
Chapter 1

She was hunched over in the middle of the road trying to make herself as tiny as possible, completely unaware of the fact that she was soaked entirely through by the cold, steady rain as she hugged her knees. Anyone who cared to could see how she was trembling, shaking fit to come apart, yet no one approached her—they all stood around, looking at her as if she was some kind of alien. As if getting close to her might make them vulnerable, and they all knew how.

When he pulled up, finally—after having been called away from saying an awkward goodbye to his latest and most unsatisfying one night stand to date, which caused him to go so far as to delete Tinder from his phone—she was the first thing he saw.

Not his friends and fellow cops who surrounded her.

Not the EMTs and the ambulance.

Not even the murder scene, which was supposedly why he was there, after all, although it looked as if it had already been mostly processed.

The sight of her in such distress was like a kick to his solar plexus—all of the air went out of his lungs at once, and all he could think of was protecting her.

He knew he had a reputation for being a bit of a softie in one situation, and one situation alone—hurt children.

It had even gotten to the point where he kept a bag of cheap stuffed animals on the passenger's seat of his car, and seeing a crying child's face when he presented them with one was one of the few things that made his life worth living.

That, and catching the bad guys.

Lots of the others had adopted his idea—from regular cops to the chief of police. The toy store in town went so far as to donate the stuffies. It was one of the few things he'd ever done of which he was particularly proud.

Gregory "Bull" Keenan slammed his car into park, exiting his vehicle almost before it had come to a full stop, ignoring calls from his coworkers and even the chief as he expediently and efficiently ducked all those who sought to step in front of him, like the running back he'd been in high school, until he was standing, alone, about five feet from the miserably shivering, huddled mass.

"Has any one of you useless cretins tried to talk to her?"

It was the chief who answered. Besides him, he was the closest person to her physically, as if he'd wanted to attempt to help her, but couldn't quite do it.

"Donna did—she screamed bloody murder as soon as she got within ten feet of her. Same thing for Hobbs, even though they've gotten kinda chummy."

All of those usually competent officers and detectives who had been uselessly hanging around just gaping at her were now watching him with much more interest as he approached her slowly, hunching down himself, so as not to tower over her—not that he had much of a choice. She was so tiny—barely cracking five feet and probably less than a hundred pounds—that no matter how he contorted or folded himself, he was always going to be an ungraceful, hulking lump in comparison to her.

Unconsciously using the same tone as he did when he was approaching a traumatized child, he spoke softly as he moved slowly towards her. "Lark? It's me. Bull." He sighed impatiently,

then took a deep breath, his eyes glued to her form. "Greg." Then adding, as an afterthought, "Keenan."

She hadn't acknowledged his presence in the least, and he wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. But at least she wasn't screaming. Yet, anyway.

If she was going to haul off and caterwaul at anyone, it would—it should, he acknowledged baldly—be him.

He knew O'Leary had called him about the murder, not her, but the compulsion to help her was more powerful and overwhelming than anything he'd ever felt before, and he could *not* ignore it.

Still, he advanced carefully, talking to her in a low, hopefully comforting tone, until he was close enough to touch her. "Lark, can you hear me? You don't have to answer me verbally—just nod your head."

How he was going to distinguish that movement from the way that she was shuddering, he wasn't sure until she did it—hesitantly, but distinctly.

"Are you hurt physically? Do you need a doctor?" he asked, knowing there were EMTs standing by.

A small shake.

"That's a good girl." The words slipped out of his mouth automatically, and they seemed to affect a change in her. Unfortunately, not a good one, as far as he was concerned.

She began to sob—mournfully, inconsolably—and Bull found himself at just as much of a loss as most men did when a female was crying.

But he wasn't about to give up, regardless of the fact that the sound she was emitting was making it hard for him to breathe; his chest was so tight.

Keeping his voice calm and low, he sidled further up to her, inches at a time, in case she panicked. "You don't have to do a thing, honey, but I'm going to put my arm around you because I-I just have to," he rambled, saying whatever came into his head. "I can't bear to hear you so sad and see you so

all alone like this. I know I can't be your favorite person, but—"

That was as far as he got in his confessional, because as soon as his arm curled around her, she practically flung herself at him, glomming onto him as if he was the only safe, solid thing in her world.

He held her to him, wrapping his strong arms around her as she literally clawed her way closer to him, as if she was trying to get under his clothes, to get that much closer to him.

It was one of the few times he cursed himself for not wearing a coat. He was a big guy and rain and snow and cold didn't bother him much—heat, yes. Cold, no. But she was tiny, and should, by all rights, have been wearing a nice warm raincoat, galoshes and a hat, preferably.

The errant thought flitted through his mind that whoever her significant other was, he or she wasn't doing a very good job of taking care of her, and if she was his, she'd be in big trouble if he caught her without them on a night like this, but he let that disturbing idea fly by him without much consideration.

For several minutes, he simply held her to him, surrounding her with his big body as much as he could, since that seemed to be what she wanted and it was definitely what was best for her, trying to keep her out of the rain as much as possible and transferring his considerable body heat. All of his women—those who actually stayed the night, anyway— always complained that he was a veritable furnace. This was the first time he was going to put it to the test.

In the vein of wanting her to know what he might do, so as not to give her anything more to be frightened about, he was going to say, "How about I pick you up and take you to someplace warm?" but then he realized that he didn't want to give her that choice.

It was less than forty degrees out, and she was soaked to the skin, and he didn't want her to get pneumonia.

So, he told her what he was going to do, instead. "Lark, I'm

going to pick you up now and carry you to my car. You still don't have to say anything or do anything unless you want to. I'll keep everyone away. When I get you in the car, I'll do the seatbelt routine for you—you just relax—then I'll get in and crank up the heat to help you get warm, and I'll take you away from here. The chief will want to talk to you as soon as you've recovered, but I'll put him off until you do." Hell, he wanted to talk to her himself, forget the chief, but he wasn't about to say that to her. "I'll take you—"

Where? To her place? He had no idea where she was staying and didn't really want to know that information anyway. Did he?

"I'll take you to my place." Bull was amazed to hear himself say those words, but there they were. And somehow, to his amazement, they felt right—as did the slight weight of her as he gathered her to him and straightened with her in his arms, as if he wasn't carrying a thing.

Everyone surrounded them then, of course, and he felt Lark frantically trying to hide her face against his chest.

"All right, everyone, back the fuck off. I'm going to get her warm and take her to my place where she'll be safe. I'll phone the chief as soon as I know anything more."

With that stunning bit of news, they parted around him like the Red Sea for Moses; even the chief stood aside as he carried her to his car, his partner holding the door open for him as he nudged the bag of stuffies aside and tucked her into the passenger's seat, clicking the seatbelt into place as he'd said he would, then closing the door.

"You're really going to take her to your house?" Randall O'Leary, who had been his partner and was his best—his only—real friend for more than fifteen years, asked incredulously.

"Yes. I'm going to take her home, dry her off, warm her up, and hopefully, get her to sleep."

Bull didn't much appreciate Randall's sly chuckle. "And here we all were thinking you didn't like her."

Opening the driver's door, Bull glared at his friend, stating

flatly, "I don't. You know I think all of that stuff is horseshit. But she didn't scream at me. She let me help her. Seems only right to continue to help her any way I can." It was as much of an explanation of his behavior as he was going to give anyone, and the only reason he voiced it at all was because it was Randall.

But the other man was not going to be put off, punching the bigger man playfully in the arm as he got into the car. "You dog, you!"

Bull scoffed loudly. "Please. Am I going to take advantage of a crazy woman who's gone even further off her rocker than she usually is? I don't think so."

With that, he peeled out of there in reverse, and everyone in the department knew him well enough to get the hell out of his way.

When he'd pulled into the driveway of the only house he'd ever lived in—the one he'd grown up in and inherited from his parents when they died—he came around to unlatch the seatbelt and pick her up again, noting that one of the stuffies had fallen out of the bag when he'd moved it to put her in, and she had a yellow stuffed rabbit in a death grip, refusing to let go of it when he tried to take it away from her.

So, he stopped trying to. What the fuck did he care if she carried a stuffed toy around or not? It was no skin off his nose, one way or the other. Just another flavor of her particular crazy.

He also noted, with no small sense of satisfaction, that she wasn't shaking any more. The fact that he was sweating like a pig because he'd kept the heat blasting all the way here was a small price to pay to get her to stop trembling in abject fear, he guessed.

Getting into the house was tricky with her in his arms, but he did it. He didn't put her down until they were standing in his surprisingly spacious master bathroom. It had been his mother's

walk in closet at one point, but, since he really just owned uniforms, jeans, t-shirts and the occasional sport coat, he hardly needed one. It had been money very well spent.

There was a big tub with jets that he loved to get into occasionally—and not always alone—to soak away the aches and pains that came with being a somewhat more than middle aged cop who'd fucked up his knee on more than one occasion and had a shoulder tear he'd never found the time to address.

The large shower stall was what he used the most, though, with its multiple jets and almost scalding hot water—it was sometimes hard for him to leave it in the morning, it felt so good.

It wasn't easy for him to extricate himself from her; she was like a little barnacle that wasn't much willing to be scraped off. But once he did, he turned the shower on to relatively hot, got out some thick, fluffy towels, and made a mental note to grab a clean t-shirt and one of his bathrobes to give her to wear, leaving the towels on the counter in the middle of the dual sink commode.

"Here you go. You should strip down and hand your clothes out to me, then feel free to lock the door behind you. I'll wash and dry them, and you'll feel much better after a hot shower."

Now that he wasn't letting her cling to him anymore, she just stood there, still clutching the rabbit, instead, head down, not meeting his eyes, not saying anything, and not moving.

It was both heartbreaking and a little bit eerie.

Bull made his way to the door, hesitating a bit, but there was no way he was going to stay in here with her while she showered. So, he slipped through the door, saying, "You'll probably want to get under the hot water. It'll feel really good and it'll warm you up quickly. There's a switch here that turns on warming lights for when you come out, so you won't get chilled again."

Nothing. No response whatsoever.

"You just undress and throw your clothes out. I'll wash them for you. You'll feel so much better in a few minutes, I promise."

He was repeating himself, but there was only just so much he could say.

Closing the door behind him felt uncomfortable, for reasons he didn't want to consider any too closely, and although he did retrieve a shirt and robe for her, he felt he had to immediately come back and stand by the door like an idiot.

As soon as he did, he noticed that there were no wet clothes in the hallway.

"Lark?"

Nothing.

"Lark, are you okay? You have to answer me, honey."

He could hear that the shower was still running, but couldn't tell if she was in it with her clothes on, or what. He felt like a damned idiot standing outside the bathroom for so long, trying to get her to say or do something, but eventually, he tried the doorknob.

It was open.

Taking a deep breath, and knowing intellectually that this couldn't be a good idea, he told her, "I'm going to come in, Lark, in a minute, just to make sure that you're okay. If you're not decent, cover yourself with a towel, please. I'm going to count down from twenty, then I'm going to come in."

Seconds later, the count was at, "Five...four...three...two...one. I'm coming in."

Great clouds of steam rushed past him as he saw her. She was hunched down again, right where he'd left her, crumpled in on herself pitifully, two long yellow ears peeping over her shoulder at him.

After taking a deep breath and closing the door behind him, he crouched next to her. "Can't do it yourself?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I wasn't blowing sunshine up your ass—sorry." He recalibrated. "I meant it when I said that a shower'll really help you get warm and feel better. I've spent a lot of time standing out in the rain myself for one reason or another. I'll absolutely understand

—no hard feelings whatsoever if you say no. But would you like me to help you? I promise I'll be the gentleman my momma always hoped I'd be."

It took her a few long seconds, but then she nodded her head.

"Well, then, let me help you stand up, Miss Jeffries." He offered his hand, putting it down where she could see it, feeling her much smaller one fitting itself into his palm like a tiny, frightened bird.

She unfolded herself slowly, and he was struck, in that moment, at just how small and delicate she was, especially standing there, dirty and soaked to the bone, her clothes clinging to her slender frame. The riot of blonde curls he'd noticed—against his will—when he'd first met her were hanging in dark, lank ropes. Her skin was the kind of translucent pale that is usually only present in babies, and as far as he could see, it was damned near flawless, the lack of color making those stark, black fringed blue eyes pop even more in her heart shaped face.

But it was her mouth that his eyes settled on greedily, full but pale red from the cold.

He'd never wanted to kiss a woman as much as he wanted to kiss her at this moment, and he knew he couldn't and shouldn't, but it was damned hard to resist the urge, anyway.

So, he kept himself occupied, hoping and praying that she wouldn't notice the erection he couldn't seem to talk down, although he thought he was probably pretty safe there. She wasn't really aware of much at the moment.

Although he kept up a running patter of what he was doing, adding "okay?" after every statement, and if she'd balked in any way at anything he did, he would have stopped immediately—he began to undress her as matter of factly as he could, keeping his eyes on her face except when necessity dictated something else, like the buttons of her shirt.

Gently guiding her fingers to them, he asked, "Are you okay to undo these for me, honey?"

She got the first one, but she couldn't seem to manage the others. He wasn't surprised—her hands were still like ice.

Something in him shifted gears at that moment, and he decided that, since she seemed to have trusted him more than anyone else, so far, and hadn't fussed at anything he'd done except when he'd tried to take the stuffie away from her, he was just going to do for her what he knew needed to be done, at least as applied to small stuff, like getting her out of her clothes—well, most of them, anyway—and into the shower.

So, he went about doing so as perfunctorily as possible, keeping up a light—if one sided—conversation as he did so. "You don't look like a lark at all, you know. They're mostly kind of shades of brown and none of them have curls."

He told her about his dad's love of birds—from which he'd garnered the otherwise non-sequitur information about larks—which his mom had teased him about, and his mom's atrocious cooking, which his dad had teased her about, quipping that it was a good thing that his father cooked well or he would have ended up being five-foot-two instead of six-four.

It had been okay for him to do this until now, when she was standing in front of him in just her panties and her bra. Bull swallowed hard, struggling to keep his eyes on her face as he hadn't before. The rabbit helped, though. In clutching it so fervently to her, not letting go of it once while he was undressing her, she seemed much younger than she was, somehow, which made him feel even guiltier about his body's very adult response to her.

His voice was huskier than he wanted it to be. "Why don't you just hop into the shower that way? If you want to take...take them off, I'd be glad to throw them in with your other clothes, but it's up to you, hon."

He opened the door to the shower stall, offering her his hand. "Come now, babygirl. Let's get you warmed up."

Her eyes flitted to his for the first time since he'd arrived on the scene, and there was such wide-open innocence and trusting

there that he found the problem pulsing behind his zipper subsided a bit.

"How about if I keep Wabbit with me, hmm? So he doesn't get cold and wet?" She resisted him taking it from her for a second, but he stepped just slightly closer to her, saying warmly but firmly, "He's completely safe here with me, I promise, just like you are. I'll put him right on the towels, where he can stay dry and warm, and you can have him again just as soon as you come out."

When she let go, he murmured, "Good girl," and she whimpered slightly, her eyes locked with his until he forced himself to close the door behind them. "There's soap and shampoo in there—I'm afraid they're both just store brand, but you're welcome to use them."

It was in his mind to give her a choice about whether or not he stayed in the room, but he quickly decided against it, although he did turn his back politely.

For a long time, he knew she was just standing there—hadn't moved a muscle since he'd put her in.

But after about ten minutes or so of that lovely hot, steamy water pounding down on her, he turned—wondering if he was going to *have* to join her—and saw her move behind the frosted shower doors. Seconds later, her very wet bra and panties were dropped unceremoniously onto his head.

He rescued them and put them on the pile of mud soaked clothes he'd make a load of shortly, but he didn't think he should leave her to start it. He couldn't bring himself to leave her, he admitted quietly to himself, refusing to dwell on that strange fact, either.

Eventually, the water was turned off. He hung the towels over the top of the stall and she took them, after a moment. It seemed she was no longer as helpless as she had been.

"Would you like me to leave?"

She came out from behind him, wrapped in a towel. Apparently not.

Bull leaned over and turned on the heat lamps, clearing his throat with a nervousness he hadn't had around a half-dressed woman since he was a teenager.

"Well. I'll go throw in that load and brew you up something warm."

If he never heard that whimper again, it would be too soon. It caused his heart to contract so painfully in his chest every time that he couldn't draw a breath.

Instead, he stayed, trying to be as gentlemanly as he could to her, thinking about how—if she was his, God forbid—how he'd want someone to treat her. He turned around, telling her to dry herself off with the towel, then offering her his t-shirt, which he knew she was going to drown in.

But she didn't take it.

When he peeped behind him, she was facing away from him, shoulders bent, obviously crying and distractingly nude.

Jesus Christ. He wasn't made of marble, although his cock had been up and down so often in the past hour and a half or so, it didn't know whether it was coming or...not coming.

Rather than try to comfort her, as everything in him screamed to do, he turned himself towards her, announcing, "My eyes are firmly closed, and my late mother is very proud of me, I'm sure. Why don't we see if I can get you into my shirt, hmmm?" There was no way he was going to trust himself to dry her off.

He turned her towards him, gathering the shirt into his hands around the neck hole and holding it out.

Still sniffing, she tugged his arms down quite a way and slipped her head into it.

"Oh, sorry. Forgot to account for the fact that you're little, little one."

He felt her stiffen slightly at that, but he didn't know why, so he continued, gathering first one arm, then the next for her to poke through.

"Decent?" he asked, not really expecting an answer, since she didn't seem capable of speaking.

Her tiny "yes" caught him by surprise and was nearly as much of a gut punch as her whimpers had been.

The sight of her wasn't, though. As far as his genitals were concerned, she might as well have been standing there naked, even though she looked ridiculously young, as if she was a little girl wearing her father's shirt. The neck opening was so big it kept slipping off one shoulder; the arms ended three quarters of the way down hers, and the hem was nearly below her knees. She looked *annoyingly* adorable.

He bundled her into his robe but had grabbed one that was full length, and once he put it on her, there was nothing of her left in it.

"Stay here," he warned, grabbing a shorter one from his bedroom that was only slightly less gigantic on her, but at least she wouldn't be tripping on it with every step.

With her in much warmer clothing than she had been, he took up the dry towel and applied it to her hair. Wet, with the curls pulled out, the ends touched her shoulders, but he knew that, when it was dry, they would form a crown of curls that would always make him wonder if they were soft and clingy, like she was now, or hard and stiff, as was his previous impression of her. That was something he wasn't ever likely to know.

When it was drier, he put his own brush through it, careful not to hurt her as it pulled through the inevitable tangles.

"Well, I'll turn the gas fire on in the living room, while we wait for your clothes to be done, and make us both something warm to sip on," he said more gruffly than he intended, turning on his heel to head for the kitchen because his libido was giving him hell again, and if he didn't get out of there in that moment, he was going to have to kiss her.

And he wanted to do more—much, much more, but he knew he couldn't even do that.

He yelled back to her, "Coffee or tea or—Jesus Christ, woman!"

She cringed when he cursed at her, but she'd surprised him. He'd always prided himself on being able to tell when someone was coming up on him—hell, the innate ability had saved his sorry ass on more than one occasion— but she was standing right behind him as he was filling the Keurig with water, and when he turned, if he had taken a step, it would have been onto her.

"Sorry."

She was caved in on herself again, shoulders humped over, chin on her chest, although she was still upright, so that was some kind of advance, he supposed, although she looked as if he'd taken a whip to her.

All traces of anger evaporated, he murmured firmly, "Stop. You just surprised me, that's all. I didn't hear you come up, and it's something of a coup for you to have snuck up on me. The guys all think I have some kind of sixth sense about that—I can always hear them clomping up behind me."

There was no way he could ignore the strong urge to pull her into his arms, although he did so very slowly and carefully, giving her every chance to get away, but she didn't seem to want to, turning into his embrace quite fervently, rather than away from it.

He held her there, saying multiplication tables in his head as he wondered why his shampoo smelled such a damn sight better for her than it did for him, adoring the soft, slight feel of her in his arms. She didn't put hers around him, but let him do all of the holding, not that he minded, as long as she continued to snuggle up against him like this.

They couldn't stay like this, though, much as he would have liked to, so he kissed the top of her head—which he was glad to see wasn't very damp at all anymore—and repeated the question she'd interrupted. "Coffee? Tea?"

She peeped up at him, asking hopefully, "Cocoa?"

He frowned. "Hmm. I've not had many requests for that, but I probably have some somewhere."

"S'okay. Coffee."

He let her go to rifle through his cupboards. "Ah-ha! I knew I had some somewhere." Bull waved the box of Swiss Miss triumphantly, feeling inordinately pleased with having found it for her.

Within minutes, they were in his warm, cozy living room. Lark was sitting as close to him as she could get without being on his lap, on the end of the beat-up couch, having arranged almost all of her limbs beneath her in that way women had, and he was in his favorite chair.

He couldn't keep his eyes off of her. She looked as if she was desperately trying not to look lost and sad and forlorn, but she was failing miserably. His arms ached to reach over and pull her onto his lap, but now that she was somewhat less broken, he was loath to do anything that might upset her.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

She shuddered visibly at that, the terrified look that had faded from her face returning a bit around the edges. She took a sip of her cocoa, answering in that thin, tiny voice of hers, "No, please," as if he was going to force her, when that was the last thing on his mind.

But then, considering the behavior he knew she had come to expect from him, he supposed he deserved that. And yet, here she was, with him. Apparently, he was the only person she would allow to get close to her when she was in a very bad state.

What was that about? His head hurt just thinking of it, but it wasn't his head that was most on his mind.

Luckily, the buzzer for the dryer went off, and he headed down the hall to the laundry room, which was another of his renovations. It was located on the other side of the en suite, taking up a bit of room in one of the almost unused guest bedrooms. But it was located where he'd always thought was the

most practical for a laundry facility—with the bedrooms, where all of the crap that was going to be put into it lived.

Again, when he turned around with a terribly small armload of her warm clothes, she was right there.

This time, she wrapped her arms around his waist and put her head on his chest as the clothes slid to the floor. It wasn't much by way of invitation, but it was all he could stand.

Before he'd even kissed her for the first time, he swung her up into his arms for the third time in less than two hours and carried her into his bedroom where he put her down at the end of his bed.

Carding big fingers into the soft tangle of curls that did, he noticed with not a small amount of delight, cling back at him, he laid his palms on either side of her face, tilting her head up gently so that he could see her eyes. "I want you, little girl," he growled softly, noting absently that the rabbit had been left on the couch.

On tiptoes, Lark placed her lips as close to his as she could get, whispering just one potent word, "Please?"