls and Gemma couldn't help but wonder if they were on to something. Maybe the big, bad wolf did exist, and maybe she was staring at him. Perhaps she should heed Victoria's warning and arm herself with silver. There was no doubt that if she wasn't careful the man looming close could shred her heart into a million tiny pieces.

The second Gemma had touched his arm she lit a dangerous fuse inside him. Cole had immediately disengaged, knowing it could only end up backfiring and blowing up in his face. He hated the familiar hurt in her eyes when he recoiled, hated that he'd put it there—again—but he knew nothing good could come from the firestorm inside him, one that had been brewing since their youth. Gemma had tried to hide the pain, the hurt on her face, and she might have succeeded with someone who didn't know her the way he did.

"Gems," he whispered. He clenched his fingers and fought the natural inclination to pull her to him and comfort her like he did when they were younger. But if her body collided with

his—one part in particular—she'd know how she affected him. And he couldn't let that happen. He had to stay strong.

Instead of acting on his needs, he took that moment to pan her pretty features, noting the way she'd tied her long, chestnut hair back into a ponytail. His gaze left her face to trail over the supple swell of her breasts as they pressed against her V-neck top. He shifted, uncomfortable as he perused her slim waist and the way her sensuous curves turned a pair of green surgery scrubs into a Victoria's Secret spread. Christ, she was even more beautiful now than she was when they were kids. But no matter what, and no matter how he felt about her, when it came to Gemma, there was a line he wasn't going to cross.

Her assistant came out from the back room. "He's stable and ready to go to ICU." When her words met with silence, her gaze tennis balled between the two, a sure sign that she felt the tension in the room every bit as much as Cole did. "Ah...Danielle will be here shortly. If you guys want to go, we can finish up."

Gemma exhaled slowly and pushed off the counter. "Thanks, Victoria. I'll come in early to check on him."

Cole stiffened. "He has to stay the night?"

"He needs to be monitored for at least twenty-four hours."

"Then I'm staying."

"It's not necessary. My night assistant will be here shortly, and I'm on call twenty-four seven. He's resting soundly and by the looks of you, you should be doing the same."

After a long moment, he gave a nod of agreement and Victoria slipped into the back, leaving them alone once again. Cole turned his full attention to Gemma and stretched his neck, working the night's tension from his shoulders.

Moving with an innocent sensuality, she walked around the counter to grab her purse from the drawer. Cole became

fully aware of the woman standing before him and exactly what she meant to him. He shifted on his feet and tore his gaze away, looking for a distraction before his mind took him back to that hot summer night when she'd lured him into the barn nestled at the back of her old homestead. Christ, it had taken all his effort not to lay her onto the soft bed of hay and take what he wanted.

But at seventeen she was a kid, as well as the younger sister of his closest friend. Of course, those weren't the only things stopping him from acting on his urges. No, when his own parents had been emotionally absent—too busy looking for happiness in the bottom of a bottle—her folks had practically taken him in. Cole would never be disloyal to the family who'd treated him like a son by sleeping with their only daughter.

"It's late and it's dark. Why don't you let me walk you home," Cole said, breaking the uncomfortable silence hovering like the sharp blade of a guillotine.

In typical Gemma fashion, she straightened her shoulders in that old, familiar way that let him know he'd hit a soft spot. "I'm capable of walking home by myself." She lifted her head a little higher. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm all grown up."

Oh, he'd noticed all right.

She opened her mouth to say something else, but he countered with, "It's on my way, Gems."

That gave her pause. Her head jerked back with a start and he didn't miss the accusation in her tone when she said, "Let me get this straight, you know where I work *and* where I live?"

"Yeah," he said, for lack of anything else.

Her big blue eyes narrowed. "Why is it you know so much about me yet I know nothing about you?"

"What do you want to know?"

Without hesitating she asked, "If walking me home is on your way, where do you live?"

He gestured to the motorcycle parked at the curb outside. "For now I've got a cot in the back of Freedom Cycle."

Perfectly manicured brows knit together as she angled her head curiously. "You're staying with Jack?"

"You remember Jack?"

She nodded. "Ex-sniper. Brandon always liked him." At the mention of her brother she rubbed the back of her neck and a contemplative look came over her face before she began again. "When I moved into one of my parents' downtown apartments during college Brandon told me—" she paused to do air quotes before saying, "*—Jack of all trades* was my go-to guy if I ever needed anything. I've run into him a couple of times since the funeral."

Cole paused for a moment before saying, "He takes in ex-soldiers and gives them work until they get back on their feet again."

"What I heard..." Her voice fell off and her eyes widened. "Wait... Are you saying...?"

"Yeah. I'm getting out, Gems. My days serving overseas will soon be behind me."

"Oh," she said, a mixture of surprise and relief swimming in her big blue eyes. Then she frowned. "So you're sleeping in the back of his shop?"

"Just until my new place is ready."

"And when will that be?"

"Tomorrow."

"Where will you be moving?"

Gemma stifled a yawn, and Cole could see exhaustion pulling at her. Instead of answering, he said, "Come on, I'm taking you home." He tossed her a lopsided grin, one that always pulled a smile from her when they were younger. "You know, for old time's sake."

Their eyes met and everything in his gut told him her thoughts were traveling down the same path as his. She too was remembering her youth and all the times he'd taken her home and snuck her to her room so she wouldn't get busted by her older brother or her folks. Sure, he'd lectured her on the dangers of her rebellious nature, but he'd always had an inherent need to protect her, from everyone and everything. He couldn't bring himself to let her get caught, even though it might have been for her own good. Then again, as long as he was around and watching over her, no harm would ever come to her.

"Cole—" she began, but he cut her off.

"I know, I know. You're quite capable of taking care of yourself," he said to appease her protest. He still wasn't taking a chance with her safety now that she was living on her own in the downtown core and he was back from overseas. Besides, when Brandon was dying in his arms and there wasn't a thing Cole could do to save him, he'd asked only one thing of Cole. And no matter what, Cole planned to follow through with the vow he'd made to Gemma's brother on that dark night, because he never, ever wanted to fail Brandon again.

A breeze came out of nowhere and washed over Gemma as she followed Cole outside. Too bad it did little to cool the heat that had taken up permanent residency inside her since setting eyes on the boy—no, the *man*—from her past. As they walked down the quiet sidewalk, Cole’s boots echoed in the unnatural silence. He stepped closer, moving into her personal space. That’s when she caught his familiar fragrance, the warm spice of sandalwood combined with Cole’s unique scent. Working to ignore the way it engulfed her and reminded her she was a woman who hadn’t been with a man in far too long, she turned to Cole and tipped her chin to make eye contact.

“What about your bike?” she asked, gesturing with a nod to the motorcycle parked on the street. She glanced at his mode of transportation, wondering how he’d managed to ride it to Sherwood Park with a dog in tow. When she noticed the sidecar, an invisible band squeezed her heart. Honestly, if she didn’t already know that Cole was one of the good guys, seeing that side cart would have cinched the deal for her. If there was one thing she knew, it was that you could tell a

guy's character by the way he treated his pet. But to a soldier, a dog wasn't just a pet. It was a best friend. An important member of the family, and there was no one in need of a family more than Cole.

He twisted his shoulders to glance at his bike. "I'll come back for it later."

His arm casually brushed against hers when he turned back around. Raw need shimmered inside her as the air around them crackled with volatile energy. Her skin flushed hotly, making it difficult to keep her voice casual when she said, "You don't have to walk me home."

He pinned her with a glare. "Did you ever think maybe I wanted to?"

She averted her gaze and stared straight ahead, not wanting to dwell on the things he *didn't* want to do with her.

After a long moment she shot Cole a sidelong glance. She gave him a thorough inspection, taking extra pleasure in his rugged sexiness and long, confident strides. The man was all strength and power, and she didn't miss the authority in the way he moved or the way he talked.

A fine shiver moved through her and she drew a fueling breath to marshal her libido before it got the better of her. "What do you plan to do now that you're getting out of the military?"

"Contract work."

"Like what? Join a renegade operation to fight organized crime?"

"No, Gems." He laughed, and the rich sound elicited a shudder from deep within and had heat flooding her nether regions. Damn. So much for pulling herself together. "That only happens in those romance novels you love so much."

"You remember my novels?"

"How could I forget? You had them scattered all over the place. Brandon and I were always tripping over them." Cole

stepped over a crack in the cement and his knuckles accidentally brushed hers in an intimate manner. Her mind once again careened in an erotic direction.

She sucked in a quick breath as naked desire moved into her stomach. Cole's nostrils flared as his glance darted to hers. Their eyes met and locked and his backbone grew rigid. She could tell he was uncomfortable but trying to hide it as he inched away, jamming his hands into his pockets to avoid further contact.

As he widened the distance between them, she tried not to think about the slow burn working its way through her bloodstream, or how everything inside her beckoned his touch, even after all this time. Looking for a distraction, she toyed with the hem of her shirt and focused her thoughts. "If you're not fighting organized crime, what exactly will you be doing?"

"When I'm not helping out at the bike shop I'm going to do contract bomb hunting."

She nodded. "I should have guessed."

His eyes turned very serious. "You wouldn't believe how many unexploded bombs there are across the country, left over from former training camps during the wars. I'll be joining a convoy next month." When she arched a knowing brow, he shrugged and added, "What can I say, I love blowing things up."

They shared a laugh, but it did nothing to ease the tension inside her or push back the heat threatening to burn her from the inside out.

After a moment Cole asked in a quiet voice, "How are your folks, Gemma? I haven't talked to them since..."

His voice fell off, like he couldn't bring himself to say the word funeral. "They're well," she assured him. "Dad is close to retirement." She paused and rolled her eyes before adding, "And when Mom isn't at one of her charity events, she's trying

to marry me off because she thinks I need a man to protect me.” When he didn’t say anything, Gemma went on to say, “I’m sure they’d be happy to see you. There’s a banquet Saturday night to raise funds for my shelter. Mother will be there. You should come.”

He tugged on the collar of his jacket. “I don’t know, Gems.”

She didn’t need to probe to understand Cole had never felt like he belonged in her world, a world filled with glitz and glamour. Cole had grown up poor, having to fend for himself, while her folks had apartments in the city, a summer home in the Mediterranean and a beautiful sprawling ranch on the outskirts of town. That’s where Gemma and Brandon had spent their childhood and went to school, despite their mother wanting them to attend a private boarding school in the city. But Gemma wanted to be near her horses and dogs, and her quiet brother had found an unlikely best friend in the rough and rugged boy who lived on the other side of the tracks.

They reached the front steps of her place, and she turned to Cole. “This is it. Home sweet home. But I guess you already know that.”

He scrubbed his chin, and she caught the way his gaze kept straying to the vacant condo across the street, and to the bright red SOLD banner splashed across the sign.

Gemma’s eyes widened. “Oh, I didn’t realize the Thompsons had sold their condo.” Cole opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but instead turned his attention to the loud barking sound coming from inside her condo.

“That sounds like some watchdog you have there.”

“Would you like to meet him?”

The corner of his mouth turned up in that boyish way that had her insides trembling with want, and her body urging her to do something about the heat careening through her.

“Uh, he actually doesn’t sound too friendly, Gems.”

She gave a casual shrug. “He can be very protective of me. But he’s a good judge of character.”

“That’s supposed to comfort me?”

“He only attacks unsavory sorts. You know, those with sordid pasts.” She paused at the foot of her stairs and arched a brow. “Do you still want to meet him? Or is there something I should know?”

“Open the door, Gems.”

Grinning, Gemma climbed the three steps to her front door, slipped her key into the deadbolt and unlocked it. “Hey, Stallone,” she said. As she pushed open the door, her oversized St. Bernard flew past her and headed straight for Cole.

Cole stumbled when her dog went up on his hind legs and put his huge front paws on his shoulders. The big wet lick across Cole’s mouth had him grimacing and groaning out loud, and there was nothing Gemma could do to stop her heart from clenching.

“Jesus,” he cursed. Gemma laughed when he wiped away the saliva with the back of his hand, the tension around them easing slightly.

“Here, boy.” Gemma slapped her leg and Stallone pushed off Cole to rush back up the stairs. She rubbed his ears and teased, “And here I thought you were a good judge of character.”

“Ha ha,” Cole said. “And I don’t know why your mother thinks you need a man to protect you when you have Stallone. He’ll lick any intruder to death.”

“Stallone’s a good boy. Aren’t you, Stallone?” She rubbed his ears harder.

“You call your dog Stallone?”

“He’s a rescue dog.” Cole gave her an odd look, which prompted her to explain. “He’s been through so much, yet every time he gets knocked down he gets up again.”

"If he's a rescue dog, I'm surprised he's friendly."

"That's just it," she said, shaking her head. "It's a huge misconception that neglected animals need to be put down. They only want to please, and once they're placed in the right homes, with the right people, they become amazing pets. We screen every family at the shelter before we let them adopt and we always do a follow-up."

Cole got quiet for a long time. "You've done well for yourself, Gems. Your brother would be proud."

Her heart beat a little harder in her chest and when her hand went to the back of her neck, she thought she spotted a glimmer of guilt in his eyes before he quickly blinked it away. "Thank you."

"You always did love animals," he said, looking a little distant, like he was remembering something from the past. "You always had a way with them actually."

"Well I'm no dog whisperer," she teased, "but I understand their needs. I took care of Stallone after he was brought into the shelter. There was something about him that tugged at my heart. Maybe it was the lost puppy look I saw in his big brown eyes." Not at all unlike the lost puppy look she saw in Cole's eyes. "And it made me want to keep him."

"You and your family always did have a thing for strays," he said and Gemma knew he was no longer talking about Stallone.

Her heart squeezed in her suddenly too-tight chest when she said, "I brought him home and he's been the most loyal, loving dog a girl could ever ask for. Which is why it's important I raise money for my no-kill shelter. It's overcrowded as it is and if I can't expand..." She let her words fall off, not wanting to think of the alternative.

When he went quiet like he was mulling that over, she panned his handsome face. "You know, Cole, you'd be the perfect poster boy for my cause." She somehow knew if he

came to the event and shared his stories the benefactors would be tripping over themselves to open their wallets.

They exchanged a long look, unease moving over Cole's face before he asked, "When is this banquet again?"

"Saturday night. Five days from now." She was about to ask if he'd changed his mind when her home phone started ringing. She looked inside her condo, then back at Cole, debating what to do.

Making the choice easy for her, he said, "You should probably answer that." Before he turned from her, he pitched his voice low and said, "Thanks for taking care of Charlie. I'll come by first thing tomorrow morning to get him." When the phone stopped ringing, he took two steps, paused, then shot her a long, lingering look. Her pulse leapt, her body aching to drag him inside to spend the rest of the night fulfilling the fantasies that had been plaguing her since her youth. "It was nice seeing you again, Gems."

Her heart fell into her stomach as she watched him retreat, his leather-clad back holding her attention until he disappeared around the corner. Once he was gone, she stepped inside, locked her door and hurried to the phone, which had started ringing again. She checked the display before answering, even though she already knew who it was, since the call came in at around the exact same time every night.

"Hello, Mother."

"Gemma," she rushed out, her voice frantic. "What took you so long to get the phone? I was sure you were being mugged."

Gemma rubbed her temples with her thumb and index finger. "I'm fine. I had an emergency at the clinic, that's all."

"An emergency?"

"Yes, but everything is fine now."

A pause and then, "I can tell it's not, Gemma." Her

mother covered the phone and Gemma listened to the muffled words. When she came back on she said, "I'm coming over there right now."

"No," she hurried out, then worked to put her mother at ease before she showed up on her doorstep. "Everything is fine. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Cole is back in town."

Silence met her words, and then her mother whispered, "I've heard."

"Oh, I didn't realize you knew." Not wanting her mother to feel hurt that he hadn't been by to visit her yet she hurried to add, "He hasn't been back for long."

"And he went to see you right away?" she said. "Interesting."

"Why is that interesting?" Gemma asked, but quickly decided she didn't want to hear the answer, or talk about Cole anymore. She put a bit of cheer into her tone and redirected the conversation. "I'll see you Saturday night, then? We should have a great turnout."

"Yes, that's why I was calling." There was a hitch in her mother's voice and it had Gemma concerned.

"Is everything okay?"

"Do you remember Mr. and Mrs. Washington? They were at our last charity event."

"Yes, why?"

"Well their son Douglas is back in town. He's a surgeon, you know. Highly respected in his field." Never one to beat around the bush, she added, "He'd make great marriage material, Gemma."

Gemma couldn't care less what Douglas Washington did for a living. Heck, even if he won a Noble Peace Prize or could spin a web and climb the tallest building, she still didn't want to go on a blind date with him, especially if it was set up

by her mother. "I told you, I don't need you to find a man for me."

"But, Gemma, you know I don't like you living alone in that downtown condo. The city is dangerous." Gemma's thoughts drifted to Cole and all the times he'd seen to her safety. She got the distinct impression he was eager to step back into the role of bodyguard. She frowned, wondering what it would take for him to see that while she might always have an impetuous side to her, she was an adult now. She made good decisions and was quite capable of taking care of herself.

Her mother's voice pulled her back. "Well, you do need an escort to the banquet, don't you? And it would put my mind at ease to know someone was seeing you home safely."

"I was planning to ask Victoria to come along."

"Oh dear, now how would that look? Last time you showed up without a male escort it had the whole town talking. Imagine if you showed up with a girl."

Gemma could feel a headache brewing. She plunked herself down on her sofa and stared at the vacant condo directly across from hers. "Victoria is my assistant, Mother. And since these events go until the wee hours of the morning I decided to get a room this time and crash at the hotel. So you see, you don't need to worry about me going home to an empty condo in the middle of the night."

"Well you should at least let Douglas escort you there. You know these benefactors are conservative and traditional and are more likely to fund your project if your conduct and morals mesh with theirs."

"In other words, I have to show up on the arms of a respected suitor."

"Exactly," she said and, in a sheepish voice, continued, "Besides, I already told him you'd be delighted to attend the event with him."

"You did what?" Gemma rushed out, shocked that her mother had gone so far as to actually set up a date. In the past she'd been pushy, but never had she spoken on Gemma's behalf before.

"Well you have to go now, dear. The Washingtons are huge benefactors and we wouldn't want to—"

"I know, I know," Gemma said, biting the inside of her mouth to stop from saying what she really thought. "We wouldn't want to offend anyone." Even though her mother was far too forceful for Gemma's liking, she had a kind, caring heart and deep down she meant well. She worried about her only daughter, and wanted what was best for her. After her mother lost a son, in such a tragic way, Gemma couldn't bring herself to say no, or do anything to hurt her. Stallone came up to her. Sensing her distress he plunked himself down between the sofa and coffee table and let loose a whimper.

"It's okay, boy," she whispered. "Everything is fine."

"You'll do it then?"

"Just this once," she conceded. "But please don't set me up again."

"You're a good girl, Gemma."

"I'll let him escort me, but don't expect me to marry him," Gemma warned.

"We'll see, dear," her mother said.

Fearing she was fighting a losing battle and deciding to change the subject she asked, "How's Dad?"

"He's still in Europe at one of his conventions. He'll be home at the end of the month. But enough about your father," she said. "Let's talk about Cole."

Leaving Gemma standing on her doorstep, Cole worked to get her out from under his skin, knowing she was a girl with

the right ammunition to rock his world. He hurried back to his motorcycle and walked past her now-closed clinic. As he worried for his dog, it had him considering all the great work Gemma was doing and the importance of her cause.

He wondered how he could help her—outside of attending one of her events. The thoughts of donning a suit, mingling with the rich and famous and talking about his life had him breaking out in a rash. He climbed on his bike, started the ignition and pulled into traffic. A few minutes later he parked beside his old pickup truck at the back of the closed motorcycle shop, and made his way in through the side entrance.

Tired after a long day, all he wanted to do was flop down on his cot and forget about the way Gemma had made him feel tonight. He didn't want to think about how all he wanted to do was drag her into his arms and fuck her long and hard until he got her out of his system once and for all. Although, when it came to Gemma, he feared one taste, one sweet touch of her body, would simply draw him in deeper to a place he had no intention of going.

He opened the shop door to find Jack and two other ex-soldiers playing cards. As they roused each other, the camaraderie making Cole smile, the three shared shots of dark rum and tried to “one up” each other with their stories. Cole looked at the motley crew. They weren't just his friends, mere comrades in the field, they were a brotherhood. Men who had each other's backs in the good times and the bad. Deciding to join them for a round, hoping the alcohol would numb the memories of Gemma and put him fast to sleep so the morning would come quicker, he peeled off his coat and tossed it over a chair.

“You been in battle, buddy?” ex-security specialist Garrett Andersen asked. He gestured toward Cole's bloodstained coat

as he unconsciously rubbed the purple scar on his face, a habit he couldn't seem to break, Cole noticed.

Jack arched a brow and slid an empty shot glass across the table as Colby, a former working shepherd, sat at his feet. "Anything we can do?" Jack asked, always ready to stand on the front line with his comrades, whether in the field or in the streets.

"It's Charlie's blood."

The three men instantly sobered, and all eyes focused on him. "What happened to Charlie?" they asked in unison.

He watched the men relax as he explained the whole situation. "He's going to be okay. I'll be picking him up in the morning."

Cole flipped his chair around to straddle it, and his gaze went from Jack, to Garrett, to fellow bomb expert Josh Mansfield. These three guys, these military dog handlers, had all loved and lost animals in the field. He considered the work Charlie had done with him overseas. Then, as he thought about the work his Lab would be doing with him there on American soil, an idea formulated.

Deciding to get right to the point, he poured himself a shot and asked, "What do you guys know about the no-kill shelter Gemma Matthews is running?" Christ, saying Gemma's name out loud triggered a reaction in his body and had his blood flowing thick and heavy. He clenched his teeth hard enough to break bone, cursing his cock for betraying him once again.

"Gemma Matthews as in Brandon Matthews's kid sister?" Jack angled his head and toyed with the dog tags around his neck, something they all continued to wear for their own personal reasons. For Cole, it was so he'd never forget the vow he made to Brandon, never forget how important it was to his childhood friend that he watch over his younger sister and keep her out of harm's way.

Noting the way Jack was staring at him with those far too perceptive eyes of his, Cole kept his face expressionless. He didn't want to give away his feelings where Gemma was concerned. "Yeah, that's her."

"I've run into her a few times. She's doing good things over at that clinic of hers."

Garrett pushed back in his chair, balancing on two legs. "I see her name in the paper all the time for the charity work she does. From what I understand she's raising money to try to keep her shelter a no-kill zone. I also heard it's overcrowded and if she can't expand, she's going to have to turn animals away. And you know what that means."

Cole nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"Why are you asking, Cole?" Jack looked at Colby, his German Shepherd, who thumped his tail in response, his big, soulful eyes staring up at his master with admiration.

Cole took a swig of rum and let it burn down his throat. "Why don't we take some of the dogs off her hands?" Truthfully, what he had in mind would be helping them both out. It would free up room in Gemma's shelter until she could expand, and it would give him something to do with his hands other than ravishing the young girl who'd blossomed into one hell of a sexual woman.

"What do you have in mind?" Garrett asked, his dog tags jangling as he dropped his chair back down onto four legs.

"We all know there is a shortage of service dogs, and since we're all handlers, why don't we train these dogs ourselves and get them into the hands of our bomb hunters here on American soil."

"Yeah, well, I know I hate the thoughts of any dog being put down," Josh said and Colby thumped his tail like he was in total agreement.

Garrett piped in. "We owe it to all the dogs we lost, and to all the ones we couldn't bring back home after their tour."

“And we do have that abandoned military base nearby we could use for training,” Cole said, looking at Jack. They exchanged a knowing look. While Jack had enlisted, preferring active field duty over becoming an officer and eventually riding a desk, they both knew he could put a call into his father. As a general, his father was a man who could make shit happen, especially when it was for a good cause like this.

“I can check it out and make some calls. The base would be a great place to set up training and obstacles.” Jack gave a slow nod, clearly warming to the idea. “You’ve convinced us, now, how are you going to convince Gemma we can train her mutts and turn them into certified service dogs?”

“Leave that to me.” Cole met the three sets of eyes staring at him, held up his shot glass and asked, “Are we all in?” After the four clinked glasses Cole said, “Here’s to Operation K9. Let’s get to work.”