

The cat on the stainless steel examining table gave out with a ferocious meow and raked its claws across Annie's arm.

"Gosh, Dr. Flynn, I'm sorry. Miss Kitty's usually such a sweetheart."

"That's all right, Mr. Wilkins. It's an occupational hazard. I've been scratched, bitten, stepped on and pecked. She's just frightened, but I'm almost finished." She administered the injection to the fierce protests of the cat. "That should keep Miss Kitty rabies free for another year what with all the roaming she does."

"Thanks. Doc Saunders used to open up for me at night when I needed him. It's hard getting here during the day. Lucky for me I caught you in tonight."

"You can come in any time," Annie said. "If I'm not here, you'll find me at home just down the road. I'm not exactly overrun with clients."

"They'll come," he said reassuringly. "Once they get used to you. You being from out of town and all. It's like that in a small town."

At the sink, Annie ran her arm under a stream of cool water. "I know all about small towns."

"But we all heard you were from New York City."

"I worked there for the last few years," she said as she dried her arm with a paper towel.

"But I grew up in a small town like this." *Several, as a matter of fact*, she thought grimly. "I'm sure the good people of Mohawk Falls have also heard that I've been married five times, I killed my last husband with an ax, and I practice witchcraft by the light of the full moon."

The old man chuckled. "Yup. That's small-town folk, all right."

"I'll tell you what," Annie said as she escorted him and his disagreeable cat to the front door. "You bring Miss Kitty back without an appointment any time. I'd be happy to—"

The screech of brakes outside silenced the rest of Annie's words. Her first thought was of Jimmy, but in the next instant, a man stormed in carrying a big dog in his arms, demanding, "Where's Doc Saunders?"

The old man held back, not knowing whether to go or stay.

"You can leave, Mr. Wilkins," she assured him. "I'll take care of this. Goodnight."

When he left, Annie turned to the stranger, and said, "He retired. I'm Dr. Flynn. I've taken over the practice. Can I help you?"

She assessed him with the same rapid instinct with which she sized up medical emergencies. He was a tall man, a good six feet in sneakers. The sleeves of his white t-shirt spanned well-developed biceps that bulged when pressed against the dog in his arms. His hands were strong, with finely shaped fingers. His dark hair curled at his neck. One reckless lock sliced across his forehead.

From the lines etched into the skin around his eyes, Annie guessed him to be in his late fifties. He might not have been the most handsome man she'd ever seen, but he was certainly one of the most chilling. It was because of his eyes, she decided, silver-gray and nearly as bright and hard and cold as the stainless steel examining table. Fleeting, she wondered what put the coldness into such beautiful eyes.

"You're a veterinarian?" he questioned.

Annie bristled at the gruff, disbelieving tone. "I am. Of course, if you have doubts as to my capabilities, the nearest vet is in Kingston, and that's what, a twenty-mile drive? Your dog looks like he could use some help right now."

His expression softened somewhat, rendering those eyes more beautiful than Annie thought it possible for a man's eyes to be. "I only meant that you look too young." A soft pink rose to his cheeks and his eyes darted beneath a sweep of dark lashes to be caught with his guard down.

Then his edge hardened, and he said impatiently, "So? Can I put him down now?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I assure you, I'm old enough," she said dryly. She pointed to the platform scale. "I'll have to weigh him first."

She noticed the gentleness with which he handled the dog as he placed him on the scale. The gesture ran contrary to his overall rough appearance with his dark, unruly hair and the stubble spiking his chin. If it weren't for his gentleness, which she suspected he wasn't even aware of, and the scent of soap clinging sweetly to his skin, she might have been afraid of him.

She looked at the digital readout on the scale. "Ninety-two pounds. What's his name?"

"Cisco," he answered.

Annie scratched the dog's big, furry head. "You're a big boy, aren't you, Cisco? And I'll bet you have big teeth, too."

She went to the counter and withdrew a blue nylon muzzle from the drawer.

Nick took a menacing step forward. "That won't be necessary."

"Maybe not. But I'm not about to find out the hard way."

His hand shot out and clamped over her wrist as she approached Cisco with the muzzle. "I'm telling you, he won't bite."

Annie looked at the strong fingers encircling her wrist. He could have snapped her bone in two with the strength simmering in his touch. Yet his grip, although forceful, didn't hurt.

The heat emanating from him made Annie's flesh feel as if it were on fire. Twisting her arm away, she looked into his determined gray eyes and said challengingly, "How do you know he won't bite? And don't tell me it's because you know your dog. That's what people usually say just before their dog sinks its teeth into you."

For several moments, their gazes locked until Nick tore his away. Placing his hands on either side of the dog's head, he looked strongly into those golden eyes without speaking. After a spell, he gave a little nod of his head, as if there were some secret agreement between him and his dog, and turning back to Annie, he said simply and confidently, "He won't bite."

"Oh? And I suppose he just told you that through some form of telepathy?"

"As a matter of fact, he did."

Annie wasn't convinced, but something about what she had just witnessed made her wonder. That the dog's eyes softened with understanding was likely, for dogs had the ability to express emotion with their eyes. But had this dog conveyed more than emotion, as its arrogant owner claimed? There was only one way to find out. Tossing the muzzle on the counter, she said, "All right big boy, let's see what's what."

With a press of a button, the scale moved upwards and became an examining table. Gingerly, she lifted the paw. "There it is. A puncture."

Nick leaned forward to get a better look. As he did, his face came within inches of hers. His warm breath fanned her cheek when he said, "It looks pretty bad."

"He must have stepped on something. A nail, or a stick, or something." His proximity made her nervous. She straightened up and moved away. "I'll clean it up and insert a shunt to drain the infection. I'll have to sedate him for the procedure." She expected a protest, but when none was forthcoming, she said, "I'll get everything ready inside."

When she disappeared into the other room, Nick took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. "Would a little growl have been too much to ask for?" he complained to the dog. "Just to let her know she can't mess with us? Let me guess, you like her. Well, forget it. We don't need any complications, especially one like the pretty doctor."

But pretty wasn't exactly the word to describe her. Other women were more beautiful, with

bodies that were fuller than the slender frame beneath the jeans and cotton shirt she wore, and hair that cascaded seductively to the shoulders instead of caught up in a ponytail. She possessed a dangerous kind of beauty that went beyond the chestnut hair and eyes as dark as semi-sweet chocolate, to how she tried to hide the flush on her cheeks when he bent over to look at Cisco's paw, and the delightful scratch in her voice when she stood up to his gruffness. Her beauty didn't hit a man squarely between the eyes, but would sneak up on him real subtle-like when he least expected it and leave him feeling uncertain.

Inwardly, Nick groaned. Here he was, with his hormones in overdrive, a normal masculine reaction to an attractive woman, he told himself. But he'd seen beautiful women before without feeling as if he couldn't breathe. Why did this brown-eyed woman produce an unwelcome response in him?

He looked again at Cisco and could have sworn the dog smiled at him. "Don't get any ideas," he said to the dog. "She's the last thing I need in my life. In fact, after tonight, we'll just forget the pretty doctor ever happened."