
Chapter 1

"**Y**ou canna park here, madam."

It was much less the autocratic statement that caught my attention than the fact that he had called me "madam." It was a step above "ma'am," but not by much.

Made me feel like I should have been wearing dentures, support hose and orthopedic shoes, like someone's ancient, maiden aunt.

I noticed his car first, with uncharacteristically mild alarm. It was a police car—an unobtrusive make of SUV with a gold shield on the door and the word "POLICE" written on its side in the same blue as the bubble gum machines on the roof.

I didn't recognize the voice, although I certainly ought to have. I'd heard it often enough—softly whispered, shouted angrily, and Lord knows, urgently, commandingly purred and purled into my ear.

But it was that defiantly unsoftened Scottish burr that should have been the dead giveaway, had I been paying even the slightest amount of attention.

My mind wasn't running along those lines at that moment,

though. It had been a long time since I'd been back here for anything other than the shortest, most perfunctory visits, so I really wouldn't have known to think that he was even still there—especially since I had immediately dismissed my mother's mentions of him without listening to them in the slightest.

Of course, my mouth ran away with me as I hurriedly crammed crap into the back of my mom's ancient, disreputable, and distinctly cantankerous minivan, concentrating on that instead of looking at him. I was dressed as appallingly as all of the Walmart memes would have anyone believe—ratty sweats, ancient college hoodie that I wore up to cover the hair that hadn't been washed yet and was scraped ruthlessly away from my face and wrestled into a Scrunchie that had been more recently used as a cat toy.

"Jeez, Walmart's hiring actual cops to work security now? I wouldn't have expected them to be willing to shell out the money for that—"

"Yes, ma'am, and this is a fire lane, so you're no' allowed to park here as the signs clearly say."

Now he'd done it. He'd gotten my attention, and as I put the last of the groceries in the van and shut the hatch, my eyes found his.

I'd already begun my snarky response to him, but it died out as soon as I recognized him. "And, as you can clearly see, I'm sure, Officer, that the car is running, and therefore, I'm not technically parked—"

My only saving grace was that he seemed to be as surprised to see that it was me as I was to see that it was him.

And it wasn't easy to get the better of him—in any way. I had up close and personal experience of that opinion to back it up.

I drew what I hoped would be a calming breath, but all I managed to do was to pull in a lungful of his all too familiar smelling cologne—the one he wore most often that made him

smell like oranges. And that I couldn't afford to buy him a bottle of then, or now.

There he was, standing there in his close-fitting uniform, leather everywhere, gun on his hip, every crease sharp, looking like the ultimate fantasy cop.

My errant mind immediately went to comparing him with the cop in the Village People or wondering if his uniform pants were tear-aways, so he could rip them off and bump and grind like a stripper at a bachelorette party. I shook my head slightly to clear away those disturbing images.

I decided that dealing with the hell of an awkward situation head-on was the only way to handle it, so I stuck my hand out to him. "Gregory. It's good to see you."

He stared at my hand for a long moment, and I wondered if he was going to outright refuse to shake it. Not that I could really have blamed him.

But, as always, he did the decent thing, shaking it fully but gently then letting go. If anyone had reason to know how careful he was to moderate his considerable strength, it was me.

I was more concerned with the fact that I, all of a sudden, felt so bereft without his big, warm hand engulfing mine, guiltily shoving it into my pocket as if to warm it and hoping he hadn't noticed.

His deeply intoned, "Catherine," didn't help my situation, either. In fact, I was quite sure that I had felt myself contract when he said my name—in the very same reverentially yet unapologetically sexy way he'd always said it.

I knew things could easily careen downhill from here, and happy that the situation wasn't much worse than it could have been, I just wanted to bring it to as rapid a conclusion as possible.

"So, as you can see, since the car is still on, I'm not parked—never *was* parked—just loading groceries after getting Mom into

the car. I'm done now." I recklessly shoved the cart in the general direction of the door, frankly beyond caring whether I hit someone in the process. "I'll get out of your hair."

I recognized that downward tilt of his chin. It made my butt tingle, which only made me angrier and less panicked.

That was a good thing, wasn't it?

"Catherine, as I'm sure you well know, you're no' supposed to stop your car in front of the door. The entire area in front of the store is a fire lane."

I wasn't about to argue any further. I was right, and he was wrong—even though, really, it was the opposite—but fighting with him about it wouldn't get me anywhere. It hadn't then, and I knew better than to think it would now, even with so many years between us.

"Yes, of course." I headed to the driver's side door and slid behind the wheel.

He followed me, bending down to stare in at me once I'd closed the door and giving me a look that—in better days—would have made me quake in my New Balances.

"Remember that next time," he growled, then his voice softened considerably as he greeted my mother. "Afternoon, Mrs. Fahy."

Mom leaned a bit forward, smiling at him, of course. She probably had us married with three kids in her mind. "It's good to see you, Gregory. Congratulations on your promotion. You do the town proud."

The smallest of smiles appeared on lips I knew embarrassingly well. "Thank you, ma'am. I know it's an impossible task I'm setting for you, but try to keep your daughter and her smart mouth out of trouble while she's here. An officer who isn't as nice as I am might well have given her a ticket."

Mom sat back in her chair, replying wryly, "I'm afraid she's a lost cause, Gregory. I've never been able to control Catherine in any way. You know that."

"I do, ma'am, I do. She's a trial, that one. She needs a firm hand."

I knew my face was as bright as my still blinking hazard lights as my mom nodded her head in agreement. "Which was something—with her father gone and all—I was never really able to provide for her, I'm sorry to say."

Luckily, he lowered his baritone voice even further, and I knew that it was so that I was the only one who would hear him say, "I could, and I did," just before he straightened.

That was all I could bear. I didn't care if he *was* practically the friggin' chief of police—and when the hell had that happened—I was outta there. If he hadn't stepped back, I would likely have run over his foot trying to get away, with Mom nattering in my ear the entire time about not only how rude that was—and how could I possibly be so rude to such a nice boy—but how stupid because he was the Assistant Chief of Police now, not just some beat cop.

I didn't much care if he was the friggin' Wizard of Oz. I couldn't bear to be around him another second, but eventually, I did force myself to slow down and stop driving so haphazardly. Not only did I want to shut my mom up about how I was driving, but I didn't want to give that annoyingly tall, imposingly large ginger idiot any reason to follow me.

I knew without checking my rearview mirror—scrupulously so—that he was staring after us, looking for a reason to pull me over.

Of course, Mom couldn't resist reciting her usual litany about Saint Gregory, ad nauseam. Lots and lots of nausea, especially considering what a hypocrite doing so made her, since she certainly vilified him enough years ago, just before I left town.

But back then, she wasn't old and rapidly becoming more

and more debilitated, and thus, actively looking to get her errant only chick comfortably married off, preferably sooner rather than later.

And Greg was now the not so lucky "right man for the job"—in one specific way she was never going to let me live down, I know.

He was also steady and reliable, had a great job, an excellent reputation in town—heck, in the whole county, perhaps the state.

Were people still saying heck? I wondered but wisely didn't ask out loud.

Mom might not be quite up to snuff, but she was definitely still able to smack me upside the head and make me regret having done whatever it was I'd done to earn said smack.

Sometimes I was able to act as if I'd learned from my past mistakes.

Sometimes not—case in point, my encounter with Gregory.

Because despite the fact that my mom now loved him, despite everything that had passed between us in a very traumatic, uncomfortable part of my life that I had neatly compartmentalized and packed away in the back of my mind, I still loved and wanted him. Desperately so, on both counts.

I knew coming here was a bad idea, but I really didn't have a choice. And, in my defense, I really didn't know how bad it was going to be.

It was a wonder I hadn't just thrown myself at him while tearing my clothes off in front of my mother, all of the Walmartians—who probably wouldn't have been fazed in the least if I had—and God, himself.

My hindbrain, even now, was questioning why I wasn't naked beneath him while he was pumping powerfully into me, looking straight into my eyes while doing so, as was his very disconcerting, very dominant habit.

A whimper of response clogged my throat, but I swallowed it

back forcefully, lest the big ears next to me—which were known to be only selectively deaf—heard it.

"He's always doing something around town—helping Habitat for Humanity build houses for the poor—"

I was definitely going to Hell for more than this, because it was always wrong to laugh at someone whose mental faculties weren't what they used to be. But I outright guffawed at that, picturing Jimmy Carter snapping tubes together for hamster sized people to run around in.

Or would the tubes be human sized? I wondered—seriously wondered.

This is why I can't have nice things—like lasting relationships.

I'm just too weird for words—the exact opposite of "steady and reliable" Assistant-Chief-of-Police, the sainted Gregory Laird.

She was making him sound boring, at which I took an inordinate amount of offense. Not that she was wrong, exactly. It's just that she left out his much more interesting aspects. Yes, he was all of the things she'd said he was—unabashedly and unapologetically. But he was also smart and funny and curious and interested, to say nothing of astonishingly single-minded and determined when he wanted something. Or someone.

And being the subject of such intensity was anything but yawn inducing.

Christ, I'd just dampened my panties as my mental dam broke and memories of how he had pursued me flooded back into my mind after nearly a decade of teaching myself to ruthlessly keep them at bay. I had to. I didn't have a choice.

And now, there they were, in excruciating detail, every single aspect of nearly every minute I'd had with him. And there were a lot of them.

I'd known Greg most of my life. His family had immigrated and landed in my town when he was about twelve. He was a

couple of years ahead of me in school in our small town, already proving himself to be cut from the same cloth as his father, who had also become a cop but who hadn't advanced anywhere near as far in the department as his more ambitious son would.

He'd been on the football team but wasn't the star quarterback. Even as one of a handful of defensive tackles, he *was* the captain of the team. Even then, he was known as a quiet, thoughtful, respectful, and responsible kid, and even though he wasn't known to be particularly gregarious, most people liked him, both kids and adults.

I was aware of him on the periphery of my own life as an outcast misfit in high school society. I wasn't a nerd or a jock or a Goth or much of anything. I didn't fit into any prescribed category, and I never have. It's almost been a point of pride to me all my life that I'm largely indefinable, and high school was no different. I got decent grades—attended honors classes—but I only had one or two good friends and no romantic involvements whatsoever. I was so far under the radar of my fellow classmates that I wasn't even worth bullying.

And that's right where I wanted to be—unnoticed, left to my own devices, perpetually overlooked.

That was, until the summer between high school and college, when I came to his attention and something happened that I could never had predicted and certainly would never have expected.

He was my boss.

It wasn't as if he was some kind of millionaire with a Fortune 500 company, though. He'd gotten a summer job as soon as he was legally able at one of the small, locally owned markets in the area. And in his usual, disgustingly mature way, he'd worked his way up in the ranks, even though he was only there part-time, originally, to accommodate his school schedule.

When he'd graduated, even though he could easily have gotten into a reasonably good college, he'd, instead, stepped up

to the full time job his current employer—McKenzie's Market IGA—had immediately offered him. But everyone in town knew he was just biding his time until he was twenty-one and could apply to the police department and follow in his father's footsteps.

And even though they knew they were inevitably going to lose him one day, the owners of the market recognized what they had in him and gave him the job as assistant manager. And their trust was not misplaced. He'd worked his ass off for them. Part or full time, it didn't matter to him. If he was going to do something, he did it well. That was just the way Greg was.

It was my first job. My mother hadn't wanted me to work at all, but I knew I'd need money for school. The funds I had from my maternal grandmother, the inevitable loans, and few small scholarships I'd been able to get weren't going to cover what I needed. I know she had reservations, wondering whether I'd be able to keep the job even if I got it, considering that holding my tongue, following through, and taking orders were far from my favorite things—or, some of them, even in my skill set.

But she underestimated the incentive of the almighty dollar, which was sorely missing when she wanted me to do chores, or go see some dreary relative, or keep my mouth shut when I thought someone was wrong—or worse, insufferably stupid.

And, in fact, he was the one who had interviewed me.

It was weird in the extreme to shake hands with someone I remember—however vaguely—as a fellow student. He hadn't been on my radar—as almost no one was—but it was impossible not to know of him when one attended the same school as a man like him.

He greeted me warmly, taking my hand in his and pumping it twice before letting it go—but even to this day, as I met those stark green eyes of his, I would have sworn he would have preferred to keep possession of it.

I had never before felt that I was as utterly and completely

the center of someone's attention until that forty-five minutes—that should have been fifteen—with him. Not even my mother looked at me the way he did, as if I held the answers to all of life's questions and he would do anything to coerce me into telling him. And that he'd enjoy doing some things more than others to achieve his goal.

Although, true to his nature, nothing he said or did then, or while we were at work, was in the least untoward.

And, somehow, it was that naturally gallant and decent and gentlemanly bent of his that was one of the biggest things about him that made him so bloody attractive!

And not just to me. Women had always buzzed around him like flies, although he had—if rumors in small towns and gossip in tiny high school hallways was to be believed—rarely indulged. He wasn't gay. Frankly, although it's a small town, the population would have been more accepting of that than what its middle aged and older, mostly female, citizens saw as a criminal waste of a good man.

No one knew whom it was he was waiting for—not that many daughters, nieces and even granddaughters of the town folk didn't regularly try to change his mind about his reticence. Especially once he got into the Department and began wearing a uniform, thus holding a position of respect and responsibility that was an irresistible draw to some women.

But at this point, he was just the second guy from the top—not even the owner's son who had no interest in following in his parents' footsteps, despite their loudly voiced desire that he should—in a small but bustling combination grocery store and gas station. Not that his demeanor changed, dependent on his job at the moment. He'd always be exactly the same levelheaded person he'd always been—grocery clerk or mayor or President of the United States.

I should have been relaxed with him. He had a reputation for being a very nice guy. I don't know quite what it was—the accent

or his intensity or what—but I was very nervous, even as he tried to put me at ease.

"Congratulations on your graduation." He smiled, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Th-thank you."

"Going to university?"

"Yes, UVM."

"Good school, but bring long johns for winter. The wind off the lake will slice right through you, and there's a lot of walking between buildings on campus."

I didn't own anything but regular flannel pajamas, but somehow it seemed distinctly inappropriate to tell him that, although I don't know why. The mental vision of me in long johns was hardly likely to inspire horniness in anyone.

"What are you going for?"

"Journalism."

He looked impressed, and I preened without reason, but then his face clouded over. "You want to be an anchorwoman, something like that?"

"I was thinking more like Nellie Bly or Marie Colvin."

Greg frowned. "I recognize the name Nellie Bly, but I don't know Marie Colvin at all."

"No one does. She's a female war correspondent. She was right on the front lines, just like her male counterparts. She was pretty fearless in pursuit of a story. I admire that enormously."

"Sounds dangerous."

I didn't pick up then on what I would later recognize as his disparaging inflection on the word "dangerous."

"Getting at the truth sometimes is," I replied, meeting his eyes for the first time without having to fight the urge to flinch away from them.

That smile—even in its softest form—was devastating, and I didn't even think I liked redheads at that time. My crushes were all dark-haired men.

Apparently, I was fickle. That was a disturbing thought.

"I think you'll find cashiering, rotating the stock in the coolers, and stocking the aisles to be terribly boring in comparison," he teased.

There's really no way to stop a blush—believe me, I've tried. I have very fair skin, and just the slightest hint of embarrassment makes my face shine like a roadside flare—and just about as prettily.

"Well, since I've not been trained in journalism yet, I think I'd be willing to risk it."

Although I thought it went well from that point on, I have always been and always will be one of those people who never thinks well of themselves, preferring to be surprised when good things happen rather than expecting them and then having to deal with the inevitable disappointment.

He mentioned that he was going to interview others, so I went home, not expecting good news, and surprised when Mom handed me the phone as soon as I came in the door.

"Catherine? It's Greg."

Oh, God. It was him.

"Hi."

"I'd like to offer you the job."

My first impulse, frankly, based on my reactions to him, and in hindsight, was the correct one. I had my mouth open to tell him a white lie—that I'd gotten something else and therefore had to decline the job.

But then my common sense—which, many times since then, was very nearly the death of me—came to the forefront. Jobs in small towns weren't particularly plentiful, and here was one being dropped in my lap.

"Thank you. I'll—" I hesitated but a second then threw caution to the wind. "I'll take it."

"Good. Welcome aboard."

When I hung up, I felt a prickling of my skin—raising goose-

At His Hand

flesh on every inch of it that should have prompted me to call him back and renege.

I didn't.

And I can't really even say I should have.

Not anymore.