

Chapter 1

Chris Nelson muttered an indiscernible oath and expelled a cloud of frost into the bone-chilling early-morning air. Even in the inky predawn blackness, it was clear that a new splotch of oil had mysteriously grown beneath her battered tan hatchback during the night. She plunged her key into the lock and wrenched the dented, rusting door open, then slid behind the wheel and tried the ignition. Nothing.

“Just start one more time, and tomorrow I’ll get you fixed,” she pledged, knowing full well that it was an empty promise. She didn’t believe in getting cars fixed—she felt too hopelessly intimidated by car mechanics. As a world-class athlete she’d conducted media interviews with the aplomb of a seasoned celebrity. She’d displayed good-humored optimism as a runner-up and honest satisfaction as a winner, and earned a worldwide reputation for her feisty personality and quick wit under

pressure. But she knew in her heart of hearts that while she could hold her own with the president of the United States, she would never be a match for a man holding an air wrench. She cringed at the memory of her last experience, when she'd paid an exorbitant amount to fix a glamus—while meekly suspecting that no such part existed.

No, she decided, keeping her thoughts silent—and thus secret from the car—it was much more sensible simply to drive the dying machine into the ground, walk away from it with whatever dignity she could muster, and buy a new one. She gingerly tried the ignition one more time and almost cheered out loud when it caught. She pulled away from her Fairfax, Virginia, town house with a glorious feeling of victory, closing her eyes to the red light flashing on the dashboard. Dismissing the clouds of gray smoke as condensation, she bravely eased the sputtering car onto the highway.

Ten minutes later when she stopped for a red light on the Little River Turnpike, the car shuddered, belched an acrid blast of opaque exhaust, and stalled out. Chris felt her heart drop to her stomach. "Please," she whispered, wrapping her fingers gently around the steering wheel, "tell me you're not ready for the big junkyard in the sky."

She narrowed her eyes and patted the dashboard. "I'll let you rest a minute, and then we'll try it again." The light changed. Traffic rushed past in the November gloom: Northern Virginia was en route to the Pentagon and downtown D.C. Chris held her breath and tried again. Nothing.

"Dammit." She peered into her rearview mirror at headlights waiting patiently behind her. Throwing her hands up in frustration, she punched the button that turned on the emergency flashers. The lights shining into her back window were high. Probably a truck. That was good—men who drove trucks always knew a lot about car engines, she reasoned. She watched hopefully as the driver emerged and strode toward her, then shifted her gaze to the flashing red light she'd so easily ignored only minutes ago.

Knuckles rapped on Chris' side window. "Got a problem?"

Chris' eyes stayed glued to the warning light on her dash. "It just suddenly stopped. I think it might have something to do with this little red light."

"Why don't you try to kick it over one more time."

She turned the key and listened morosely to the churning motor.

“Stop.”

“Only thing in decent working order on this whole crummy car is the stupid warning light,” Chris muttered through gritted teeth. Her peripheral vision registered a shift of weight, and she felt rather than saw the grin of good-humored masculine resignation.

“Maybe we should push it over to the shoulder, and I’ll take a look under the hood.”

Several minutes later, Chris stomped her feet in the cold as she watched him poke around at the engine. He was very tall—maybe six-two, she guessed—and nicely put together. He wore scuffed, waffle-soled construction worker’s boots and well-washed jeans that clung suggestively to long, muscular legs. A faded navy blue hooded sweat-shirt draped comfortably over broad shoulders. A smudged tan down vest hung unbuttoned over the sweat shirt.

He flicked a flashlight beam over rubber tubing and fan belt, his black hair falling in unkempt waves over his eyes. A heavy beard made his dark skin look villainously swarthy, and the tousled hair curled over his ears and halfway down his neck. He made an attempt to brush it back onto his forehead and noticed Chris watching him. “I need

a haircut," he explained, flashing a boyish grin that displayed perfect white teeth.

Chris felt her heart tumble unexpectedly at his disarming smile and immediately an image of Little Red Riding Hood and the big bad wolf popped into her head. What a ridiculous thing to think of—yet there was definitely a predatory air about him. Wolfish, in an attractive sort of way, she decided. And incredibly handsome . . . but a slob. Probably on his way to pour a foundation or dig a septic system.

Determined to prove herself invulnerable to his charms, she leaned on the front quarter panel and stuck her head under the hood with him. "Well?" she asked expectantly, "what do you think?"

"For starters . . . there's not a drop of oil in it."

Chris looked up and found herself staring into magnetic blue-black eyes made even more compelling by thick curling lashes and crinkly smile lines that testified to an active, outdoor life and a generous sense of humor. She watched dry-mouthed as he directed his flashlight to the riot of yellow-orange curls that surrounded her perfectly oval face. His inspection traveled from her almond-shaped hazel eyes, down to her small pixie nose and her bow-shaped mouth that shone with just a

touch of pink lip gloss. She licked her lips and answered in a voice that suddenly sounded strangely husky, "Is that bad?"

The look of incredulity that fluttered across his eyes was replaced immediately with a gently mocking curiosity. He played the light over her ringless hands. "I think you need a new man in your life." The timbre of his voice lowered. "Someone who takes better care of your . . . mechanical needs?"

Chris rolled her eyes. She was late for work, her car had just succumbed to terminal neglect, and her feet were freezing. She was in no mood to field a double entendre from a scruffy stranger . . . even if he did make her heart skip a few beats. She stood abruptly, hitting her head on the inside of the hood. There was a loud *spronnng*, and Chris jumped away just in time to see the hood come crashing down on two long, sweatshirt-clad arms.

His breath hissed from between clenched teeth. He swore softly, resting his forehead on the cool metal of the car. "Nice work, lady," he rasped. "Do you always cripple men who stop to help you? Or am I special?"

Chris opened her eyes wide in horror. "I'm sorry—it was an accident!"

“Uh-huh.”

Chris glared at him. “Well, you shouldn’t be making passes at women you stop to help. It’s like Sir Walter Raleigh carrying some grateful lady over a mud puddle and then trying to sneak a look under her skirt when he sets her down. This was a well-deserved accident. An act of God,” she tagged on for dramatic effect.

He nodded his head in mute agreement. Beads of sweat had begun to appear at his hairline. “Do you suppose God would mind if you got the damn hood off my arms?”

“Sorry.” She held the hood while he awkwardly started to move his arms. He flexed one gingerly, then winced when he tried to raise the other. Chris Nelson was the sort of person who rescued baby birds and felt guilty about stepping on ants. She cried when people were hurt on television, and sent money to aid starving children, but she found it difficult to muster any sympathy for the man standing in front of her. He was so big and capable looking, and so aggressive. He was so roguishly shabby. And he silently emanated a casually checked sexuality that she suspected could knock her socks off if she gave it half a chance.

Standing to his full, imposing height, he cradled

his left arm tenderly against his body. "My right arm seems to be okay, but the left is definitely broken." His voice was quiet, calm. "Is there a hospital near here?"

"There are two hospitals in the area—both about ten minutes away. Maybe a little longer in morning traffic."

He looked at her expectantly. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Lady, you just broke my arm. Aren't you at least going to offer to drive me to the hospital?"

Chris looked at him tentatively, her lip caught between her teeth, while she debated the danger of being alone in a car with him.

"For Pete's sake, I'm not going to attack you. I've got a broken arm."

"You look disreputable."

His gaze drifted down over himself in amazement. "I suppose you're right." He tipped his head back and laughed softly. "I've been called lots of things, but you're the first person in a long time to tell me I'm disreputable looking." He motioned to his truck. "I hate to be pushy, but my arm is killing me, and I can't both drive and shift my truck with only one arm. Since you're the cause of this disaster, I think the least you can do is drive me to a doctor."

He was right, she thought dismally. "Okay. I'll take you to the hospital." She shook her finger at him in warning. "So help me . . . if you make one false move I'll drive you straight to the state police."

His gaze swept slowly over her, and Chris felt suddenly unaccountably flustered—self-conscious of her tousled curls, her slim, athletic body bundled in her gray running suit and bright red vest. "You're not a minor, are you?"

Chris pulled a large athletic bag from the back seat of her car and locked it. "I'm twenty-nine, and if you tell me I look like Little Orphan Annie I might break your other arm."

"There is a resemblance."

"Don't push it." She stood facing his truck. It was a single cab Toyota Tacoma, dark gray with large wheels—and it seemed to be in perfect condition. Sure, it's easy for him, she thought grimly. He probably knows if it has a glamus. A huge black dog sat behind the wheel. Chris looked at the man beside her. "There's a dog in there."

"Yeah."

"That's the second-biggest dog I've ever seen."

"It's a Rottweiler."

"It must weigh two hundred pounds. We won't all fit."

"Of course we will. This truck seats three."

"This truck would have to have rubber doors to seat three."

He swung himself into the truck and settled beside the panting Rottweiler. "Come on," he coaxed. "He's a good dog. See? He's smiling. He likes you."

Chris set her bag on the floor between his feet and trudged around to the driver's side. "Why me?" she groaned. "Why do these things always happen to me?" She opened the driver's side door and slid in next to the mountain of dog, trying politely to nudge him over. He didn't move. He draped his huge head on her shoulder and drooled down the front of her red vest. Chris rolled her eyes in disgust. "Oh for goodness' sake. Hey, you!" she called between the dog's ears. "What's your name?"

There was a brief hesitation. "Ken Callahan."

"Ken Callahan, I can't drive with your dog drooling on me."

He sighed. "Okay."

The passenger door opened and slammed shut. Chris watched Ken Callahan jog around the truck. Not her type, she told herself, but she had to admire his style. Even with a broken arm, he moved with the fluid ease of an athlete. He opened

the door and jerked his thumb at Chris in an obvious order. "Out!" Maneuvering his large frame behind the wheel, he used his good arm to shove the dog clear to the window. He settled himself next to the Rottweiler and straddled the gearshift. "Is this better?"

"Do you drool?"

"Another ten minutes with you, and I'm going to be drooling and babbling and committing mayhem."

Chris slid behind the wheel again and found herself pressed thigh to thigh with Ken Callahan. There wasn't an inch to spare between the dog and the man. And the gearshift was hopelessly lost from sight between Ken Callahan's legs. *I should have left well enough alone*—she grimaced—*I was better off with the Rottweiler.*

"Um . . . Ken?"—she tried to shift in her seat—"We don't all fit in this truck."

"If I'd known you were going to break my arm, I would have left my dog at home." His voice was rapidly losing its calm modulation.

Wriggling again, Chris shot him a black look. "Don't get cranky. For two cents I'd leave you stranded here."

"I'd give you the two cents, but I can't get into my pocket with my broken arm."

Chris narrowed her eyes and counted to ten. "Can't he ride in back?"

"He'll jump out—and please don't suggest that I ride in back . . . it's starting to rain."

Chris squinted miserably at the windshield. He was right. It was raining. "Fine," she said through clenched teeth, "just keep out of my way." Ken Callahan made a fruitless attempt to move his long legs while she turned the key in the ignition. She switched the lights on, but the interior was barely lit by the glowing dashboard. Pressing her lips tightly together, she reached between his legs in search of the gearshift.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and the man squirmed beside her. "Lady, if you'll just tell me what it is you're looking for . . . I'll be glad to help you find it."

She swallowed and willed her voice not to quaver. "I'm looking for the gearshift."

He took her hand and placed it on the plastic knob. "Maybe you could be careful when you put this thing into second? This is a little cramped quarters."

She eased the stick back into gear and felt her thumb brush against the inside of his thigh. She closed her eyes in disbelief and scorching embar-

rassment. "This is impossible! Can't you scrunch into the seat a little?"

"I'm scrunched as much as I can scrunch. If you'd just get moving, you could put it into third, and we'd all feel better."

Chris spun the wheel and peeled out into the stream of traffic.

Ken Callahan gripped the dashboard. "Holy cow, now I know how you got all those dents in your car."

"Do you want to drive?"

"You wouldn't want to know what I'd like to do," he returned between clenched teeth.

Chris clutched the wheel with all the desperation of a drowning woman clinging to a leaking life preserver. She couldn't ever remember feeling so disturbed by a man. Every move she made pressed against hard muscle and sent suspicious sensations fluttering along her nerve endings, resulting in an odd mixture of fear, annoyance, and raw physical attraction. She focused her attention on the road and took a deep breath to steady herself. It was a ridiculous situation, and she knew it was going to get worse before it got better. She was up to fifty miles an hour and still driving in third gear. The motor whined in protest. She had

to put the truck into fourth gear, but that meant sliding her hand along the inside of his right leg, again. *This is my punishment for neglecting my car*, she agonized. *I didn't feed it oil, and I lied to it, and the Car Fairy is getting even.*

Ken Callahan cleared his throat nervously. "Uh, you really should put it into fourth."

"I know that." She glanced at him in the rear-view mirror and realized he was biting back laughter. "Something funny?"

"You're kinda cute when you're all flustered."

She made a grunting sound of pure annoyance. The only thing worse than being flustered was having him know she was flustered. She wrapped her fist around the gearshift and plunged it back with a vengeance.

"Yeow!" he gasped, jumping out of the way and smashing the surprised dog against the car door. "Watch what you're doing with that thing. I hope to have children some day."

"If you make me any more nervous you're not going to live to have breakfast . . . much less children."

He settled into his seat, and Chris felt his eyes watching her speculatively. Embarrassment, and some other emotion she didn't care to analyze, rose in fiery waves clear to the roots of her hair.

He touched her flaming cheek with the back of his hand. "You're blushing."

She groaned inwardly. Blushing was an understatement. If her face got any hotter, she'd be able to fry an egg on her forehead.

"This is a first for me. I've never been able to make a woman blush. I didn't think modern women did that sort of thing." He wound his finger around an orange curl and tugged lightly. "It's nice." His voice was soft and low. It reminded Chris of fine brandy that had the unusual ability to simultaneously soothe and stimulate. "What's your name?"

"Chris Nelson."

"That's a very no-nonsense name for a slightly crazy lady. You look more like a Tootsie or a Fanny . . . or maybe a Lucy."

"Lucy is my daughter's name."

"You have a daughter?" There was a moment of pregnant silence while he digested the fact of her motherhood. "How old is she?"

"Seven."

"And her father?"

"Gone."

"Poor man. Life must always seem dull after living with you."

She gave him a sidewise glance and saw a smile threatening to emerge at the corners of his mouth.

Damn him. He was laughing at her again. How dare he enjoy himself when she was so uncomfortable. And he didn't even have the good grace to be obnoxious—the rat was downright adorable.

He shifted his broken arm, trying to find a more comfortable position. "Is it much farther?"

"The hospital turnoff is just ahead. Does your arm hurt?"

"It's down to a dull throb."

Chris had an insane urge to kiss his arm and make it better. Maternal instincts, she assured herself. Nothing more than a hormone imbalance left over from childbirth. The fact that he was incredibly handsome had nothing to do with it.

They were traveling down a four-lane highway with a safety island running down the middle. Chris pulled into the left-turn lane, stopped at the intersection, and watched the oncoming traffic. Rain pelted the windshield, making it difficult to see openings in the morning rush of commuters.

"Here we are," Chris announced, finally able to complete the turn. She pulled the truck into the brightly lit parking lot and rolled to a stop in a space near the emergency entrance.

Ken Callahan gave an audible sigh of relief. The Rottweiler looked around expectantly and thumped his tail against the upholstery.

For some reason Chris suddenly felt annoyed that everyone was so happy to have arrived at their destination. It was as if they were overjoyed at the prospect of quitting her company. Not very complimentary, especially since she was unaccountably depressed at the thought of leaving Ken Callahan. "Hmmpf," she snapped.

"Hmmpf?"

"You and your dog are obviously ecstatic to see my driving come to an end."

"You drive like a maniac. And besides, you've been fondling me for fifteen minutes. How much do you think a man can take?"

"Fondling you?" she squeaked. "Of all the . . . I never . . . you . . ."

"Oh, man, now I've got you all upset. Listen, I know this is a small truck, and you probably didn't mean to fondle me, but . . ."

"I don't drive like a maniac. I've never driven a truck before." She shook her finger at him. "You haven't made it any easier—you and your dumb dog—and let me assure you that if I fondled you it was purely accidental."

"Yeah, and it was accidental that you broke my arm," he teased.

"You didn't move fast enough!"

He grinned sheepishly. "You're right. I'm not at

my best this morning. I didn't get much sleep last night." He leaned toward her and nuzzled her hair. "It wasn't entirely my fault, you know. I was distracted. You looked downright wanton . . . leaning over the engine at me."

Wanton? Of all the nerve, she huffed to herself. She might have been ogling a little, but she definitely hadn't been wanton—had she? "I wasn't feeling wanton. I was concerned about my car."

"Your voice was husky." His lips brushed against her neck as he spoke. His warm breath whispered along tingling skin.

Chris felt her stomach lurch. "My voice is always husky in the morning," she lied. "I wasn't awake, yet. I didn't have time for coffee."

He kissed the nape of her neck, sending a shiver rocketing along her spine. He leaned against her and placed a nibbling sort of kiss just below her earlobe while rain drummed on the roof of the truck, wrapping them in cozy isolation. Chris wondered why she was sitting there, waiting to be kissed again. She had dated sporadically since her divorce, mostly to appease well-meaning friends, and she'd always found herself counting the minutes before she could issue the perfunctory good-night kiss and get home to her daughter. *Why on earth am I feeling so attracted to this man? I don't even*

know him. I literally picked him up at the side of the road. She felt a little hysterical.

Ken slipped his hand inside the red vest, his fingers curled around Chris's rib cage. "Chris Nelson," he whispered silkily, "you're a very dangerous lady." His thick black lashes lowered as his gaze dropped to her lips.

Chris felt her body turn toward him, desire creeping through her like heated honey. His lips grazed hers in a kiss that was featherlight and lingering.

"Mmmmm..." she purred—and then wondered who'd just made that incredibly contented sound. Surely, it wasn't Chris Nelson. Chris Nelson was a dedicated professional, an intrepid mother. Up to now, the only thing capable of evoking that sort of response in Chris Nelson was her mother's New York cheesecake. She sat up with a jolt, surprising both man and dog. The Rottweiler stopped panting momentarily and eyed her suspiciously.

Ken Callahan drew his eyebrows together in a small frown. "Now what?" he asked warily.

"You're trying to seduce me in a hospital parking lot."

"What's wrong with that?"

What's wrong with it is that it's working, she thought. "I don't even know you. And it's inappropriate.

And . . ." She was babbling. Grasping at straws. "And your dog is watching."

A look of disbelief registered on Ken Callahan's face. It changed to a smile. He tipped his head back and laughed triumphantly. "I'm really getting to you, huh?"

She pressed her lips together in annoyance. "Doesn't your arm hurt anymore?"

"Not nearly as much as my heart," he confessed playfully.

She opened the truck door and jumped out into the rain, ran the short distance to the emergency entrance, and stood just inside the lobby, shaking out her wet hair and stomping the water off her sneakered feet. She pointed toward the desk. "Why don't you go and register. I need to make a call. I'm late for work."

"It's five-thirty in the morning. What sort of job do you have? Delivering newspapers? Making doughnuts? Hit man for the mob on the early-morning shift?"

"I'm a skate coach. The rink opens at five-twenty so the kids can practice before school starts."

He studied her slim, compact body and nodded. "It's easy to imagine you on the ice. I'm afraid I'm not very knowledgeable about ice skating—are you famous?"

Chris paused to look at him. His eyes were guileless and filled with genuine curiosity. "I suppose I was several years ago, but I'm not any longer. I might have a certain amount of recognition among other skaters, but my name is hardly a household word these days." She realized she'd left her purse in the athletic bag in the truck and started a fruitless search through the pockets of her vest.

Ken placed his cell phone in the palm of her hand. "I assume this is what you're looking for." He grabbed her elbow as she turned away. "Get back to me as fast as you can," he pleaded, "I hate hospitals."

When Chris returned, she found Ken Callahan slouched in a chair, his long legs stretched in front of him. His arm had been put in a sling, and he looked up at her anxiously over a cup of coffee. "You've been gone for hours—what took you so long?"

"I've been gone for five minutes."

He smiled boyishly, slightly embarrassed. "Well, it seemed like hours. They've already taken X-rays." He pointed to a Styrofoam cup on the table beside him. "I got you some coffee."

Chris removed the lid and added a container of cream, then studied him as she sipped at the

coffee. He had high cheekbones, a perfectly straight nose, and a few flecks of gray in the unruly profusion of wavy black hair. He had a wide mouth, which she could easily imagine set in ruthless determination, but right now he stared moodily into his coffee, the corners of his mouth turned down, and Chris wondered why he was looking so grim. "Is something wrong?"

"To tell you the truth . . . I'm scared to death. I've never been in a hospital before. And I've never broken anything that was mine. Will it hurt?"

Chris gaped in astonishment. He was serious. He really was scared. She smiled and shook her head. "I don't think it will hurt."

"Have you ever broken anything?"

"When I was a little girl we lived on a farm in Colorado—not a working farm, we just called it a farm because it was eleven acres, and it had a barn. When my parents bought the farm it came complete with a big old black horse named Looney. He was a great horse, but every now and then he liked to see me go over a fence solo. He'd run right up to a fence, plant his feet, and I'd go soaring off into the air. One time I crashed into a split rail and broke my nose."

Ken slowly ran the tip of his finger along the bridge of her nose. "It's a pretty little nose. Straight

until the very end, where it tips up just a bit. Elegant without being boring.”

She felt her heart flop at his touch, and an unaccountable tingle ran down her spine. “Mmmm,” she answered, waiting for her mind to clear. “And then when I was eight I was dancing in my room with a laundry basket on my head . . . and I tripped over a roller skate and broke my arm.”

“I find that surprisingly easy to believe.”

“And when I was twelve, I broke my finger playing softball.”

“Never been hurt skating?”

“Bruises. Lots of bruises. Nothing serious.”

“Did you ever compete?”

“For years and years. I was National Novice champion at sixteen, Junior champion when I was eighteen, and National Senior bronze and silver medalist. And then I quit.”

He watched her quietly. Their mutual silence grew uncomfortable, the inevitable question hanging ominously suspended in the air between them.

Chris sighed. “Don’t you want to know why I quit? Everyone always does.”

“I thought it might be sensitive.”

She smiled at him, pleasantly surprised at his perception. “It was a long time ago. As a young athlete I’d led a very narrow life. Up at five in the

morning. In bed by nine at night. I was the world's latest bloomer. I'd never had any sort of relationship with a boy until I was twenty-one. And that relationship resulted in my daughter, Lucy."

He drained his cup of coffee and returned it to the table. His hand found hers and traced a line along her ring finger. "Want to tell me about the father?"

"Steven Black."

He whistled softly. "The actor?"

"The classic whirlwind courtship. He wined and dined me for two weeks. I thought I was madly in love." She shrugged with her hand. "We were married in a thirty-second service in Las Vegas. Four weeks later I discovered I was pregnant, and my adoring husband divorced me while I was still in my first trimester."

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "Why did he do that?"

"Steven wanted a glamorous wife. If I'd stayed with skating I would have been on the Olympic team. Eight years ago Steven was still struggling for recognition, and I suppose he thought he could use the media coverage. When I refused to have an abortion and told him I was giving up competing, he divorced me."

Ken slid his hand along hers and gripped her

wrist. Little prickles of pleasure ran up her arm at his possessive touch. His hand was large—a working man’s hand, she decided. Strong. Permanently tan. It was a hand that could be gentle and protective and still manipulate with confident authority. In a sudden flash of insight Chris knew what it would be like to share a bed with Ken Callahan. A burst of unexpected heat rushed through her at the thought, and a scarlet scald crept from her shirt collar.

Ken regarded her with serious curiosity. “It must have been difficult for you to give up competing.”

Chris smiled. “It was easy. I loved to skate, but I hated to compete. I threw up before every competition. And as soon as I became pregnant my whole body oozed contentment.” She sat forward in her seat, warming to her subject. “Having a baby is a miracle.” Her face glowed with satisfaction and pride. “They have fat little hands and tiny fingernails, and they love you . . . just because you’re there, and you’re Mommy. Babies don’t care if you’re famous or rich.”

She felt his hand tighten on hers and knew she had allowed some of the hurt of rejection to surface. She hadn’t meant to show that to him. She hadn’t even known herself that it still existed.

She hurried to cover the slip. "My favorite part of the day is when Lucy and I read bedtime stories. The book I like best is about this little bear. He gets a bicycle, and his father is going to teach him how to ride it, but the father does everything wrong! And then there's another Little Bear book where Little Bear and his dad go hiking with the bear scouts—" Chris stopped suddenly and closed her eyes with a groan. "I don't believe I'm telling you about Little Bear."

His voice was mockingly serious, but his dark eyes danced with amusement. "Little Bear is undoubtedly an important part of your life."

"Are you laughing at me again?"

He put his hand to her cheek. "No. I think it's very nice."

A white-coated intern appeared before them. "Mr. Callahan? I have the results of your X-rays. You have a simple fracture. It's not terribly serious, but it'll require a cast. You can go to an orthopedist of your choice, or I can have a staff doctor paged for you. I believe Dr. Wiley is on the floor somewhere."

"Dr. Wiley will be fine."

A bank of steel-gray clouds hung low in the early-morning sky, diffusing the sunlight and adding a chill to the air. Ken Callahan brandished his

flourescent green, spanking-new cast, like a flag—holding it high to prevent his arm from swelling.

“Keep it above your heart for a few days,” Dr. Wiley had advised.

“Above my heart,” Ken mumbled, heading for his truck in long, angry strides. “Damned inconvenience.” He stopped and looked down at his plaster-clad arm. The cast stretched from his elbow to the middle of his hand, wrapping around his thumb, and making it impossible to grasp anything with his left hand. He wiggled his fingers pathetically. “Just look at this,” he ranted. “How can I drive? How can I work? How can I tie my damned shoes?”

Chris trotted beside him. She unlocked the doors to the truck and bit her lip to keep from laughing. Ken Callahan had ceased to frighten her. He wasn't as disreputable as she'd originally assumed. He was well-spoken and easy to talk to. A little over-sexed, perhaps, but not weird or dangerous. And she knew from the past two hours that his anger was short-lived. He was not a man that held a grudge or nursed a wound—and the memory of him locking her hand in a death grip while his cast was being applied sent spasms of laughter choking in her throat. Her hilarity ceased when she opened the door and came face-to-snout

with the Rottweiler. There was a tug at Chris's vest collar and warm breath skimmed along her neck.

"I can hardly wait for fourth gear," Ken murmured into her ear.

"You weren't so crazy about fourth gear when we pulled in here."

"I was worried about being driven to the police station."

"And you're not worried anymore?"

"I've decided to take my chances."

Chris wrinkled her nose at him. "Well you needn't be concerned. It's light out. I can see what I'm doing, now. Your honor is perfectly safe." He was a nice man, but she was going to be extra careful about first gear. She didn't have the time or desire to complicate her life with a man. She slid behind the wheel and, after Ken was settled, turned to him. "I suppose I should drive you somewhere. Home? Or to work? Where were you going this morning?"

"I was starting a new job. I wanted to get in early and take a look around before anyone else showed up."

"Oh, no," she groaned, "first day on the job, and I broke your arm." She looked at the jeans and scuffed boots. He had removed his sweatshirt in deference to the cast, leaving him in a yellow

short-sleeved T-shirt, which said CONSTRUCTION WORKERS USE THEIR TOOLS. The shirt clung to a flat stomach and broad, muscled chest, the sleeves spanning well-defined biceps. His forearm was corded, the back covered with a silk mat of black hair. There was no doubt in Chris' mind that he could crack a walnut as easily as an egg. Her eyes glazed over in silent admiration.

"Earth to Chris."

"Uh, I was just wondering about your shirt. You do construction work?"

"Yeah."

Not a laborer, she decided. He didn't seem the sort to take orders. A project manager or a supervisor, maybe. Certainly someone who worked in the field. He didn't get all those muscles sitting behind a desk. "Should I take you to work?"

He looked at the cast. "I think I'll pass on work today."

"Won't someone be upset if you don't show up?"

"Relieved would probably be a better word."

The truck idled at a standstill in the parking lot. "That's a strange thing to say. Are you insecure?" she joked.

He shook his head. "No. I'm ruthless."

An inadvertent shiver ran down her spine at the bitter tone in his voice.

"And I'm disreputable," he teased, trying to lighten the conversation.

"It's the stubble."

He rubbed his hand across his whiskered chin. "Twenty-eight of my last forty-eight hours have been spent on a plane. And only three of the remaining twenty hours were spent sleeping. I was afraid to take a razor to my face at four-thirty this morning."

"Where did you fly in from?"

"Everywhere."

She felt him slump in the seat next to her. He passed a hand through his hair and sighed. "I've been to three countries and seven cities in the last forty-eight hours. Six job sites. This would have been number seven. Maybe I'm glad you broke my arm. I think I'm running on empty."

"Are you some sort of troubleshooter?"

"Troubleshooter? I guess that's as good a name as any, but lately I feel more like a *troublemaker*." He quirked a smile at her. "I'd like to make a pass at you, but all of a sudden, I'm so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Would you like me to drive you home?"

"I don't think I have a home." It was a flat statement issued in a voice totally devoid of emotion.

"There's this place out in Loudoun County where I stay sometimes."

"Loudoun County! After I drop you off, how will I ever get back here? Loudoun County is miles away. There aren't any buses running to Loudoun County, there isn't a subway running to Loudoun County, what are you doing living in Loudoun County?"

He sat with his black curls resting against the rear window, his eyes closed in exhaustion, his cast propped in a ridiculous position on the head of the Rottweiler. "You could spend the night," he smiled dreamily. "It's lonely in Loudoun County."

"I'll pass on the night stuff, but I guess I can drive you home. After all, you did try to help me."

"Mmmmm."

Chris glanced at her watch. "I have students waiting for me right now. Would you mind hanging around at the skating rink for a couple hours? I'll be done at ten-thirty, and then I can make arrangements with one of the other coaches to follow us out and bring me back home."

"Mmmmm."

Chris looked at him suspiciously. "Did you hear anything I said?" There was no response. He was asleep.