
Chapter 1

A few seconds later, he was back. Putting an arm under her waist, he raised her to her feet and nearly dragged her to his SUV, tucking her in the back seat and fastening the belt across her snugly. His face was inches away as he glared at her and took his phone from his pocket. He hit the speed dial.

"Alex? It's Max."

"Did you find her?"

"Yeah. I found her in *Peaceful Valley*. They were after her. I shot one and killed him, but I suspect the other might be back. Send Forensics, would you? And an ambulance. And someone needs to come and get her car."

"On my way. Where will you be? And Lowry's in here. He wants to know where you're taking her."

Max paused, his eyes resting on Mellie. "My place in the country, I guess. I'm not taking her home. Meet you at the front gate under the old oak." He jumped into the front seat as he hung up.

He looked in the rear-view mirror to see her head down then turned back to her. Mellie was staring sadly down at the flowers

she'd brought to put on her husband's grave. They were dilapidated now from being trapped under her.

"Well, hell," he grumbled under his breath. Exiting the car again, he opened her door and took them from her. Glancing around to make sure it was clear, he strode toward the grave and placed them on top of it before running back to the car.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He didn't answer right away. Driving the SUV to the entrance of the cemetery, he guided it up under a tree and stopped to wait until reinforcements got there. There was only one way in and out; the suspect's car had to have come this way.

His hand reached backward over the seat, wiggling his fingers impatiently yet keeping an eye on the area around them. "Keys, Mellie." It was a demand.

She stared at him. "You can't keep my keys, Max."

"Can't I?"

She rose up slightly, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror. He extended his hand back again. "Melanie Anne Jenkins, I've had it with you. If I have to wrestle you for them, I swear, when I get you home, I'll blister your recalcitrant little butt. Hear me?"

She sighed and reached into her coat pocket, pulling them out and shoving them into his hand. Refusing to meet his eyes in the mirror, she turned her head toward the window.

The scream of an ambulance was heard in the distance, and she looked up to see it approaching, followed by a police car, a sheriff's car, and two from the Highway Patrol. A few others followed, including Alex's Jeep.

The Jeep stopped, pulling up to the SUV. Special Agent in Charge Lowry was in the passenger seat.

Max tossed the keys to Alex through the window. "Drive her car out of here. We can't leave it. I'm taking her to my place for now, until we decide what to do."

Alex caught the keys, glancing at Mellie and then back at Max. "Where do you want me to leave it?"

"I don't care. Impound it." He heard Mellie gasp in the back seat but didn't turn around.

Alex glanced toward Lowry then back. "Will do." A second later, he drove into the graveyard further, leaving them there.

Max glanced into the rearview mirror again, catching sight of the young woman behind him. Mellie's mouth was flat, and she was shaking her head angrily. "I cannot believe you told him to impound my car. That has to be illegal."

Max turned around to face her. "How many times have I told you to stay away from here? How many, Mellie?"

She met his eyes only briefly before glancing away, refusing to answer.

Max continued to stare at her. He'd just killed a man to save her life, and she had the nerve to be obstinate? Seconds later, he was out of the car, opening her door and unfastening her seat belt. Capturing her by the wrist, he hauled her outside the SUV.

She tugged against his grasp. "Let me go!"

"I think not." His arm around her, he lifted her off the ground. Before she realized his intent, he had raised her skirt up above her waist and smacked her bottom, hard, at least a half a dozen times before opening the front door and putting her inside. "Move to the passenger side," he ordered. "*Now*. I'm not in the least finished with you. And get down in the floorboard."

HER BOTTOM BURNING and her eyes huge, Mellie moved quickly to obey. She'd managed silence through those hard swats, but it hadn't been easy.

When she glanced up, Max was watching her, his mouth tight. With a look of warning, he said sharply, "And stay there until I'm sure they aren't following us. Although I suspect they're long gone by now."

Mellie covertly watched Max's face on the journey back to

town. His face was handsome, she had to admit, even though his steely eyes were busy watching the rear and side view mirrors, his hands tense on the wheel.

She grew fascinated, watching him. He wore his hair longer than most agents did, and that stubborn jaw pulsed when he was angry, as it was doing now.

Once they got on Kingshighway and started north, she began to hear the sounds of other vehicles on the road.

"All right, you can get up in the seat now. And fasten your belt."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my place. I can't let you go home."

"Why not? Max, I have no clothes or underwear or—"

A longsuffering sigh escaped as he interrupted her spiel. "Because, obviously, they were watching you, or they wouldn't have known you were at the graveyard. I went to your house this morning looking for you and just caught sight of you heading out of town. And something told me that's where you were going. You little *brat*."

"It's been months since I visited Jim's grave," she muttered under her breath.

"I don't care if it's been *years*. Your life may depend on heeding my advice, and you don't seem to be trying in the *least*." His mouth was flattened, and she thought better of saying anything else. She'd never seen him quite this angry.

She watched silently as he drove toward the north end, then out of town, and turned off. Eventually, he turned onto a gravel road and up to a cabin nestled in the woods. She was surprised. It looked really nice.

He reached into the console and pulled out a garage door opener, sending a stern glance her way. A moment later, they were inside the garage.

"Don't move," he said as the door came down behind them.

Mellie watched him warily as he moved around the car

toward her. The door opened and she blinked as he reached in across her and unfastened her belt. He paused, glancing down at her, and she forced herself to meet the stern gaze that was inches from her face. But she lowered her eyes again quickly as he straightened up and stood back.

She slid off the high seat to the ground gingerly, skirting away as he shut the door. But he took her shoulders and moved her in front of him, marching her toward the door of the house with a large hand to the small of her back. She tried to ease past him as he unlocked it.

Inside the door, was a kitchen, and she ascended the steps into it. She could see the archway that led to the living room and attempted to move into it, away from him.

She didn't get far. An arm snaked about her waist, as it had earlier, and caught her back against him. Dropping the keys on the island, he spun her around to face him and picked her up as if she were a football, holding her under his arm. She gasped as he lifted her off her feet.

"Oh, no, you don't. You're going to listen to me this time, young lady. Got it?"

After what had happened at the cemetery, she was not inclined to argue. "Got it," she shot back.

MAX STOPPED. He'd almost been tempted to let this go, but he'd warned her so many times to stay away from that place. She'd been a sitting duck, standing there at her husband's grave at the top of the hill. Had she not bent down to place the flowers just when she did—and had the man's aim been a half-inch higher—the first shot from him would have killed her instantly. He was thankful he'd been so close to her when the shot was fired.

Carrying her under his arm, he approached the living room

despite her protests. He distinctly remembered threatening her with a trip over his knee if she went there again. Taking a deep breath, he moved in front of the sofa. It was time to carry it out.

"Could you please put me down first?"

"The answer is *no*."

Mellie scowled over her shoulder at him as he stood her on her feet in front of him. Removing her coat and setting it aside, he brought his hands to her shoulders and stared at her. He'd often admired that little face, but at the moment, her big blue eyes flashed with defiance and told him in no uncertain terms how angry she was.

Immediately, he plopped her over his left thigh, face down. She struggled, but the only thing he did was to put his other leg behind hers and trap both of hers. He grasped her by the waist and tilted her forward until her bottom was up higher over his thigh.

She gasped. "Stop it, Max! You haven't even said anything yet, and I already promised to listen."

"Yes, you did, and this is to insure it. Now, do I have your attention?"

When she hesitated, he brought down a hand, hard, and she cried out, "Yes! You have it."

"All right. This is my house, and these happen to be my rules. While you're here, you'll follow them. Are you ready? I'm only going to say them *once*, and I expect you to remember them. Afterward, I'll question you, so listen carefully."

"You, Max Lemons, are a bully."

In answer, he flipped her dress up above her waist and brought down his hand once more. When she gasped, he nodded. "You think so? Then you'll *really* think so when I've finished with you. First, you'll be here until I think it's safe for you to go home. Got that?"

Mellie answered quickly this time, "I hear you."

Max stared down at the shapely little bottom clad only in

skimpy lace panties, trying not to notice how perfect it was. He considered pulling those panties down but decided against it. He shook his head. "You say you hear me, but I can't help but notice that you didn't agree to it." His hand came down again, leaving a red mark all the way across the little butt it had descended on.

"Oh!" She was trying to squirm away, but he tightened his arm around her and grasped her wrist when she reached back to defend herself. "Second, you'll stay away from the cemetery. Hear?"

She sighed sarcastically. "I hear. It'll be a little hard to get there without my car, won't it?"

When he brought down his hand again, she howled.

"Third, that kind of sass will get your butt blistered every single time. Understand me?"

This time, her voice was a little more subdued. "Yes."

"How about adding a *sir*?"

Her head came up at that. "You can't be serious."

He added extra strength into the next swat, and she gasped sharply.

"Entirely," he said. "Try again."

Her head lowered. "All right. Yes, *sir*."

"Better. Next, you'll listen to what I tell you and do as I say. No, wait. I suppose that's too much to ask for."

When she looked back over her shoulder at him, he threw his head back in laughter.

"How dare you laugh at me," she challenged, incensed.

He arched a brow. "All right. That's all for now. But remember, I *will* expect you to obey me, and I *won't* put up with any back talk from you. You might not like being here, and frankly, I could do without a brat I can't depend on to follow orders who only knows how to offer a mouth full of sass. But we're stuck with each other for the time being. So, deal with it." Her bottom was quite red now, but he planted ten more hard smacks down on it, listening to her squeals of protest

before he brought her dress down again and offered to let her up.

He expected her to scramble to her feet, but she didn't try to get up. Instead, she reached back when he released her wrist, trying to rub, and he reached down to capture it again with his left hand. His right, he slid upward under her dress, rubbing her bottom gently to ease some of the sting. Her head came up once again, and he gave her a sharp pat and sat her up on his knee.

Mellie's attitude seemed to have altered as her eyes rose to meet his sadly. "You forgot something."

Surprised, he cocked his head. "What?"

"You were forced to kill a man today because of me."

He met her gaze for a moment before shaking his head. "I think you've had enough." His eyes traveled over her face slowly. "I didn't know how many of them there were. I did know there must have been at least two there."

"How did you know?"

He frowned. "Not enough time elapsed between the time the door slammed and the driver took off. One person had to be getting out and another had to be driving."

When he looked down at her again, her face was about to crumple. Tears were welling up.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, dear God. Don't cry," he said, engulfing her in his arms and pulling her against him.

Her shoulders began to shake with silent sobs. Max couldn't stand it. He found himself rocking her back and forth gently. "Shh, Mellie. I can handle a lot of things, but not tears. Quiet."

It didn't help. Her sobbing grew harder, and he tucked her head under his chin. When she didn't stop, he rose with her and went to find a box of tissues.

He found them on the top of the kitchen island, where he sat her down. Taking a couple from the box, he mopped up her tears. "Better?"

She nodded, sniffing, and he handed her a third. "Blow."

She took it. A minute later, she handed it back, and he took it from her, dropping it under the counter into a waste can.

"Now. Do we agree on how you'll behave while you're here?"

She lowered her gaze and finally nodded. "Yes."

He leaned forward, caging her in with both arms, and arched a brow, waiting.

When she glanced back up, she sighed. "Sir," she added.

He framed her face, tilting it upward. "That's a start. Now tell me. When's the last time you ate something?"

"I had breakfast this morning before I went..." She paused, hesitant to bring up the graveyard again.

"Well, I didn't, and I'm starving. We'll eat something before we go back to the office. I suspect Lowry wants to chew me out, and I can't handle that on an empty stomach."

Her voice was a whisper. "I'm sorry—"

He shook his head, placing a hand over her mouth. "Quiet, brat. I'm a big guy. I can take it."

But as soon as he moved his hand, she said, "I'm twenty-eight, Max. I'm not a brat."

He grinned. "I'll remind you of it, the next time you act like one, with my hand on your butt. I'm *thirty-eight*, a decade older than you, so have some respect and behave yourself around me." Without warning, he took her by the waist and set her on her feet, turning her toward the living room. "Go get your coat. Brat."