

*RACING
STORMS*

The CHASING DESIRE Trilogy

RACING STORMS

BOOK 1

SARA RUSSELL



Copyright © 2017 by Sara Russell

North Loop Books
2301 Lucien Way #415
Maitland, FL 32751
407-339-4217
www.NorthLoopBooks.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

ISBN-13: 978-1-63505-379-1
LCCN: 2016919000

Distributed by Itasca Books

Printed in the United States of America



CHAPTER 1

Decoursey's heart pounded as she read the text message on her phone.

Want to let you know Rory at Texas Motor Speedway next weekend

She wondered if anyone heard her gasp, but no one came to investigate within the confines of one of Dallas's less glamorous office buildings. The occupant of the cubicle next to hers was out with stomach flu, and Decoursey was in a rather isolated corner of the floor anyway, still being the "new girl" after less than a year with the ad agency. This cubicle was certainly a far cry from the office she'd enjoyed at her previous advertising job back in North Carolina. That office hadn't been the posh corner space, but at least it had featured a blessed door to block sounds like gasps and crying.

Until the awful day Rory had kicked that door in.

The last time she'd talked with her ex-husband, he'd sworn to kill her. In the back of her mind, she knew it was possible he'd be in the Dallas area sooner or later, because logic held that a member of a NASCAR pit crew would come to nearby Texas Motor Speedway.

But she also believed Rory would have been kicked off the pit crew by now. She had heard he'd been on a leave of

absence from Marland Motorsports for rehab of some sort; alcohol and painkillers, she assumed.

So he was back on the pit crew. Things must have worked out for him.

Now there was precious little time to devise a plan should Rory try to make good on his deadly promise. Decoursey fought panic as she struggled out of the neat coral cardigan she wore over her navy dress, draping it over the back of her company-issued ergonomic chair. The maroon upholstery, stained from some long-ago beverage mishap, clashed horribly with the little orangish sweater. Cooler without it, she forced herself to inhale and exhale slowly, hoping to clear her mind and conjure a solution.

Since members of the pit crew didn't have a lot of extra time during a race weekend, the window of opportunity for Rory to cause trouble was narrow. But she didn't trust him any farther than she could spit. Decoursey pulled up the website for Texas Motor Speedway on her computer monitor, her wobbly fingers clicking to the schedule of events for the upcoming spring race weekend.

Footsteps signaled someone approaching her workspace. Hastily, she clicked from the browser window to her e-mail pane. It was on the early side yet for lunchtime Internet browsing, and making a good impression was her path out of this entry-level position. She paused and listened; whoever it was had turned down the aisle before reaching her. She clicked back to the browser window to examine the detailed track schedule.

If only she could hire an off-duty police officer to stand guard at the door of her condo. But even if she could afford it, there was no guarantee that even a security professional would be able to take Rory down. He'd been a formidable

college linebacker, a blond god who came out of blows on the field that had flattened his teammates. That toughness had attracted her in the first place. But now it was the undoing of anyone who had to defend against him. Especially if he showed up drunk.

Decoursey steepled her fingers over her nose and let her eyes fall shut. *Think.* The wise thing to do would be to leave town for the weekend. She could bunk with her friend and coworker Abby, who lived at her condominium complex. But despite her fear, she chafed mightily at the thought of leaving her home. She'd already run all the way to Texas. She wasn't running again, not even across the parking lot. Not on his account.

Somehow, the idea of getting an able-bodied man to stay with her for the weekend was intriguing—not a full-fledged cop or bodyguard, but merely someone hale enough to provide a distraction in the unlikely event that Rory showed up. If she had someone in her condo—someone who didn't look like a pushover—to act as a witness, even crazy Rory wouldn't be stupid enough to try anything. And he'd be kicked off the pit crew for sure if he violated the restraining order.

Trouble was, she didn't know of any suitable candidates to stay with her, complicated by the fact that she couldn't exactly tell the person why he was there. Having lived in the Dallas area for less than a year, she didn't really know any men outside of work except Abby's boyfriend. Not only was Jayesh a lightweight, but he'd never be able to keep her plan a secret from Abby. She'd tease it out of him once she sensed something was up.

Naturally, any acquaintance at work was out. Talk about an HR nightmare and the nail in her promotional coffin: inviting a male colleague over for what amounted to

a sleepover. Even if she asked one of the gay guys, that would peg her as a consummate weirdo. *Hey, by the way, I thought maybe you could stay at my place this weekend. Just for fun. I'll feed you too. No reason at all.* Anyway, she knew from overheard conversations that several men in her office were busy this weekend. They were, of course, going to the NASCAR races at Texas Motor Speedway.

Wait—that's it! Her eyes popped open. An outrageous plan, but she didn't seem to have any other genius-inspired options. It was race weekend, with upwards of 150,000 NASCAR fans descending upon the area. It wasn't unheard of for locals to rent out extra rooms, even entire houses, to ticket-holders coming into town. She could advertise her spare bedroom online to a male in need of accommodations—the sooner, the better, since it was already Wednesday.

Decoursey sighed and tucked her blonde hair behind her ears, guilt adding to the festering soup of emotions in her head. Putting someone in this position wasn't her preference, however farfetched it was that Rory would make an appearance. In a way, it made her no better than Rory . . . except she didn't plan on abusing her guest. But she was almost certainly feeling guilty over nothing. Rory would be hard-pressed to get away from his duties at the speedway; he'd never once violated the restraining order; and all this would be her fretting over the worst-case scenario. Her favorite hobby.

CHAPTER 2

I've had it. The malignant odor wasn't nearly as bad as the bickering. Kennan closed his eyes in the back seat and tried to shut out the sniping of his friends. It wasn't working. The day had been a complete disaster, and they were taking it way too seriously.

"Can't you just accept that you're not always right?" Zane practically yelled.

"Right back atcha, a-hole. We shouldn't even be out here. The semester ends in four weeks. I should be home studying, even if it is Friday." Travis fumed from the driver's seat.

"Just drive the fucking van. Goddammit." Zane got in the last obscene word.

Blue-sky bust. That's what storm chasers call it when a layer of warm air in the atmosphere—the "cap"—stays firmly in place, quashing any severe-weather development and, along with it, the camaraderie of a storm-chasing team. Travis and Zane were meteorology graduate students at the University of Oklahoma. This wasn't just a hobby for them, as it was for Kennan; this was their balls on the line. And what really rubbed salt into their wounds were videos of massive tornadoes well to their north that other chasers had already uploaded for the whole world to see.

A tense silence reigned as they rattled down the Texas highway in Travis's beat-up chaser van. While not a recent model by any stretch of the imagination, it looked way too

dilapidated for the vintage. Hail damage like automotive cellulite covered the vehicle, with a big crack across the windshield and six figures on the odometer.

Kennan wished the van had even more damage. Those divots in the bodywork were a chaser's badge of honor, and they certainly hadn't earned any accolades for today's result. They'd missed every storm to the north by positioning at the southern end of the cold front, waiting for that cap of warm air to rip and allow pillars of clouds to explode up through the atmosphere. It would have been spectacular and highly tornadic. Unfortunately, the cap hadn't cooperated.

Travis drove on, the afternoon sun glinting off premature grays in his dark hair. Zane sulked at his mobile as he checked surface data and weather forums for the umpteenth time. After a few minutes, Zane sat up, holding the screen closer to his face.

"We could have another chance with the next cold front. Today's Friday . . . so maybe Sunday evening."

"I saw that in the forecast models a few days ago, but it looked mediocre. You think it looks better now?" Travis asked casually, sunglasses trained on the road as if he hadn't just been mad as hell.

Zane scratched at his thick auburn shag. "No guarantees, but I like what I see. Hey, Kennan, did you get a chance to look at the updated models?"

Kennan drew on his scant three semesters as a meteorology major to inform his opinion. "Yeah, it's got some promise. Maybe out toward Abilene again? Huh, where we just were. Too bad we can't park it here by the side of the road and wait."

"Why not, dude?" Zane had the enviable ability to sleep anywhere.

Kennan grimaced. "Dude. This van smells like shit. You and those gas-station burritos. There is no way I am sleeping in here." *Not to mention I could use a break from you two.*

"What, my van isn't good enough for you?" Travis scoffed. Zane leaned sideways in his seat, punctuating the conversation with a pungent fart.

"Seriously, Zane!" Kennan tried not to breathe as he put down his window. "Again? You need to go to the doctor or something. That can't be normal."

Zane looked smug. "I can't help it. It's genetic."

Kennan let the outside air blast him in the face like a hair dryer, then rolled his window up. It was too hot and sunny outside to leave it down. At least the air conditioning worked in the van. "I don't think that's anything to brag about. God help us if you ever get married. Your kids will pollute the earth and drive all life-forms to extinction."

Travis snorted. "That's if he can get anyone to marry him. It's gonna take a special lady to love the Fartmeister."

Although the conversation continued to be as foul as the lingering aroma, Kennan much preferred it to their petty arguing. He pulled up weather data on his own phone. It did look promising. Too bad they couldn't really stay here in Texas for a few days. Travis and Zane wanted to get back to their rented bungalow in Norman, where Kennan had stayed last night, and Kennan planned to go home to Kansas City. As slow as his environmental consulting business had been lately, he needed to get his one project wrapped up pronto so he could spend time trolling for more work.

"Now that you mention it, sticking around here isn't such a bad idea," Travis mused. "We're almost to Fort Worth. We could hang there in some cheap-ass trucker motel and then drive back to Norman Sunday night, after the next round

of storms. Depending on where we chase, we might end up close to Oklahoma City anyway.”

“Hey, works for me. I can study on the road. Let’s do it,” Zane said.

“Kennan, you in?” Travis barked as he swerved to avoid a dead armadillo.

Kennan looked up from his e-mail. “Wait—what are we doing?”

“Staying in a motel. You have your big ol’ laptop. You can work all weekend, like you always do.”

“I don’t *always* work weekends. Anyway, I mostly finished a project yesterday before you called.”

“So—what’s the problem?”

Kennan sighed and ran his hand through his overgrown mop of dark hair. “All right, fine . . . I guess I can spare a few days. But I am so getting a motel room by myself. Either that or Zane has to put a cork in it.”

Two hours later, Kennan edged closer to the front desk of a budget motel, allowing a family of four with a rolling cart piled with luggage to squeeze by. He noticed that it wasn’t just suitcases—a huge cooler balanced atop more baggage than a mom, dad, and two kids seemed to require, unless they were planning to move in. Well, he was one to know. He’d overpacked for this trip. It was far easier to stuff everything he might need into his jumbo camping backpack than to sit around tediously pondering what to cull.

“Ah do apologize, sir. We don’t have any vacancies. Would you like me to check another location?” asked the twangy-voiced clerk.

“Um, yeah, if you could, thanks.” Strike three on motels. He could see Travis and Zane getting antsy outside in the

van. He should've just tried to book through a travel app, but who knew they'd have this much trouble finding a simple motel room?

"Hmm . . . looks like it'll be the one about thirty miles from here, on the other side of town. Everything's all booked up 'cause of the NASCAR weekend at Texas Motor Speedway. Can I reserve a room for you at that south location?"

"No, that's okay. I'll try somewhere else. Thanks, though." It was hard not to sound exasperated. He glanced back at the family as they stood waiting for the elevator. They must be NASCAR fans. That would explain why they were decked out in garish racecar-themed T-shirts and caps. Kennan strode back out to the van to break the bad news.

"This one's full too?" Travis called through his open window.

"All the rooms around here are taken." Kennan heaved himself into the back seat and buckled his seatbelt. "I don't know what to do. Every NASCAR junkie west of the Mississippi is here for some stupid race."

"Aw, man—I totally forgot!" said Zane. "It's the spring race weekend at Texas. My DVR is set, but it sure would be nice to see it in person. Yep, sure would." He nodded wistfully.

A charged moment passed before Travis jerked his head sideways to look at Zane. "Dude, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Hell, yeah!" Zane crowed, fist-bumping Travis.

Kennan regarded them warily. "You guys are having another one of those long-lost-twin ESP moments. Explain, please."

Zane looked triumphant. “We go to the races. That way we can park the van and sleep in it. And have something awesome to do while we wait for Sunday!”

“And where does that leave me? I am not sleeping in this dump!”

“Hey, lay off the insults of my sweet chariot. She’ll hear you and get temperamental,” Travis scolded.

“Kennan, you should sneak into the campground and find a bed in someone’s RV. Pay them fifty bucks to sleep and shit,” Zane suggested.

Kennan grabbed his phone and started an Internet search. “Better yet, I’ll find someone with a real bed and a real room. Don’t people rent out rooms in their houses when there’s a big sports event? Like the Super Bowl or something?”

“It’s worth a try, but you better do it fast, ’cause this hotrod’s headed to the track. Zane, which seats do you want—Turn 1 or Turn 4? Those are gonna be the cheapest. Man, I hope it’s not sold out.” Travis fired up the engine and turned out of the motel parking lot onto the frontage road.

CHAPTER 3

Deccoursey almost dropped her Swiffer as her cell phone rang from its charging stand on the table she was dusting. *Please don't let it be Rory.* She didn't recognize the name and number that came up, but she wouldn't put it past Rory to throw her off by borrowing someone else's phone. He'd done that before the restraining order was issued, wanting to talk to her and work things out, he'd said.

Dusting was a good way to keep busy, even though it didn't matter if her residence was clean or not. No one had called about renting the room, which stank in more ways than one: it made today a wasted Friday vacation day from work, and it also marked the failure of her plan.

The male fans of NASCAR were missing out, because she'd even decided—reluctantly—to put the person in her own bedroom. It was hard to give up her sanctuary, but since it had the attached bathroom, both she and the guest would have more privacy if he stayed mainly there and not in her living room or wandering back and forth to the hall bathroom. She'd already gone through the trouble of moving things she needed into her second bedroom and hall bathroom.

She reached out to pick up her phone, then hesitated. She didn't want to answer if it was Rory; at the same time, she definitely wanted to know if Rory was calling. But . . . she could let it go to voicemail.

Don't be a chicken. Pick up the stupid phone. Obeying the internal command, Decoursey reached out again, this time grasping the phone and clumsily pulling it off of the charger. But she was too late, and it went to voicemail anyway. She waited a minute until the notification popped up, then hit Play. Her stomach clenched as she anticipated the sound of Rory's voice, the homespun North Carolina accent belying the violence of his soul.

A deep, resonant voice spoke, but not the one she expected.

"Uh, hi, I'm calling about the room for rent. If you could please call me back, my name is Kennan McGregor, my number is 816-555-8624, and, um, if you could let me know ASAP if the room is still available, I'd appreciate it. Thanks."

Decoursey collapsed onto the sofa, still clutching the phone. Hallelujah—a potential guest for the weekend! She replayed the message and wrote down the name on a notepad, guessing at the spelling. She then grabbed her laptop and typed the name into the browser, hoping it was close enough to get search results that revealed the true spelling of his name. *Bingo.* She opened a new browser window to perform a criminal background check. Why deter her criminal ex-husband with yet another criminal?

Fifteen minutes later, Decoursey was fairly satisfied that this Kennan fellow was a safe bet. The background check was squeaky clean. In addition, the Internet had revealed a lot more than just his respect for the law. Kennan McGregor had a website for some kind of environmental consulting firm and seemed to be a weather nut, judging from his page with all sorts of storm photos and videos. He lived in Kansas City. He was twenty-nine years old, so hopefully mature enough to have some manners and not make a huge mess of her place.

She pored over several photos of him that came up in the search, some of them with a striking brunette. One picture showed her perched on his lap at a party, her narrow black skirt riding up to show off long, lean legs. Probably his girlfriend, since the background check indicated he wasn't married. And a serious girlfriend at that, since upon closer inspection, his suit and boutonniere signaled that it wasn't just any party—it must be a wedding reception. You didn't take a date to a wedding unless it was serious.

Examining a photo of him with a few other guys, it was hard to tell which one was Kennan at first glance. He was no standout, with nondescript brown hair, boring features, and an average physique. He appeared toned, maybe, but not what she would consider buff. He was certainly nowhere close to being as big and muscular as Rory, who stood six foot five and bulged like Hercules.

Decoursey zoomed in on the photo. She thought she detected some muscle definition in his upper arms, but the image resolution was too low to tell for sure. If only he'd taken more pictures of himself instead of clouds. Well, even though he clearly wasn't a bodybuilder, he'd have to do. No one else had called about the room. She selected his number on her phone and waited. He answered on the second ring.

"Hello?" The same deep voice answered.

"Hi, is this Kennan?"

"Speaking."

"Um, I'm calling you back about the room." Her voice was high and squeaky in contrast to the masculine voice on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, is it still available?" He sounded friendly.

"Well—could I make absolutely sure it's just you by yourself? I . . . don't have a whole lot of space." The last thing

Decoursey needed was a condo full of rowdy race fans. Or worse yet, what if he brought his girlfriend along and they had loud sex in her bed?

“Yep, only me, myself, and I. Just need a place to crash for the weekend.”

“Okay, great. Ah, let me give you the address, and I assume I’ll see you soon?”

“Sure thing. Lemme grab a pen . . . okay, go ahead.”

Decoursey gave him her address and the complex’s gate code, along with information for him to transfer the money to her online. She ended the call and sat down on the sofa, then hopped up again like a jack-in-the-box. Had she just given up her cherished privacy by inviting a stranger to stay in her home? In her own bedroom, for heaven’s sake? Decoursey put her phone down, fighting the urge to call this Kennan guy back and tell him the deal was off. She might come across as an idiot, but she couldn’t possibly feel more idiotic than she already did.

CHAPTER 4

Kennan relayed the address to Travis for the GPS, though Travis prided himself on finding locations without GPS, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He felt drowsy after an early start to the day.

He was surprised that a woman had answered the phone. He realized as soon as she answered that he'd assumed it was a man renting out the room. Why else would the ad specify a single male instead of just anyone? Weird, but whatever. It was probably a couple trying to make a buck off the weekend who didn't want some diva monopolizing their bathroom.

Anyway, once he arrived, he planned to make polite conversation for about ten seconds, then barricade himself in his rented room to commune with the updated weather models on his laptop. Trying to see everything on the five-inch screen of his phone was giving him eyestrain.

"Hey man, I think we're here," Travis announced, tires squealing as the van lurched into the driveway of a large complex. It looked like a nice place, almost new. The landscaping included a lot of short, young trees still held upright by stakes. There were wrought-iron balconies and covered parking spaces, even private garages on some of the ground floors. *Makes sense in case of hail*, thought Kennan, storms still on his mind.

Travis piloted the van to Building 4 and brought the vehicle to a halt. "Okay, we'll see you Sunday, noonish or

whenever, depending on how hungover we are. Call us if this guy is a creep, and we might rescue you.”

“Actually, it was a lady who answered the phone. A very nice-sounding lady,” replied Kennan, stuffily defending a person he had never met, if only to promote the impression of his own superior judgment.

“Woo-hoo-hoo! It’s a lady!” Zane jeered.

Kennan turned on the sarcasm. “Oh yeah, she and her husband probably planned this to have a nasty three-way all weekend. All I can say is it has to be better than staying in this putrid pit of a van. And more fun than watching a bunch of Matchbox cars drive around in circles.”

Travis grinned. “Have a great weekend, my friend. Time will tell, buddy, time will tell.”

Kennan grabbed his oversized backpack and bottle of water, exited the van, and closed the heavy sliding door, extending his hand to flip the bird at Zane and Travis as they pulled away. They cheerfully flipped him back. This was their custom any time they dropped each other off at the end of a chase. No one could remember exactly how it got started, but it was one of those “guy things” that served to cement the brotherhood. Kennan hoisted one strap of the heavy backpack onto his left shoulder and started up the stairs to the third-floor condo.

* * *

Decoursey both heard and felt the subwoofy rumble of an engine idling and wondered if that could be her weekend guest. Nobody who lived around here had a car that noisy.

The complex was inhabited mainly by youngish professional types like her who drove late-model, superficially sporty sedans.

She peered out her living room window and spied a disreputable-looking van. A man stood by the van with his back to her, and he was . . . giving the “one-finger salute” to the driver? What was that all about? The driver was extending his middle finger as well. They must have had quite a disagreement. The man outside the van turned, swinging a huge, dingy backpack over his shoulder, and started up the stairs toward her condo.

Horrified, Decoursey thought it must be a hitchhiker planning to set up camp on her landing until a better-looking ride came along. Unkempt, shaggy hair stuck out in all directions. His whiskery face was badly in need of a shave. His attire looked ready for the ragbag: a rumpled white T-shirt, baggy cargo shorts of a muddy hue, and sneakers without socks. Taking in his ragged appearance, she realized with dismay that this was indeed the man in the pictures she'd seen online.

This filthy-looking, finger-flipping bum was Kennan McGregor.

CHAPTER 5

Decoursey thought wildly of how she could get herself out of this mess. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea to stay with Abby after all! Or . . .

The doorbell rang, followed by several loud knocks. *How annoying*, she thought, irritation edging out the shock. As if she couldn't hear the doorbell in a condo this size. It wasn't as though she lived in a mansion. She squared her shoulders and opened the door.

Decoursey looked boldly—she hoped—into a face that was startlingly more compelling than she'd expected. This was not the bland, suited young gentleman from the online photos. He overwhelmed her senses with too much to take in all at once—his thatch of dark hair, the face textured with the beginnings of a beard, and . . . all of it was lower than she'd expected. He'd seemed taller in the pictures. Good Lord, even though he stood above her petite five-foot-two frame, he couldn't be any more than five nine. At least he looked reasonably fit, as she'd surmised. If anything, his face looked leaner than in his photos; older somehow, more rugged.

The scruffy one arranged his sandpaper face into a fixed smile and tucked a bottle of water under his left arm, extending his right hand.

"Hi! How are you? I'm Kennan. Thanks so much for having me," he said loudly. Well, maybe it wasn't so loud. She just wasn't used to having virile men in her condo. *Virile?* She

recognized his voice from the phone call—the neutral accent typical of the Midwest, the words clearly spoken.

“How do you do?” she murmured, taking his proffered hand. It felt warm and firm, although she couldn’t help but wonder about the last time he’d washed it. That pleasant warmth could be a potent germ incubator on someone with his lack of grooming. She was confused as he stopped shaking but still held her hand. Why on earth would he be holding her hand?

“And, ah, I don’t seem to recall your name?” His smile looked even more forced.

“Oh! Sorry. Decoursey. Decoursey Granger,” she repeated automatically, having learned that it helped when one used an uncommon name to say it twice.

“Decoursey. Nice to meet you.” He finally let go of her hand. So that was why he held on—he was just waiting for her not to be rude. She needed to calm down and think serene, logical thoughts. But who could think logically with a bedraggled stranger entering her condo and setting his gigantic, dirty backpack down on her bamboo floor? Thank goodness she’d performed the background check, or she would literally be running to Abby’s. He could stuff a dead body in that thing and be off to Mexico in a heartbeat.

Kennan’s eyes darted around the room. Decoursey flattened herself that he was taking in the decor she was proud of, until she realized he might be looking for a bathroom. The bottle of water he was holding was almost empty. And from the looks of him, he’d been on the road for a couple days. There was a hint of an odor—not horrible, but not fresh. She hoped he didn’t plan to inhabit her bedroom without a long, hot shower.

"So . . . can I get you something to drink? Or maybe you'd like to wash up first. Let me show you to your room." Now she was babbling. Oh please, would he just use the bathroom and leave for Texas Motor Speedway? Tonight's event was scheduled to begin in just a few hours.

But he'd been dropped off—he didn't have a vehicle. And given the unmannerly digital exchange between him and the driver, it was unlikely the van would ever return. How was Kennan supposed to get to Texas Motor Speedway without a car?

She reminded herself that he had zero criminal record.

* * *

Kennan felt like a Neanderthal. This went beyond the coffee stain on his T-shirt suffered in the van's encounter with a pond-sized pothole. It hadn't occurred to him just how repulsive he looked until he saw the obvious concern and distaste on Decoursey's face.

Hanging around with two other guys for a few days definitely brought down one's standards of hygiene. Not to mention that since he and Melanie had broken off their engagement, he'd not spent a good deal of time in the company of women he wanted to impress, greatly reducing the need to spiffy up. It had been months since he'd even gotten a haircut. And he hadn't shaved for a week. At least if he'd quit shaving when he'd quit getting haircuts, he'd be sporting a lush Grizzly Adams instead of artless, uneven stubble.

Damn, he probably reeked. There was no way to confirm it by trying to sniff his pits with Decoursey giving him

the hairy eyeball, but he knew his feet had to be ripe, given that in a rush, he'd forgotten to pack socks on Thursday when he'd left home—and had resorted to wearing sneakers without socks. They'd driven past dozens of Walmarts. He could have bought some.

Decoursey's pert appearance and the flawlessly decorated apartment didn't help matters, making his grubbiness seem even worse by contrast. She looked fresh as a daisy in some kind of crisp cotton sundress—the strappy kind with a cinched-in waist and floaty skirt. Freakin' June Cleaver from that old TV show *Leave It to Beaver*, except Mrs. Cleaver was tall and willowy, while Decoursey was short and, well, a little round. *Voluptuous* was a better term, although lately that seemed to refer to skinny, tits-on-a-stick types. She had shoulder-length blonde hair that gleamed and a soft, peachy complexion. Definitely not the sort who would appreciate a rough-around-the-edges character.

Well, he could take a hint. She'd just asked him if he'd like to wash up. *No shit*. He hefted his backpack again, which felt weightier every time he picked it up. He had enough crap in there for a week, socks notwithstanding.

"I'd love to see the room. You have a great place," he added.

"Thanks." Decoursey smiled a pinched-looking smile and minced past him down a short hallway. He'd bet a hundred bucks she was holding her breath as she went by.

He followed her to the end of the little hall, almost more of a foyer, where a door stood open. She flattened against the wall to allow him to enter the room. Maneuvering his oversized backpack through the doorway, his right arm almost brushed against her chest. She was unquestionably well endowed. Not that he was trying to look.

The bedroom was much nicer than he expected. He'd figured on a multipurpose guest room with a rinky-dink twin bed, creaky futon, or some god-awful sleeper sofa. This room actually had a queen bed. He glimpsed a bathroom through a second door.

Like the rest of the place, the bedroom resembled something out of a magazine, if a bit feminine for his taste. The walls were painted grass green, highlighting white-painted furniture. The bed was made up with an ensemble as fresh and inviting as Decoursey's dress—white with a little dotty pattern that was probably flowers close up. Better not put his backpack on that. He set the backpack down on the wood floor instead and turned to find Decoursey hovering in the doorway.

"The racks in the bathroom have clean towels, and there are more pillows and blankets in the closet if you need them," she offered. "I wrote down the Wi-Fi password on that slip of paper on the nightstand."

"Sounds good. I'll just settle in, and I could use a shower," he said, stating the obvious. Then he would appear human again, and maybe his temporary landlady would relax. She'd been stiff as a poker ever since she answered the door. He couldn't blame her, though. He was feeling more malodorous by the second.

Decoursey's worried expression didn't change. "Okay. Just let me know if you need anything." She closed the door, mercifully concluding their repartee.

As Kennan unzipped his backpack and pulled out his laptop, it occurred to him that this must be Decoursey's own bedroom. The apartment wasn't that big; there couldn't be another master suite. So then—what about her husband? He scanned the walls; no wedding photos. He hadn't

noticed any in the living room either. And he couldn't recall Decoursey—weird name—wearing a wedding ring. So much for his assumption that it was a married couple living here, as if it mattered. He wasn't here to dazzle or befriend, just to exist until the next round of severe weather. Either way, he now had a decent room to occupy for the weekend. Goal accomplished.

The cord of his electric razor was tangled around various items in his shower kit. He'd almost left the razor at home, planning to rough it for two days, but brought it along at the last minute. He might have stayed in Norman for the weekend to party with the guys, even though that wasn't his thing anymore. He was old enough to want to settle down, hence his engagement to Melanie. It had been quite a shock to discover she wasn't ready to settle down. She'd seemed ready enough when he gave her the ring.

Bending to rummage in his backpack for clean underwear, he turned his head and caught a whiff of his underarm. Yep, he stank.

CHAPTER 6

Decoursey flinched as her phone rang. She looked up from an inch-thick fashion magazine and saw the image of a pixieish, red-haired young woman on the cell screen. *Settle down.* It was only her friend Abby. She tapped the screen to answer.

“Hey, Abby, what’s going on? How was work?”

“All I can say is TGIF. You’ll find out Monday when you’re back.”

“That bad?”

“It’s the Simmons account. They’ve named their new home-organization product line ‘HomeOrg,’ which I pointed out sounds like ‘home morgue.’ Who’s going to buy anything called that?”

Decoursey laughed nervously. “No one but workaholic forensic pathologists, I guess.” A morgue was the last thing she needed on her mind.

“You’re hilarious. I wish I could have ignored the whole mess all day. I need to forget about corporate hell and enjoy my weekend. Speaking of which, what are you doing for supper? Jayesh is coming over, and you’re welcome to join us.”

“You’re sweet, but you two invite me over far too often. I think I’m just going to stay in tonight and not intrude.”

“Oh, bullshit. Jayesh and I have been dating long enough that not every dinner has to be a romantic one. Anyway, you practically are staying in, even if you come over for a bite to

eat. It's a five-minute walk through the parking lot. You're not getting that stomach bug that's going around, are you? I thought today you took a vacation day, not a sick day."

"I'm fine. I just feel like being a homebody."

Abby tsked. "Are you really okay? You sound a little down. You don't have to hang with us all night, but it would make me feel better if you came over. You haven't been yourself for a few days. You've been, I don't know . . . quiet."

Decoursey could tell Abby wasn't buying her story. All right, then. Controlled disclosure was in order.

"Well, remember how I told you that my ex is basically nuts?"

"Yeah."

"He's in town this weekend for his job. I'm ninety-nine percent sure he won't try to locate me or anything, but I want to stay in, just to be safe."

"Girl, what if he finds out where you live? That's not hard to do. Heck, your address is probably on some court paper. He could just follow another car through the gate, and poof, he's in. I'd say the least safe place you could be is home."

"Whatever." Decoursey erected her brave façade. "I hope he does try to break in and violate the restraining order. It would serve him right to be arrested and lose his job," she lied. She wanted Rory to just stay the hell away from her.

"Suit yourself. If you change your mind, come on over. We're just going to hang out here. Jayesh wants to watch some boring basketball game. I might send him home so I can watch a movie."

"Have fun. I'll talk to you later."

After hanging up, Decoursey heard water running through the pipes. Kennan must be taking that shower. On the plus side, he wouldn't further contaminate her bedroom

with his bouquet of sweat and outside. But if he was going to Texas Motor Speedway for tonight's race—a minor-league event building up to the marquee race tomorrow night—he was already running late. Traffic would be gridlocked, what with normal Friday rush hour in addition to thousands of race fans. She'd been a racing wife and had attended motor-sports events; you didn't just drive to the parking lot and waltz right in. You sat in traffic, unless you left hours early. At the rate he was going, this Kennan joker would get to Texas Motor Speedway just in time for the checkered flag. He didn't even have a car to drive. Would he hitchhike to the track? What was the point of being clean for that?

Decoursey looked through the glossy magazine a while longer. Nothing in it demanded much attention, and this time of year women's periodicals were full of ads for the spring and summer clothes people seemed to wear year-round in Texas. She realized that she wasn't even comprehending the pages, just flipping through them. She huffed and tossed the magazine onto the couch cushion, then puttered around the room, straightening things that were already straight. She'd pull out her latest crochet project if she didn't think it would look weirdly anachronistic. Few people crocheted anymore.

The sound of running water finally stopped. She made herself wait ten more minutes and then ventured down the hall, straining to detect activity behind the closed bedroom door. Did she hear movement, or was it her imagination? She steeled herself and rapped gently on the door before speaking through the crack at the doorjamb.

"Kennan?" Silence. "Kennan?" she said a little louder.

"Yeah?" He sounded to be on the other side of the room.

“You should leave soon to go to the track. It takes a while to get there in traffic.” Silence again. “Kennan?” she practically shouted.

“Do you mean the racetrack?” he asked, sounding as if he’d moved closer to the door.

“Yeah.”

“I’m not going to the track.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.” *What?* Well, then what was he doing in town? “Are you going . . . anywhere?”

“Not planning to.”

“Okay. Just asking.” Decoursey stood aimlessly for a moment, then wandered back to the living room.

All right, so he wasn’t going anywhere—fair enough. It just hadn’t occurred to her when she cooked up this screwball gambit that whoever wanted the room wouldn’t be here for the race. After all, she’d begun the online post advertising her room with “Speedway-bound guy?”

Her mental light bulb flashed on. Since Kennan wasn’t going anywhere, he’d be here in case Rory really did try something. It wasn’t such a bad thing after all. She could deal with this change; perhaps it was meant to be. Hmm, and speaking of plans, that meant he didn’t have any plans for dinner. If she offered something, he’d probably accept—he, it was free food—and be ensconced in her condo for the duration.

A horrible thought occurred to her. What if his ride never returned, and Kennan was still here Monday? Then what would she do? She talked herself out of a tizzy by focusing on what needed to be done next: supper. The easiest thing would be to heat up that leftover chicken in the freezer to

throw over a salad. She had steaks in there too, but they would take too long to defrost.

Oh, crud. What if he didn't eat meat? People nowadays had all manner of food restrictions. He might be gluten-free. Or vegan. Food allergies, perhaps. Lactose intolerant. Decoursey sighed and started back down the hall to ask him what he wanted to eat.

Just as she walked past the front door, someone knocked.

Rory.

Her body went into panic mode, her heart racing, every hair standing on end. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears.

Rory.

He'd know if she looked through the peephole by her face blocking the light coming through the tiny aperture. But she had to check. She eyed the red panic button on the alarm keypad next to the door. Did the alarm really work? She'd never tested it.

She closed her eyes for an instant, then gulped and peered into the peephole.

Not Rory. Nope, not even close. It was Abby. With Jayesh. Holding restaurant take-out bags.

Dear God. Instead of her having supper with them, they'd taken it upon themselves to bring supper to her.

Decoursey choked down hysterical laughter. How fast could she get rid of them? She hadn't told anyone about her kooky idea for the weekend, least of all Abby, who was of the I-meddle-because-I-care ilk. Abby, brash and brave, wouldn't understand the kind of fear Decoursey had for Rory. Nobody else would understand why she had to do this.

Eureka! She could plead diarrhea, that most humiliating and effective of excuses. After all, there was a stomach virus

going around the office. Desperate times called for desperate cop-outs. They'd be out of here posthaste to bathe themselves in hand sanitizer. She unbolted the door and let them in.

"Hey, you two!" she said in an unnaturally high voice.

"Surprise!" Abby sang out. "Since you wanted to stay home, we brought take-out. Jayesh picked up Giacomo's on his way over."

"And traffic was awful, or I would have been here sooner. I ordered you a chicken Caesar salad. Is that okay?" Jayesh asked.

"Yes, of course, that's perfect! I love Giacomo's. You know, y'all are so sweet to do this, but actually, I have to tell you—I apologize, I didn't want to say anything earlier—I have had a bout of, uh, well, diarrhea—"

Abby gasped and grabbed Decoursey's arm, her eyes wide. Decoursey whirled around in the direction of Abby's stare, then did what she was sure was an unintentionally comical double-take.

Kennan had just stepped out of her bedroom.

CHAPTER 7

The word *diarrhea* seemed to echo in the rafters. Kennan's eyes bugged out. He glanced at Decoursey as though she were a leper and took a step backward.

"Uh, hi." He waved stiffly. "I'm Kennan. I'm staying with Decoursey for a few days." He flashed his fake-looking polite smile.

Abby's mouth hung open. Decoursey's jaw almost hit the floor too and not just because he'd remembered her name. Kennan had cleaned up well. Extremely well, in fact. Clean shaven, hair slightly damp, and wearing jeans and a T-shirt, he no longer looked like a lowlife—he looked more like something yummy out of a *Cosmopolitan* article. The kind about sex.

Abby swung her head to give Decoursey a confused look. "You didn't tell me you found a boyfriend," she blurted.

Kennan looked markedly uncomfortable as Decoursey's face flamed. "Abby, this is Kennan. Kennan, Abby and *her* boyfriend, Jayesh." Decoursey's voice sounded stilted, as much as she tried to be blasé.

Abby didn't help matters, remaining uncharacteristically silent. Jayesh gamely waved back at Kennan but kept his distance. They all stood post-like until Decoursey managed to snap into action.

"Abby, come with me to the kitchen. You two—bond," she commanded, grabbing the take-out bag from Jayesh and steering Abby into the kitchen with her other hand.

"What the hell!" Abby stage-whispered as soon as they reached the counter. "You had me scared to death. For a minute I thought that was Rory. What's his name again?"

"*Kennan*. Look, you have to promise me you won't say one word to him about Rory. Not one single word," Decoursey admonished.

"Only if you tell me who this guy is and why he's in your bedroom," Abby said, jabbing the air with her forefinger.

"*Shh*," Decoursey hissed. She listened. The TV was on—it was basketball, and the volume was up. Oh yeah, Abby had mentioned that Jayesh wanted to watch hoops tonight. She turned her attention back to Abby, keeping her voice low.

"Here's the deal. First of all, I did a criminal background check, and Kennan is clean. So the reason he's here"—she put a hand up as Abby tried to interrupt—"the reason he's here is because he's renting the room from me for the weekend. It's extra money, and also means there's someone here in my condo. Besides me, of course."

"Do you need money that bad? I thought you said your parents helped you out with moving here and buying furniture and stuff."

"It's not really about the money. It's mainly because of Rory. If he comes sniffing around this weekend, and that's a big *if*, there'll be someone here to maybe throw off his plan, whatever plan that maniac may have."

"This is your way of saving yourself from your batshit ex? You could have just stayed with me." Abby sounded both hurt and annoyed.

Decoursey put a hand to her forehead. “I know—but I can’t put you at risk. And I didn’t want to leave because here I am halfway across the country, and that’s as far as I’m going. So I decided to rent out my room. That way, if Rory does come by, he won’t have a chance to do something rash without a witness.”

Abby crossed her arms and glared. “How do you know this Kennan person isn’t some kind of psychopath?”

“I told you—I did a background check.”

“Just a regular guy, huh?”

“Clean as a whistle.”

“Well, I’ll be the judge of that.” Abby began unloading boxes of delicious-smelling Italian food from a large brown bag emblazoned with *Giacomo’s* in green and red script. “I’ll grill him while he eats grilled chicken and pasta. Which is what I ordered, by the way. I can never finish it, so he might as well have half.”

“What if he doesn’t like chicken?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. If he wants something else, he can just go get it himself.”

“Not unless he walks,” Decoursey muttered as she got a stack of plates out of the cabinet. “He sort of hitchhiked here.”

“What?” Abby screeched.

“Keep it down. They’ll hear us.” Decoursey peeked anxiously into the living room.

“I don’t care if they hear us,” said Abby, albeit in a quieter voice. “Let me get this straight. You’re afraid of your insane ex-husband. So you find a hitchhiker to babysit you for the weekend. Have you lost your mind?”

Jayesh appeared in the doorway, saving Decoursey from an immediate confirmation of that fact. “Hey, Decoursey,

can I get a couple beers? Watching basketball is making us thirsty.”

Decoursey gave him a dazzling smile. “Of course. You know I only keep beer here for you.”

“Aha,” Abby said as she opened the fridge and handed two cold ones to Jayesh. “Truth serum.”

Jayesh gave her a strange look but wisely said nothing as he ambled back to the sofa.

Decoursey opened a drawer to get out forks and knives. “Nice,” she said. “We’ll get Kennan drunk and find out all his terrible secrets.”

“It’s worked for me before,” said Abby pertly. She wrinkled her nose. “Do you think you should be touching silverware if you have diarrhea?”

Decoursey squeezed her eyes shut in humiliation. “I don’t really have the runs,” she admitted. “I was just trying to get you and Jayesh out of here.”

“Oh. Right,” said Abby acidly as she snatched up two full plates and headed toward the living room.

Decoursey followed Abby with silverware, napkins, and placemats. “Here you go,” she told Kennan and Jayesh as they sat glued to the action on the flatscreen mounted above her fireplace. “Always a terrible thing to give people food and nothing to eat it with.” Not that they were even listening to her. She plopped the pile onto the large, square coffee table that doubled as a Japanese-style dining table to create more space in the room, laying out placemats so Abby could set the plates down.

“Thanks,” said Jayesh, finally breaking his eyes away from the game. “Look, I remembered to use a coaster.”

Decoursey smiled again, appreciating that Jayesh seemed to be trying to break the tension. “Good for you. You get one million points,” she said sweetly.

“Hey, how do I get points?” asked Kennan, looking up at Decoursey.

Abby jumped in. “We’ll think of something. Oh! I know. You can tell us how you came to be here. Since Decoursey says you’re not her boyfriend.” She gave Kennan a smirk.

Kennan set his beer bottle down—on a coaster—and leaned back, seemingly unfazed. “I was just passing through town. I needed a place to stay, and all the hotels around here are full. There’s some big race going on.”

Decoursey shot Abby a look of warning. “Yes. There’s nothing else to it but that. Certainly not a secret boyfriend. Hah.”

“Hah,” Abby shot back. “You could have fooled me.”

“Whoa, did you see that block?” Jayesh’s non sequitur failed as badly as the Dallas Mavericks’ three-point attempt.

“Abby, why don’t you have a seat in the chair, and I’ll get our plates. And I do not really have the trots,” she felt compelled to tell the guys. Jayesh ignored her with gusto. Kennan grimaced and nodded. Oh, Lord. This was certainly going to be an evening to remember. Or forget.

CHAPTER 8

“Y eah!” Kennan and Jayesh hollered in unison, high-fiving each other. Two beers each plus a winning basket by the Mavericks, and the bromance was blossoming.

Decoursey was surprised to find she was having a good time. Rather than anchoring her attention on the game, she'd been surreptitiously observing Kennan the whole time. He'd not hogged the proceedings with his life story or anything. The conversation wasn't deep discourse—mainly sports-related comments and social banter—but it surpassed the level of forced small talk. Kennan and Jayesh had hit it off in the short time it had taken for Decoursey and Abby to conspire in the kitchen, likely with inanities about how the women-folk used kitchens and public restrooms as contemplative venues. Whatever their common ground, it had broken the ice for all four of them.

So far, Kennan had redeemed himself from his shabby entrance a few hours ago. First impressions could be deceiving, and the contrast to his grungy debut and vanilla online photos was so astonishing, it was hard for Decoursey not to ogle him. She wondered about his shaggy hair, not that it was unattractive; it was just different from the clean-cut 'do in his pictures. Shifts of appearance often accompanied shifts of life. Hadn't she herself lost a few pounds and lopped five inches off her once mid-back mane since leaving Rory? She'd had her stylist cut layers too. She liked how they looked, but

also how the layers in front could shield her eyes in a peek-a-boo effect if she swept them across her forehead.

It wasn't just Kennan's revitalized appearance that impressed her. He seemed like a genuinely nice guy. Not that she could trust the integrity of her own opinion after how she'd misjudged Rory, but she was no longer afraid of having Kennan stay at her place all weekend. She was glad he was here now, not just for possible protection but also for the company—a window in her cocoon. She realized that this was the first social gathering she'd had in her condo that included a guest other than Abby, Jayesh, or her parents.

She'd certainly not invited up any of the few men she'd dated, not even when their eyes begged for it after an evening out. As much as Abby had tried to set her up with Mr. Right, none of the offered-up swains held any appeal. In retrospect, it might have been too soon for her to start going out again. Each date left her more jaded and depressed than the one before. The last time Abby announced she'd found the "perfect" beau—in that instance, a friend's college-age cousin Abby had met only once—Decoursey made excuse after excuse to be unavailable.

Now that the basketball game was over, Decoursey stood up from the floor pillow on which she'd been sitting and tossed it back to its customary place on the limestone hearth. It was as good a use as any for a fireplace in warm, sunny Dallas.

"Yay, the game's over! Time for cheesecake," announced Abby, clapping her hands.

"Cheesecake?" echoed Decoursey, twisting from side to side to work out the kinks in her spine.

Jayesh got up too. "Abby would kill me if I came back from Giacomo's without cheesecake." He took Abby's

hands and pulled her up from the side chair. “You sure you want some?”

“Heck yeah, babe,” Abby said, letting Jayesh give her a quick kiss. “Twist my arm.”

Decoursey tried to ignore their PDA as she gathered up dishes. Kennan jumped up to help.

“No, we’ll get it. You two sit down,” Abby fussed, taking the stack of plates from Decoursey. “Decoursey, go sit on the sofa. You’ll get a backache from sitting on that pillow all night. Let Jayesh sit on the floor for a while.”

“I never get backaches,” Decoursey protested, but sat on the couch anyway. The cushion was warm where Jayesh had sat. She reached for the TV remote on the end table and clicked off the post-game show, then tucked her legs underneath her skirt and hugged the throw pillow like a shield.

Kennan stretched his arms out over his head, popped a shoulder joint, and flopped back down on his end of the couch. He turned his head to look at her. “This is fun. I didn’t expect entertainment.”

Decoursey glanced sidelong at him, suddenly shy. She noticed how silky his clean, dark hair looked now that it had dried. She still couldn’t discern if his eyes were blue or gray or somewhere in between.

“I didn’t know they were coming over. Not that I had plans anyway, but I thought you did,” she said lamely.

He circled his hand over his middle. “Are you feeling okay?”

That again? She’d never live down lying about Montezuma’s revenge. “I’m perfectly fine.” Decoursey glanced over her shoulder and then spoke behind her hand. “I fibbed about that to try to get them to leave. They weren’t aware someone else might be here.”

Abby saved her from further toilet-themed revelations by bustling in with two dessert plates. “One for you . . . and one for you,” she said. “There’s a bunch left over, so you can have more if you want. Decoursey, I just cut you a little tiny piece. Kennan, you should see what she eats. Natural this, organic that, superfoods, fiber, yadda, yadda, yadda. She’s the only person I know under the age of fifty who shops at the farmer’s market.”

Decoursey’s head spun, and not just because of the large glass of wine. Abby was shameless. Jeez, were there no secrets? Wait, she did have secrets—about Rory. But the details of her food intake, and false rumors concerning its output, weren’t facts she considered fit for public consumption. She gave Kennan a weak smile.

He apparently felt the need to say something. “Hey, that’s great. You should see the horrible stuff I eat on the road. I should try to eat healthier.”

“I suppose we all could. Anyway, here’s to cheesecake,” Decoursey said, lifting her plate and taking a bite. It was luscious. “Hey, Jayesh,” she said toward the kitchen, “thanks for bringing dessert.”

Jayesh reappeared with his own piece. “Not a problem. You’re a fine woman, and I appreciate eating from real plates instead of take-out boxes,” he said, earning a smack on the arm from Abby.

Once settled in the side chair, Abby crossed her legs and toyed with her wine glass. “So, Kennan—tell us more about yourself. Decoursey says you’re staying for the whole entire weekend?” Decoursey recognized that flirtatious manner as Abby’s cover for serious reconnaissance.

Kennan laughed, a brief *heh-heh* that was every bit as heartfelt as Abby’s tooth-baring grin. “That’s kind of an

interesting story. Did you hear that earlier today there were tornadoes northwest of here, in Oklahoma?”

Abby gave him a blank look. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“Yeah, there were significant tornadoes up there, which fortunately didn’t cause much damage. My two friends and I are amateur storm chasers, and we thought the storms would be closer to here. They weren’t. And then we decided to stick around for the weekend, so—long story short—I ended up here.” He stabbed a bite of cheesecake and popped it into his mouth.

Jayesh looked impressed. “Hey, man, that’s cool. Have you seen a bunch of tornadoes?”

“Not as many as I would have liked, considering we missed them all today. But yeah, I’ve seen a lot. A couple dozen, maybe? I don’t know; I’m not one of those chasers who keeps a running count of every single one I’ve seen.”

Abby was practically batting her eyelashes. “What an awesome hobby!” she gushed. “It’s like we have a celebrity right here in Decoursey’s living room.”

Kennan snorted. “I don’t know about that. Most of the time I feel like an idiot, out there in the rain and hail, about to get struck by lightning, wondering what the hell happened to the tornado. Plus it takes a lot of time to forecast and prepare and drive.”

“That makes it even more impressive. Is it hard to make time for all that, what with work and family?” Abby cooed.

Decoursey almost choked on her cheesecake. Leave it to Abby to slide in that question without warning.

Kennan shrugged. “I work for myself, I live by myself—my time is my own. The only thing I wait on is my chase buddies to call, and away we go.”

Abby simpered. “You obviously don’t spend every second on those things. You have to sleep . . . and work out.”

Decoursey’s eyes widened at that. Abby wasn’t famous for subtlety, but this was off the charts, even for her.

Kennan looked flattered, if also a tad suspicious. “Yeah, well, during chase season, even that goes by the wayside if there’s a wicked weather setup developing. You get kind of obsessed because the opportunities to chase are so limited. I live five hours away from the friends I chase with, so there’s also that driving time I have to account for.”

Abby paused for a delicate bite of cheesecake before delivering her next strike. “Where *are* your friends?”

Decoursey had been wondering the same thing—if his friends were the ones who’d dropped him off in that van, they didn’t seem to be on good terms. She almost interrupted to bring it up, but Kennan answered without a hitch.

“They’re big NASCAR fans, so they decided to spend the weekend at the racetrack. Me, not so much. I tried to get a hotel, but they were all booked. So, plan B: here I am.”

It seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation. Time to cut Abby off before she became truly obnoxious. Decoursey could tell that she was just getting started with her interrogation, like a skilled detective extracting a confession from a perp.

“Does anyone need anything?” Decoursey said, picking up her empty wineglass and angling toward the kitchen. “Abby, do you want to take the leftover cheesecake? Otherwise I’ll be tempted to eat it for breakfast.”

“Sure. Let me help you.” Abby gathered up the empty dessert plates and followed Decoursey into the kitchen.

Good. This would get Abby out of the living room and off Kennan’s case—but Decoursey hoped Abby wouldn’t try

to have a heart-to-heart in the kitchen, being as it was within earshot of the living room, and there was no more basketball on TV to provide a diversion. The guys could hear every word they said if they quit talking and listened. Although they seemed pretty darn chummy at the moment, guffawing at something.

Decoursey regarded her empty wineglass and rejected the idea of imbibing further. She usually didn't drink much, mindful of her ex-husband's problems with alcohol. And slowing her reflexes with booze was the last thing she needed if Rory showed up.

But . . . funny how she was feeling so uptight after a normally relaxing glass of wine. *Oh, to heck with it.* She poured herself another glass, noticing that Abby looked like she wanted to say something. *Uh-oh.* She knew Abby would not rest until she'd given Decoursey a piece of her mind about getting rid of Kennan.

"I'll soak the plates in hot water and put them in the dishwasher later. Can you do me a favor and get the cheesecake out of the fridge? We can put it in a smaller container so you don't have to take home a big half-empty box," she gabbled, not thinking for a moment that Abby would be put off.

"Sure. So," Abby said as she opened the fridge, "do you like him?"

"Abby," began Decoursey as quietly as she could while still sounding stern. "Wait—what?" This wasn't the lecture she'd expected.

"Do you *like* him?" Abby retrieved the light-blue cardboard box of cheesecake from the refrigerator and shut the door with her hip.

"No! I mean, not like that." Decoursey handed Abby a lidded plastic container.

“Why not? He’s a hottie.”

“Well, for one thing, I suspect he has a girlfriend. And I don’t think he’s my type.”

“*Au contraire*, chica. He is most definitely your type. He would be perfect for you.”

Decoursey stuffed the empty cardboard box into the trash. “You’ve known him for, what, a few hours? How could you think I might be interested in him?”

Abby responded with a withering stare. “There are some things I just know. And what I know right now is that Kennan would be an excellent match for you.”

Decoursey rolled her eyes. “Sure. Just like you knew that Miguel and Brandon and that weird Josh guy were ‘perfect’ for me.” She gave it air quotes. “Abby, you’re my best friend, and I think the world of you, but so far you’re batting zero when it comes to choosing men for me.”

Abby shrugged. “True. But this time, I swear—it’s a home run. You’re smart, even though you won’t admit it, and he’s obviously intelligent. What’s not to like about a guy who’s both smart and cute?”

“You’re the one who just spoke French. Maybe you should date him.”

“I learned *au contraire* from you, brainiac. Believe me, if I weren’t taken, I’d go after him in a heartbeat.”

Decoursey sighed and rubbed the tight muscles at the back of her neck. “I know I said I was ready to date again, but I’m not so sure. Plus, Kennan doesn’t even live here. It’s such a bad idea, there’s no point thinking about it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to try? He’s pretty hot.”

Decoursey laughed and shook her head. “You’re such a matchmaker.”

“Never give up. By the way, you still have protection, right?”

For a second, Decoursey thought Abby had somehow found out about the Smith & Wesson .38 she'd bought and learned to use upon moving to Texas. Decoursey hadn't told anyone about it, and for good reason. It was another questionable idea of hers that everyone would try to convince her to drop. Or at least give her heck for it. Just like inviting some random guy to stay at her place.

No, there wasn't any logical way for Abby to know about the gun. Abby waggled her eyebrows and gave Decoursey a provocative grin. *Oh . . .* Abby was talking about *condoms*. Decoursey's startled look turned into a scandalized gape.

Abby was so confident in her matchmaking abilities that she'd presented Decoursey with a gaily wrapped box of prophylactics for Christmas, shortly after Decoursey declared herself willing to try dating again. Abby had almost peed her pants laughing when Decoursey deadpanned that she was merely ready to go out with men, not go down on them. She certainly hadn't been in a situation to actually use the condoms. Dear God, she hoped that if Kennan snooped, he didn't rummage through *that* drawer of the nightstand. She'd taken the handgun out of its usual place in the middle drawer but had forgotten about the condoms shoved behind the box of tissues in the top drawer.

"Abby!" she said, otherwise speechless.

"Time to break out your Christmas present." Abby breezed out of the kitchen with her container of cheesecake. Decoursey loitered by the counter, allowing her most current blush to subside.

She could hear Abby talking in the living room. "I hate to be a party pooper, but I'm about to fall asleep. Jayesh, are you ready to call it a night?"

"Yeah, we should get going. Kennan, my friend, anytime you want to show me your meteorology equipment, give me a call."

Decoursey ventured out of the kitchen, her cheeks still warm. She hoped no one else could tell. She'd turned on the table lamps earlier but not the all-too-revealing overhead light.

Abby stepped back to give her a brief hug and whispered, "I bet you'd like Kennan to show you his *equipment*."

Well, that did it. Decoursey's blush was back. "Thanks a lot." Abby giggled, and Decoursey smiled despite herself. "You're still my best friend, you know that?" Then she sobered, casting a worried glance at the front door. She'd almost forgotten about Rory.

"This stuff about my ex is no joke. He could be out there watching this very second. Promise you'll text me as soon as you get home."

"Only if you promise to text me every waking hour so I know you're okay."

"Deal." Decoursey unbolted the door and peered past the landing. "Do you want to take a flashlight?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Abby said dismissively. So much for Decoursey's effort to instill a healthy sense of fear for her unsound ex-husband. Abby extended her hand to Kennan.

"Kennan, it has been an absolute pleasure. Have a great weekend, and I hope we meet up again sometime." She smiled winningly as she and Jayesh started down the stairs.

"Don't forget to text me," Decoursey called, waiting with the door half open until they walked out of sight. She closed and locked the door, twisting the deadbolt twice to make sure it was anchored in place. Kennan yawned behind her.

"Sleepy?" she said.

“Yeah. I’ve been up since four o’clock this morning. We had to get an early start.”

Decoursey brushed past him on the way to the kitchen. She ought to at least stuff the dishwasher before hitting the sack. “Is there anything I can get you before you head off to bed?”

“Just some water would be great.”

Decoursey opened the fridge and pulled out bottled water. “Here, take two. You might be thirsty in the morning.”

“Awesome, thanks.” He took the water and hesitated. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. I hope you can get some rest. I know I plan to sleep in.”

“Me too. Well, good night.”

“Good night.”

Kennan quit the kitchen. Decoursey reached into the pantry and pulled her apron off the hook. Abby thought it was hilarious that Decoursey even wore an apron, especially since it was a vintage-style number that Decoursey had designed and knitted herself. But Decoursey loved to wear the wacky apron that spoke of a simpler time, even if it did idealize a past that was far from perfect. She tried to sort her thoughts into some semblance of order as she tied the heather-brown sashes at the neck and waist, a contrast to the zigzag afghan pattern of the bib and skirt. She’d chosen brown, light blue, off-white, and olive for the main colors, with a thin stripe of mustard-yellow in between for a full-on retro palette.

Fact one. Kennan had turned out to be surprisingly attractive. She wasn’t sure if she would have even realized it—or rather, admitted it to herself—had Abby not watered the seed of interest.

Fact two. Kennan wasn't going anywhere this weekend. They were stuck with each other. Pro: her overall plan—to thwart misbehavior by Rory—was working better than she expected, since Kennan wouldn't be hanging out at Texas Motor Speedway. He didn't even have transportation to facilitate an escape. Con: it might be awkward that they had to spend a lot of time cooped up together.

Fact three. She'd promised to text Abby. Better do that now, or she'd fret until she did. The specter of Rory skulking in the parking lot chilled her blood. The feelings of dread, even terror, that she thought to leave behind in North Carolina were back, if not full force then at least enough to be disconcerting.

The alarm light on the security keypad reassured her, the tiny red dot blinking every few seconds. She sat on the sofa with her glass of wine while she texted.

All ok?

Ok, what are you
2 doing?

replied Abby after a few seconds.

NOTHING he went
to bed

2 bad ;)

Decoursey laughed to herself at Abby's saucy reply. Abby was so funny, even when she was being annoying. At least

you always knew where you stood with her, which was more than Decoursey could say about herself.

Even though she was tired, she decided to stay up longer and read that new novel she just bought. That way she'd be awake in case anything happened, and she'd be so tired once she went to bed she'd go right to sleep instead of lying awake, heart palpitating at every little noise. It wasn't the first time this week she'd wished for sleeping pills. But pills weren't always the answer. They certainly hadn't been for Rory.

She shook off the memories and made herself focus on the present, which brought her back to the dishes. Best to git 'er done, especially since she didn't want to wake up Kennan at midnight with kitchen noises. Although he was surely sleeping like the dead after getting up at four in the morning.

She checked her phone for other notifications, standing slowly as she swiped with her thumb, absently picking up the stemmed glass with her other hand.

There was a motion just beyond the corner of her eye. She couldn't help it—she screamed.

CHAPTER 9

“Yah!” Kennan shrieked in unison with Decoursey’s piercing cry, almost running into her as he made his way back to the kitchen. He instantly felt like a first-class doofus. He’d venture to say he’d scared Decoursey a heckuva lot worse than she’d scared him, though.

Oddly enough, it was his gentlemanly side that led to this incident. After going to the bedroom, he’d opened his laptop to check the latest information on the Storm Prediction Center’s website, then heard a few faint noises coming from the living room. He’d felt like an oaf when he realized she was likely out there cleaning up. Not that there was a whole lot to do—it’s not as though there had been a wild party with fifty people—but it had to be more scut work than she was used to, living by herself. And his momma had taught him that you always offer to help with dishes. Didn’t matter if you’re male or not—you at least ask. So, prince that he was, he went to offer his services as busboy and dishwasher.

But after he’d said he was going to bed, the last thing she probably expected was to run into him. His suspicions were confirmed by her heavy breathing and stricken expression.

“Oh, my God. You startled me,” she gasped, clutching her wine glass in one hand and her phone in the other, eyes wide. The wine sloshed dangerously close to the edge of the glass. A few drops escaped onto her clenched hand, the knuckles showing white through her skin.

"Sorry! I came to help you clean up. Didn't mean to give you a heart attack." She looked as though she'd seen a ghost. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." She took a deep breath and collected herself. "I shouldn't be such a scaredy-cat." She slipped her phone into a side pocket of her dress and lifted the corner of her apron to blot the wine off her hand.

"Here, let me." Kennan took the slippery glass from her and set it on the kitchen counter, wiping his damp fingers on his jeans. "It didn't spill on the floor, did it?"

"I don't think so," she said, bending to examine the wood.

"It's a good thing you like white wine instead of red."

Decoursey straightened and fanned her face with her hands, giving him a wan smile. She reminded him of a delicately plumed bird ready to take flight. He wanted to reassure her, but how did you go about reassuring someone you barely knew? Especially now that her friends had left. Having four people versus only two had diluted the conversation, insulating him from being one-on-one with this pretty, puzzling blonde who didn't seem to think much of him. Or at least hadn't thought much of him when he showed up an unholy mess after a full day of storm chasing.

Who was she expecting, anyway—Mr. Universe? You advertise for a single male, you get a single male, even if he smells like roadkill and looks like a hobo. Not only that, but it had also become obvious that she'd assumed he was going to Texas Motor Speedway, where Travis and Zane were. No wonder she seemed so skittish; she'd been waiting for him to make himself scarce.

His pride had been pricked at her reaction. He wasn't a stunner, but neither was he a sleazy vagabond. The only woman who'd ever acted less enthusiastic about him was

his own sister. Even Melanie had kept up pretenses through the end.

Earlier, as he had showered, shaved, and donned clean clothes, he'd felt it would be rude to stay hidden in her bedroom; after all, this was someone's home, not a hotel. So he plotted his grand re-entrance, hastened by the voices of Abby and Jayesh as they arrived. His suspicion was that Decoursey had called in reinforcements after the shortcomings of his debut. Well, he'd shown them all that he was no scumbag. He was Kennan McGregor, Environmental Consultant and Storm Chaser Extraordinaire.

The surprised look on her face as he sauntered out had been priceless. He glowed with satisfaction for approximately one second. Then, his hostess promptly took the wind out of his celebratory sails by announcing she had dysentery or something—just what he needed to catch before spending hours on the road Sunday—and foisting him off on Jayesh while she disappeared into the kitchen to have low, serious-sounding words with Abby.

At least Jayesh had turned out to be a cool guy. And Decoursey had softened during the course of the evening. He'd even caught her gaze on him a few times, and she didn't look mad or annoyed, chatting comfortably in her Southern accent. After the game, when they had a conversation, short as it was—no Abby, no Jayesh, no TV—she seemed sweet; but a poised sweet, not little-girl sweet. He'd wanted to keep talking, had the evening not effectively come to an end when Abby and Jayesh left.

Admittedly, he was drained. It was hard to believe the entire storm chase had happened earlier today. He'd left Norman with the guys before dawn and had seen *nothing*. Not one blasted tornado, nor even so much as a thunderstorm.

No residual excitement to keep him awake. Even so, a little corner of his mind wanted him to help Decoursey instead of going to bed like he ought to. Because then they could continue their conversation.

He'd not exactly redeemed himself by startling her. But hey, they were both wide awake now.

"Well—anyway, do you need help cleaning up? I mean, not that you *need* help, but at this point, it's the least I can do to make it up to you after just about scaring you to death."

"Sure. I'll take you up on it." She stepped into the kitchen and took what he hoped was a fortifying sip of wine. "Can you put anything recyclable in the bin? It's there in the pantry." She pointed to a narrow bi-fold door, then set down her glass and tugged on a pair of bright-pink rubber gloves next to the sink.

It was about this time that Kennan really noticed what she was wearing. He couldn't help but gawk as she leaned over to open the dishwasher. She paused mid-stoop as she saw him beginning to snort.

"What?"

"That's quite a getup you have there."

"Getup?" Decoursey stood up straight, put a hand on her hip, and leveled her gaze.

He couldn't conceal a huge grin. "I mean, that's some apron, with those rubber gloves. You're a blast from the past, like you're wearing a blanket from 1970. Not that you look old or anything," he said, backpedaling. She looked cute as hell, the tie around the waist accentuating her hour-glass figure.

"I get messy sometimes, so I have to wear an apron." She sounded defensive.

Kennan shook his head. “Somehow I can’t quite envision you ever being messy.”

Her sky-blue eyes blazed for an instant, but the fire quickly faded back to neutral. She seemed guarded yet transparent. Certainly not like her scheming friend Abby or anything like Melanie—someone he didn’t need to think about.

He attempted to make himself useful as promised, grabbing beer bottles off the counter as Decoursey removed dripping plates from the sink and loaded them into the dishwasher. He was still eyeing her knit apron and pink rubber gloves; that was something you didn’t see every day. He opened the pantry door, deposited the bottles into the recycling bin, and was just about to close the door when he saw something else hanging in there.

“No way!” he said, cackling as he plucked a second knit apron off its hook. “You have two of these things?” This yarn creation was black and white, almost like a girly apron version of a tuxedo. The top part was white with light-gray stripes mimicking pintucks and little black buttons down the center, with a cascade of black knit flounces edged with what looked like black fur making up the skirt.

“Aprons are practical,” she rationalized. “If you do any amount of cooking, you’ll get spots on your clothes otherwise.” She sounded oh-so-proper as she looked down her nose at him, an admirable feat for someone half a foot shorter.

“I meant all these ruffles.” He ran his hand over the inky flounces.

“I like ruffles. I figure if I have to work in the kitchen anyway, I ought to have fun while doing it,” Decoursey countered. “In fact, if you’re going to help, you might as well suit up.” She laughed at Kennan’s dumbfounded expression, her eyes sparkling. “Go ahead, Julia Child. You’ll look precious.”

That sounded like a dare—the fun junior-high party-game sort of dare. Kennan held up the confection and tried to figure out how to put it on. He fumbled with the strings and managed to tie it around his neck, then turned from side to side to find the waist ties.

“You’d better let me do that,” Decoursey said, shucking her rubber gloves. “Turn around.”

Kennan turned as directed and waited, looking at the dark, modern cabinetry and lighter quartz-style countertop. Her hands skimmed the sides of his waist to find the sash, light as the wings of a butterfly, and then he felt her slight motions as she tied a bow at the small of his back. It seemed to take a long time, but something about it felt both relaxing and stimulating. He tried to slow his breathing so she wouldn’t notice he was practically panting.

Her hands left him as she finished fiddling with the bow. “There, all done.”

Kennan looked down at the frilly garment. “Do I have to wear this?” he asked, his feet rooted in place as he glanced at Decoursey over his shoulder. Now he knew why cats froze motionless when dressed up in doll clothes. He felt the same way.

“You’re the one who gave up an early bedtime to help in the kitchen. No pictures, I promise.”

Kennan sighed and turned around, holding out his arms, a morose expression on his face. Decoursey burst out laughing, a real belly laugh that had her wiping her eyes.

Kennan couldn’t help but grin, unable to resist her infectious laughter. “You don’t happen to have another pair of those fancy gloves, do you? That’ll finish my transformation into culinary drag queen.”

Gasping, Decoursey opened the cabinet under the sink and produced another pair of over-the-top rubber gloves, this time in black with zebra-striped fabric adorning the cuffs.

"This is absurd. You really wear these?"

"Yes! Go ahead; try them on." She displayed an orthodontically perfect smile, and her pink, rounded cheeks made her look younger than he supposed she really was.

Kennan shoved his left hand halfway into the glove. "It's too small. I can't get my hand in."

"That makes you the ugly stepsister, except instead of a glass slipper, it's a rubber glove," Decoursey said merrily. At last she seemed relaxed. He sensed that this fun, flirty side was the genuine Decoursey underneath the quiet exterior.

"So can I take this thing off, since the look is incomplete?"

"Not in my kitchen. Besides, you just look so adorable."

"Adorable, huh? Wench," Kennan said. He reached out and playfully swatted her on the backside, surprising even himself.

Whoa, maybe that was the wrong thing to do. He wasn't sure what had gotten into him, except that she seemed to be coming out of her shell. And she did have the sort of ass that just begged for it. Round and out there, topped provocatively with the bow of her apron. Nothing subtle about that.

"Oh!" Decoursey yelped. Before he could react, she paid him back with a stinging snap of the dish towel she had just picked up, catching him on the hip. *Yowch*, he thought, jumping back.

She reeled in the towel and cocked it for another blow, looking delighted and defiant at the same time. "I have a brother who's in the navy. I know how to defend myself."

Okay, so she was good with it. She would have told him off if he'd offended her. "You'll be sorry you did that," he

said rakishly as he advanced on her, which wasn't difficult in the small kitchen.

Decoursey made another attempt to snap him with the towel, but this time, he was ready. She squealed as he seized the dish towel mid-snap and pulled. He tried to jerk it from her hand, but she hung on and stumbled toward him. He instinctively caught her in his arms to keep her from falling, and almost stopped breathing. The lush feel of her body, her parted lips, and flushed face framed with soft blonde hair triggered a nearly overwhelming urge to kiss her. He felt himself leaning in, then tensed to curb the impulse.

Back off, dude. Nope, nope, nope. You didn't just whack a gal in the hindquarters and then plant one on, although she didn't look as if she'd mind. But he forced himself from heated to mischievous. And instead of being kissed senseless, Miss Decoursey found herself the victim of a noogie, not as hard as other ones he'd administered by any means but enough to make her shriek.

Fortunately for her and any neighbors listening in, the noogie was brief. Kennan released her and backed away as she again wielded the towel.

"Truce!" he declared, hands up.

Decoursey eyed him warily but lowered her improvised weapon. "Truce. Are you going to behave yourself now?"

"Only if you do." Kennan leaned against the counter, the grin back on his face. This was the most fun he'd had in forever. "You might want to fix your hair," he added.

"You are the very devil, I swear." But she smiled as she said it, tossing the dish towel onto the counter.

Kennan stayed where he was, doing his best not to drool as she swiped at her blonde tresses, finger-combing her hair. He let his eyes wander and detected more than a hint of

cleavage as she worked at her hair with her arms over her head. Maybe the extravagant apron he wore wasn't such a bad idea, considering the sudden increase in blood flow beneath it. The skirt portion was definitely coming in handy at the moment. He leaned on his hands behind his back to keep himself from grabbing her again.

Hell, he should have gone back to bed already, even though he really wanted to stay in the kitchen and play more slap-and-tickle. He was still in recovery mode, and Decoursey was practically a stranger. One episode of tipsy flirtation didn't mean she wasn't some kind of man-eater underneath that womanly demeanor. He ought to have learned his lesson after Melanie.

CHAPTER 10

D ecoursey guessed that the fun and games were over, what with Kennan standing back against the counter. She wasn't going to get that kiss after all. Not that she'd been kissed recently, but some things were unmistakable, no matter how long ago it had been. Her stomach had done a back flip when he caught her as she tripped. And when his eyes locked onto hers . . .

Oh, well; it had been exhilarating while it lasted. It was her first definitive sign that she might still be able to play the dating game after a long hiatus. Not with Kennan, of course—he was temporary. But it didn't hurt to get a little harmless practice.

Anyway, they were finished cleaning up. She suppressed a yawn as she closed the dishwasher and started the cycle. She'd think about all this after Kennan went back to bed, while she sat on the sofa and tried to stay awake. At the same time, she didn't want him to leave her alone out here. What she really wanted was to find out more about Kennan McGregor—a lot more. Or did she just want company to keep fear at bay? Whatever the reason, she decided she was more curious than tired and went out on a limb.

"So you're a storm chaser," she stated.

"Yeah. An untalented one, apparently."

"I saw that you have a website with weather photos. You must not be too terrible."

Kennan perked up from his lazy stance. “I can show you pictures on my phone—some videos too but not very good video. There’s nothing from today, which sucked, but I have decent photos from a few weeks ago that aren’t on the website yet.”

“Sure.” Screw going to bed. This was infinitely more inviting. “Why don’t you take off your apron, and we can go sit.”

“Only if you take yours off too.”

Her stomach did another somersault. It sounded suggestive when he said it like that. But she seemed to be overly sensitized to everything he said or did at this point.

She scraped her hair to one side to undo the tie at her nape in what she hoped came across as sultry. “Sometimes I forget. My grandma was a stickler for wearing an apron only in the kitchen, never at the table. She’s the one who taught me how to knit and crochet.” Oops, did she just ruin the mood by invoking her late granny? She watched him, wondering if he needed help untying. She’d be more than happy to oblige.

Alas, Kennan managed by himself. “Is that her apron you’re wearing?” he asked, untying the sashes.

“No, I knitted this one myself.”

“It’s cute.” He handed over the black-and-white apron.

So are you. “Thanks. Abby got me the black gloves you tried for my birthday.” She hung both aprons in the pantry, her heart tripping along despite the mellowing wine.

Kennan patted the pockets of his jeans. “You know what? I can’t show you any pictures when I left my phone in the bedroom. Be right back.”

As he disappeared down the hall, Decoursey collected her wineglass and made her way to the sofa, smoothing her

skirt underneath her rump as she arranged herself in the center of the left cushion. She allowed plenty of room for Kennan to sit, but she'd naturally have to be more toward the middle in order to see his pictures.

She took a sip of the diminishing wine in her glass as he reappeared holding his phone. He barely looked up as he manipulated the screen, settling down beside her.

"Okay, this was about three weeks ago, in eastern Oklahoma. See the funnel there?" He leaned in to show her the picture, his upper arm grazing her bare shoulder.

"Is it that cloud hanging down?" She pointed to a hazy gray appendage.

"Yep, that's it. And then"—he swiped to the next photo—"it dropped. So here you have a nice tornado. Not huge, but it has good structure." The cone-shaped twister dwarfed mature trees in the foreground.

"It looks huge to me. Aren't you kind of close?" Indeed he was . . . she could sense the heat of his arm millimeters away from hers.

"Nah, we were about three miles away. But check this out." He showed the next photo.

"Oh! I see what you mean." It was taken at such close range that the connection to the cloud was cut off at the top of the photo, showing the disembodied lower portion of the funnel and a cloud of dirt and debris rising up from the ground. She marveled at that shot and at yet another enticing touch of his arm against her shoulder. This time, he didn't move away.

"We were only a mile away from it there. But that's about as close as I've ever been. I like to think I have a healthy respect for tornadoes. You could say I'm cautious, even though storm chasing itself would seem to contradict that."

He showed more photos. “We saw two good tornadoes that day, but we just chase for fun, mainly. Well, too often it’s more of an ordeal than something truly fun. Case in point . . .” He scrolled through pictures of broken van windows. “We were caught in a mammoth hailstorm last year. That one got expensive. We all chipped in to pay for new windows.”

“Holy crap,” said Decoursey, her fingers brushing his as she took the phone for a closer look. “If I saw a tornado that close, I’d flip out.”

“You’d be fine. Just make sure you have an escape route, and don’t go down any muddy roads without four-wheel drive.”

“Well, I do have four-wheel drive. And I’ve done a little mudding in my past.” She’d had a chance to learn some recreational car control during her marriage to Rory, hanging out with his NASCAR friends from work. “So you see, I do get messy on occasion.”

“I can’t picture you out in a field, mudding.” His voice held a mixture of disbelief and admiration.

“Sometimes messy is good.” She turned her head to look directly at him. “You know, I’m not as predictable as people seem to think.”

“I’m beginning to see that.”