



## ***Romantic Notions***

### **Excerpt**

Book 4 of the Falcon's Bend Series

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### Prologue

*"The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."*

~Carl Jung

*"If you love me only in my dreams, let me be asleep forever."*

~Unknown

*Seven years ago...*

Kimberly's roommate finally left the campus dorm room. Some foreign student, he reminded himself. He'd timed his visit to coincide with her absence. When the dark girl descended the stairs, he slid out of his hiding place at the end of the hall.

*Just the two of us now, darling. No more interference. I've rescued my eternal princess, and now I can finally accept the rewards of my hard work.*

His shoes made no sound on the worn carpet. Seconds later, he lightly knocked on Kimberly's door. Anticipation built in his chest as he waited for the sight of her. Blond hair, soulful blue eyes, a blood-red mouth...a mouth that had made him tremble with violent need.

He frowned as the seconds ticked by, each a lifetime he'd waited through with impatience.

*Soon you'll belong to me, darling. Don't make me wait even another second.*

Just a little harder he knocked again. He couldn't risk alerting any of Kimberly's neighbors. The tension seemed to jump inside his very veins. He clenched his hands, his needs growing with the prolonged wait. This moment had been appointed, destined, for all time to happen. That she might refuse to open her door had never occurred to him--not when he'd arranged it, worked out every last detail. No, she wouldn't spoil it. She couldn't.

Soft padding footsteps came close to the other side of the door, and then a voice called, "Who is it?"

The lilt of her voice captured him. Relieved, he smiled though she couldn't see him. "Kimberly...please, I'd like to talk to you."

Uncertainty crept into her tone. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Van's. Please...can we talk?"

*Darling, I'm the man you've waited for. The one who will love you and only you to the exclusion of all else. You'll see. Throughout all time we have been, we will be, soul mates. Just the two of us, darling, I promise.*

*No one will ever hurt you again. No one else will ever have you.*

The deadbolt slid back with a heavy thud, but when she opened the door a crack, he saw in frustration that she kept the chain lock pulled. For a long minute she stared at him uncertainly. He could see the redness of her eyes and swollen nose. She'd been crying. Over Van. Over the man who'd destroyed her, *betrayed* her time and time again. How could she...?

*B@#h!*

Forcefully, he tamped down on his anger.

"Kimberly, don't you recognize me?" *Of course you do, my love. I'm your heart. Open the eyes of your heart and you'll know I've always been there and always will be--an integral part of you just as you are a part of me. The biggest part.*

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure. But...I'm sorry. I'm really not in the mood for company."

"I know. I understand," he said too quickly, but tempered his eagerness with soft consolation.

*How dare you pretend you don't know me? Oh, you'll pay for that.*

"We're both grieving. Van was my friend, too. He often spoke of you."

"He...he did?"

He recognized the interest in her expression and took a half step toward her. "I'd like to talk to you, Kimberly. Van wanted me to come to you now. He wanted me to tell you what's important for you to know."

"What? What did he tell you?" Instead of intrigue, a hint of suspicion entered her stance.

"Please, could we talk inside, Kimberly? This is a difficult time for both of us."

Taking a shaky breath, she stared at him through the crack with agony in her eyes. She wanted to say no, he realized, but her lingering feelings for Van restrained her.

When he murmured please again, his hands clenched in fists, she reached up and unfastened the chain. Standing back, she opened the door just a little wider. Just enough for him to enter.

She wore barely more than a long T-shirt--legs, feet, arms...all bare. She'd scraped the sides of her waist-length hair back from her pale face, showing her grief with starkness.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked, arms crossed over her front as soon as she closed the door behind him.

"Jeffrey," he murmured, expecting her to recognize him instantly.

Once more she disappointed him. Her gaze narrowed. "I think I remember seeing you with Van. You said you were friends?"

His teeth came together ruthlessly at her prolonged confusion. "The best of friends," he managed.

She shook her head, brushing wispy bangs back from her forehead. "Well, come in." With that she started toward another room.

While her back was turned, he reached behind himself and slid the deadbolt into place as quietly as he could.

*No, she won't open the door to anyone else dressed so scantily. From now on, only I will see her beauty.*

The sound of the lock dropping home returned her attention to him. He rushed forward to follow her into the next room saying, "Van and I shared a dorm room."

"We didn't go there often," she offered softly.

He watched her sit, tucking her legs under herself and reaching for the box of tissues. Wadded balls lay strewn around the padded window seat she occupied.

*No more tears, darling. When you remember me, accept me, love me as I love you, as only I can love you...I'll see to it that you'll never be sad again.*

"What did Van want to tell me?"

"You shouldn't grieve so, darling. Van wasn't worth it."

A tissue halfway to her nose, she jerked her head to look up at him standing over her. "What did you say?"

"I knew him well, Kimberly. We shared a dorm room. I know you would prefer to hear the truth now. It's not good for you to harbor illusions that simply aren't true. He was never faithful to you, my love. He hated your constant possessiveness. I know you caught him cheating on you. Why would you want to retain good memories of someone who treated you so disgracefully?"

Horror filled her expression. "He's...he's dead! How can you--? I forgave him for that. It was only once. I love...*loved* him. He loved me; I know he did. He was so sorry..." She wasn't saying the words he'd expected of her.

Jeffrey slid onto the window seat beside her. She shrank back from his nearness when he reached toward her. Annoyed, he nevertheless infused his tone with tenderness. "You'll never have to go through that again, darling. I love you as you deserve. You'll lack for nothing, I promise you. You're the only woman I could ever feel this way about. We'll be together throughout time and space from this moment on."

"What are you--?"

She jerked away once more, stumbling to her feet.

He shook his head at her. "We can't have you dressing like a tramp anymore, darling. I won't allow it. Don't you see? You belong to me now. Only I will see your beauty."

"I want you to leave!" she barked in terror. "I don't want you here anymore. I don't know who you are..."

Standing, he strode sinuously to follow her when she ran toward the front door. Grabbing her by the hair, he yanked her back to him, shoved her against the wall, and trapped her with his body.

"Of course you know me, darling. Don't hurt me again by pretending you don't know of my love. We were meant to be together. I knew you felt the same way the night we met. It was meant to be. Nothing can change that now, not even death."

"I love Van. I don't even know you. You're crazy! Get out!"

"You're distressed. I can see that, my love," he murmured.

When he captured her wrists, she fought to be free. He tightened his hold, dragging her toward him. Seeing her open her mouth to scream, he smashed his hand over her lovely lips. Soon he would claim them as his own--without resistance.

"He's dead, darling. The authorities believe he killed himself because you broke up with him, but between us there will be no secrets. We share in love always." He lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered, "I did it for you, my love. I did it so we could be together as we're meant to be, timelessly."

Her eyes widened; her scream muffled when he drew his head back. He felt the slickness of her blood beneath his palm, and his arousal grew almost painful.

"Tonight, darling, is our wedding night. I have everything we need."

Violently she shook her head, and he felt her coiling to attack him. His anger flared as he caught her leg coming up between his own. He slammed her back against the wall again, pinning her there with an unbreakable hold on both of her wrists.

"It doesn't have to be this way, my love," he bit out while she struggled, exciting him. "Just tell me you love me too. Tell me you understand that what is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil. I will have you as I deserve for the sacrifices I've made to be with you."

Her body went limp against his, her eyes staring at him in panic.

"You see, darling..." He stroked her satiny cheek, stained with the first blood of atonement for the sin of her love for another man. "You'll always come back to me. I will have you, my love, or no one will ever have you again..."

## Chapter One

*Thursday, January 6, 2005...*

*Why are Thursdays the longest days of my life?* Amber Carfi wondered as she slid out of her vest in the locker room. She already knew the answer to that, of course. She had every Wednesday off, as did her partner and lover, Warren Jensen. Spending the day together had taken on a whole new meaning in the two weeks since their on-the-job-and-off buddy relationship had become more than she'd ever dreamed, everything she'd ever wanted. They'd shared two blissful, perfect weeks together, yesterday the full day.

*And I'm just waiting for the boom to fall and destroy it all, destroy me beyond repair.*

She took a deep breath. As patrol officers on the Falcon's Bend Police Department, she and Jensen struggled constantly to keep the new dimensions of their relationship a secret. The force was so tight-knit everybody knew everybody else's business--or at least tried to if any indication arose of dirt to gossip about. So far, she and Jensen had done a pretty good job hiding their feelings. But the second she went off-shift...

Nothing else mattered except being together. Jensen filled her every waking and sleeping moment. She couldn't get enough of the sight of him, the sound of his voice, the feel of him next to her. Heck, she'd always been intoxicated by the smell of the guy: leather, fresh air, and all man.

Amber stood in front of the long mirror attached to the wall near the showers. Her face was almost healed, finally. Just a rapidly clearing scab that ran in a jagged horizontal line across her jaw was all that remained. A few weeks ago, she'd been working a case and ended up kidnapped with her father by a psycho and his girlfriend who'd beat her with a leather belt.

The buckle damaged the lower half of her face and upper chest. All things considered, she'd gotten lucky. No permanent damage had been done. She wouldn't have any scars. Soon she'd be left with the same old broken-a-half-dozen-times nose and ultra-feminine mouth--one of the few girly things about her.

She'd spent a lifetime downplaying her femininity: too much fighting with boys as a kid, playing football in high school, becoming a cop on an all-male police force.

*Never had a relationship in my life beyond the guys I hung out and watched football with. And Jensen was my favorite, my best bud.*

The image of him sneaking into her first-floor bedroom window last night, and their muffled laughter that quickly turned to frantic panting, filled her mind. In the mirror she watched her cheeks turn a dark shade of pink.

*Yeesh, I'm pitiful. But I love it. I've never felt this way before--can't get enough of him. He's so good!*

She sighed, hearing her own longing in it. Reaching up, she slipped the rubber band out of her hair, letting the strawberry blond strands fall. When she'd gone to get her hair cut recently, she'd told the woman not to cut it to her usual shoulder length. She'd wanted just a trim, wanted it to grow longer. She found it strange to look at the silky strands making a halo below her shoulders.

Once they were alone after their shifts concluded for the day, Jensen always took her hair out of the tightwad ponytail she wore it in for work. She'd also been wearing a touch of makeup, something she'd never done before, and dressing a little better outside work instead of donning the old slob-wear. Sometimes she barely recognized herself. She was no longer the burping, cussing, gum-smacking, mannerless, awkward *pig* who fit in so well with a bunch of guys boaring it up. Even the glow in her cheeks and the sparkle in her pale green eyes appeared unnatural. Did anyone else notice the changes in her? The idea embarrassed her to no end. But she wanted Jensen (*Warren--will I ever get used to calling him that?*) to see the differences in her.

She forced herself away from the mirror and went to her locker. Since she had come to work at the department two years ago, she'd gotten to knock around in the ladies' locker room by herself, but she'd used it only to store her duffel bag and to shower. Lately, she'd been bringing clothes to work to change into after her shift. In fact, today she'd slipped out of roll call without waiting around the way she usually did after shift reports were given. For once, she wanted to punch out on time.

*All we'll have is the hour after work at his place. Then it's dinner with Dad and waiting endlessly and uncomfortably until we can be alone after Jensen pretends to leave for the night, only to sneak back in through my bedroom window.*

They'd agreed not to tell or give any indication to their families and friends that things had changed between them. They hadn't even told her father Zeke, and Jensen's best friend and former brother-in-law Scott. Much as she would've liked to have more freedom, her father was still nursing a broken leg from the kidnapping. She couldn't leave him completely. He'd be laid up for the next month or so until his leg healed. She and Jensen would just have to make the best of things until then.

*Torture.*

She took off her uniform, put it on a hanger, and was slipping a sweater over her head when she heard a sound that made her duck around the line of lockers facing the door out to the department.

"Geez!" she started when she saw Jensen quickly close and lock the door. "What are you doing?"

She knew everyone still occupied the briefing room, but he'd taken a huge risk sneaking in here.

"If anyone saw you..." she began as he came toward her, his gaze moving over her bare legs to the sex-kitten underwear that'd been her secret penchant since she was a teenager.

"Nobody saw me. I made sure of it."

"We could be fired if anyone did. Or worse, teased ruthlessly until we've got no choice but to quit or kill somebody."

The Falcon's Bend Police Department employed twelve full-time officers and six qualified reserves, along with the patrol sergeant and chief, plus an administrative assistant and two investigators.

Jensen chuckled.

Even in his dark blue patrol uniform, he took her breath away. He was tall and muscular, his tan skin a contrast to his blondish-brown hair, spiked in front. She still couldn't believe how much had altered between them. He'd been her best friend for five years--the guy who'd encouraged her to make a career as a police officer, who was constantly on her case for her lack of feminine appeal, the man who had saved her from the worst experience of her life a few weeks ago. Back then, she'd finally admitted to herself she was attracted to him. For years she had been, and apparently he'd felt the same about her regardless of how unsexy her habits. But from the first time he kissed her on Christmas Eve, there'd been no turning back.

He slipped one arm around her. The other remained in the sling to prevent it from moving around and tearing the muscle again. Her kidnapping crazies had rigged a gun in his kitchen in an attempt to keep him from following. Only solid instincts had saved his life. The bullet caused a flesh-wound that'd done a lot less damage than he told her he'd feared when he saw all the blood. Unfortunately, it'd also done more damage than they hoped. His doctor said there was a chance he'd have trouble with the arm for years to come, or for life. But he was alive. For that, she said a prayer of gratitude each day.

His hand slid down to cradle her satin-covered butt, and she looked up at him sassily. "Hey, who do you think you are?"

The intensity of his desire blew her away. When he looked at her like that...

"The man who's been dyin' to touch you like this for the last ten hours."

Who needed sleep? She'd been getting up two hours early just to go to his house and crawl into bed with him. Who needed food? The fact that she'd barely been eating was truly saying something about her state of mind. They'd even forgone their usual nightly trips to Bend Fitness Club, not caring about football games and invitations to join friends.

Life was crazy, and she realized it with the sting of tears behind her eyes. She hugged him hard, careful about his arm, and murmured, "What am I gonna do with you, Jensen?"

*I don't know how to function anymore. All I care about is being with you. We need a vacation. But even then, I'd come back and still wanna be alone with you every second of every day.*

He sighed against her, his hand at the back of her head now, holding her tightly enough to make her cry in joy. She'd had so few relationships. Well, if one-night stands could be considered relationships, she'd had her share--more than her share--in her twenty-four years. But nothing like this. Then, all she'd wanted was what she'd gotten from those guys--a five minute pick-me-up to keep lust at bay for another month. She didn't think it was possible to get enough of Jensen. He held her the way no other man ever had. He looked at her and touched her and talked to her until the entire world felt perfectly balanced and safe. That didn't even get into the lovemaking...slow, uninhibited, mind-blowing love that satisfied her on more levels than she'd realized she possessed.

When he eased back and looked at her with his deep brown eyes, she felt like he was mesmerizing her. She would have done anything he asked of her, too.

"Let's go home, honey."

"Okay."

His gaze fixed on her lips, but she knew even one kiss would keep them here. With his arm...No way. She shook her head and he conceded, but his attention shifted to the globe key she wore on a long gold chain around her neck.

The heavy old-fashioned skeleton key wasn't like any other in existence with its supple curves. When she was a little girl, she and her father had designed a globe puzzle together, and this key was just one of several steps to opening it. The globe puzzle had been confiscated by the FBI, but she'd gotten the cherished key back a few weeks ago and had taken to wearing it all the time. The first time Jensen saw her naked on Christmas, he'd commented on it, asked how she got it back: did their superiors retrieve it from the FBI agent they'd been working with? Amber had murmured, "Hmm", not able to confirm or deny the fact for fear of the truth coming out--a truth she hoped he'd never learn.

In any case, his expression whenever he saw the key told her that he wasn't satisfied with her initial non-answer for how she'd gotten it. She knew if she just took it off, he'd forget it. Maybe she'd forget her own stupid mistake, but the key represented the only happy time in her childhood, a time that'd been stolen from her. She wanted to hold onto the good even if it meant discomfort all the way around.

Tucking the key into her shirt, she proceeded to pull on jeans, aware that Jensen watched her. Then she threw everything else in her bag. He went out the back way first, and she followed a minute later.

Falcon's Bend was a small town in Wisconsin on the Falcon River, with just under eight thousand Green Bay Packer football-loving folks; Amber and Jensen had, until recently, been fanatics themselves. The town had more taverns than churches, but filled both on the appropriate days. Teenagers talked of escape from a one-horse town like Falcon's Bend, but transportation in or out was limited if you didn't have wheels: no train, no commercial flights, one bus stop, and one taxi service that only took calls from around town and some of the nearby areas. For Amber, Falcon's Bend was the only home she'd ever known, the only one she cared to know.

By the time she drove them to the farmhouse his grandfather had left him a few miles outside of Falcon's Bend, they were laughing about the fact that neither of them remembered more than surface details about anything they'd done that day while on patrol. She remembered their morning alone together vividly, but lately her job had become a job--the impediment to her twenty-four-hour Jensen fix. His three golden retrievers came running and they gave cursory attention to them before rushing inside.

She helped Jensen take off his jacket, not an easy task with his arm, and shucked off her own along with her boots. Without further delay, he reached for her. The touch of his lips against hers broke her restraint. She unbuttoned his shirt, carefully removed it as fast as possible because he wasn't patient. Kissing her again, he led her backward toward the living room where his sofa bed had become his permanent bedroom. He never bothered to put it away anymore. Neither of them could wait long enough to fold out the bed each time they wanted to use it.

Her hands busily worked open his trousers, shoving them down. Once he sat on the edge of the bed, she discarded the rest of his clothes, stripped her sweater over her head, her jeans off, and climbed on top of him. Magic hands cradled her sensitive flesh.

"I love your breasts," he whispered raggedly against her cheek.

"I think I do too." She'd barely noticed them before--before Jensen had made them beautiful and necessary and so incredibly responsive. Before Jensen, the world had been a place devoid of pleasure, empty with the agony of being...*Yeah, the agony of being in love.*

Their coupling was frantic, hindered only by his arm in the sling. She'd learned how to give and get pleasure without hurting him. She slipped to his side and propped up on one elbow to look at him; their fingers played without the same previous level of urgency over well-explored flesh.

"Move in with me," he murmured harshly when their breathing slowed.

"Okay."

He chuckled as he looked at her heavy-lidded eyes and drawled, "Okay?"

"Just as soon as Dad is healed."

"That's a month or more. I want you here. I wanna wake up with you every morning and go to bed with you every night."

"You do wake up with me and go to bed with me--sooner or later anyway." He groaned as she stroked him but wouldn't be distracted so easily.

"Here, where you're always in reach."

Here, where his dead wife still lived. Jen's stuff remained in her closet upstairs and all over the bedroom she and Warren lived and loved in. He'd closed off the entire second floor after she died, as if enshrining the past.

Amber looked down at him. "I can't leave my dad alone, baby. He can barely go to the bathroom by himself right now."

"We can go there every day. Call him. Check on him. Make sure he's all right." The fingers of his good hand reached up and traced the line of her neck, her shoulder, lower...

"I thought we decided not to tell anyone about us."

Her reminder gave him obvious pause. Did he regret that decision? Things were so new between them, she acknowledged that it wasn't the right time to make their relationship public. They weren't ready to make a commitment to one another, but, geez Louise, she was so far around the bend with this guy...

*If we tell everybody and then something goes wrong...when it goes wrong. Nothing ever lasts for me.*

He sighed, drawing all five fingers of his left hand over the sharp jut of her hipbone. It was an awkward caress for him, lying on his back to protect his right arm from injury, reaching over to touch her where she lay beside him on his left.

She shifted her head an inch closer to his. "Do you remember the first time we made love?"

"Christmas eve. Morning. In that chair. You were wearin' that kitten-soft white sweater, and you pulled it over your head...I stopped breathing. Never forget it, honey. Got a feelin' I'll remember it 'til the day I die."

The words "I love you" came to her throat, fiercely demanding, the way they had that first time and every few minutes since. If she couldn't say them, she'd show him.

Life had taught her that a person could never prepare for the big stuff like love and loss. Those things always came straight out of nowhere. Only once they appeared could you deal with them.

She didn't have a clue what she was doing with this big stuff she felt, but she vowed, if nothing else, to cherish what they shared until the day she died.

\* \* \* \*

Warren followed Amber into the older duplex. She lived in a nice, geriatric neighborhood of Falcon's Bend. The living room was the first room immediately upon entering the apartment. Her father Zeke sat in the chair that he'd come to favor in the few weeks since he'd been paroled, the one nearest the front door. He'd been sentenced to thirty years for

robbing a bank, but made parole at the end of last year. Amber knew the fact that she was a cop, and had vouched for him at his hearing, made a difference to the board--the difference that'd gained him parole after fifteen years of rejecting his application.

Her two-year-old golden retriever rushed to greet her, and she bent to give him some love. "Need a milk bone, Sammy old boy?" she muttered, rubbing his ears until he all but became gel on the floor at her feet.

"There you are," Zeke said, his gaze leaving the football game on the TV screen to take them in. He'd obviously just gotten off work at the local hardware store where his best friend Micky was his boss. He still had his coat on. Just getting in the door with his broken leg took most of his strength, usually, so he waited a while to tackle the next endeavor.

The nature of his expression as he looked at the two of them left Amber feeling completely exposed. He knew something, though she hoped he'd respect their unwillingness to talk about it.

"Micky's picking me up and we're going to Brews 'n Blues for dinner," he continued. "You're both welcome to join us."

"Will you be okay?" she asked automatically, her hand still caressing her dog's silky head.

She glanced at Jensen and knew their excitement at the prospect of being alone together was mutual.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I'm sure you could use a break from your old man."

Amber couldn't help noticing that he'd gone from inviting them to uninviting them. The look she'd given Jensen had no doubt been the cause. She mumbled something about having a good time.

A car horn came from outside. "That's Micky," Zeke said, reaching for his crutches. He managed pretty well on his own, but Jensen moved with her dog deeper into the small living room to give him space. At the front door, Amber helped her father into his winter hat, meeting his denim-blue eyes for an awkward second as he said, "Enjoy yourselves."

She closed the door after him, then strode to the picture window overlooking the street to make sure he made it down the steps and sidewalk to the driveway where Micky was parked. His friend had emerged to help him into the passenger seat.

Predictably, Jensen came up in back of her. "This is our lucky day," he murmured into her hair. "Let's go to my house. I'll make dinner."

His good hand slipped beneath her waistband. She sighed contently. "Can't refuse that. Let me check on Mrs. Frederick first."

Her neighbor in the duplex was an elderly woman who got out only infrequently. Amber had been checking on her at least once a day since Amber had moved in, running errands when she needed it.

"I'll take Sam for a walk," Jensen agreed, she knew, just to speed things up.

"He can come with us to your house. He's got a thing for Goldie." Goldie was one of Warren's three golden retrievers, and the only female.

"Don't blame her. Rusty and King are too old to see to her needs. Kinda like you and me."

Amber laughed. "We're only ten years apart, and you've got my needs well in hand, baby."

She could hear his grin when he asked, "Do I?"

She turned in his arms. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed."

They shared a long kiss that made her say, "I'll hurry." She went out ahead of him and Sam and let herself into Mrs. Frederick's apartment. As she entered, Amber called to her hard-of-hearing neighbor, "It's me, Mrs. Frederick--Amber."

At seventy-one with a variety of health issues, the woman should have been in a nursing home or living with a relative long ago, but her stubborn refusal had kept her where she felt most comfortable. She accepted help from very few, and Amber counted herself honored to be among those trusted.

She found her neighbor in the kitchen, her wheelchair next to the cupboard where her old-fashioned phone hung. In an instant, Amber saw the usually smiling woman in tears.

"What is it?" she demanded in concern, kneeling before her chair.

"Oh Amber, it's my granddaughter."

Erin Daughtry, Amber remembered. Mrs. Frederick talked about her daughter Heather and granddaughter often.

"A friend of mine just heard on the police scanner. Poor Erin has been murdered! I just can't believe it!" Fresh sobs erupted.

After a moment in which Amber tried to console her while finding out more information, the older lady said brokenly, "It has to be one of those terrible men Erin always gets hooked up with. She's been with the same one steady for the past year, which isn't usual, but my Heather tells me he's no good. Erin just can't seem to find a nice man like your Warren."

Amber had met Erin the few times she'd visited her grandmother with her mother, as well as at the bar where Erin worked the times she and Jensen had gone there after a shift. Erin was the type of woman who dressed a little sleazy and could be aptly described as an oxymoron: street-smart understanding of the way things were, yet no brains when it came to men. She let them walk all over her, loved them far too desperately, and took them back even when they didn't deserve forgiveness. After being treated like crap by one too many of them, she'd become experienced, but not nearly hard enough to prevent it from happening over and over again.

"So Heather found her?"

Mrs. Frederick nodded. "She called the police from Erin's apartment."

"Look, I'll see what I can find out. I'll do whatever I can."

The older woman patted her cheek gratefully. "What would I do without you, honey?"