

CHAPTER 1

Deanne heard the first knock and the second, ignored them both.

Julius Zern! Oh, my God, I'm ignoring Julius Zern.

For a dog.

She glanced down at the canine. "Come on, Samba baby, you can do it. It's the last one, I promise."

The weary dog gave her a disbelieving look and rightfully so. She'd used the it's-the-last-one promise two puppies ago—and now there were four. She stared in awe at the slicked and gooey quartet on the whelping bed, totally in thrall, even while wondering how she'd gone from petless to midwife in two short weeks.

I am so-o out of my depth here.

Another knock on the door.

Another puppy slid out of Samba—this one tricolored—and like the good mother she was, Samba immediately started the clean up, giving Deanne a necessary break from the puppy action.

She stroked Samba's head, whispered something inane about what a great job she was doing and stood. Shoving her hair back from her face, smoothing down the front of her rumpled shirt and wishing she wasn't wearing skinny jeans, she hustled her butt to the front door, to greet one of Seattle's most influential art collectors.

Opening the door wide, she blinded him with a smile in the vain hope he'd miss seeing the denim. "Mr. Zern."

“Deanne Moore.”

As she'd expected, he didn't recognize her. He also didn't return her smile. What he did was x-ray her from her disheveled hair to her—

Oh, my God, the slippers.

Ignoring the heat inching up her neck on prickly feet, she said, “Come in, please. I'm sorry I kept you waiting. My dog is—” *Damn.* This meeting was about selling art, not dogs. Clancy's next month's rent, and her new start in Seattle, depended on her making this meeting work.

Zern gave her a quizzical look, waited calmly for her to finish whatever it was she was going to say—which she'd totally forgotten. His gaze, so fixed on hers, set her stomach on butterfly mode. It'd been a long time since that happened. Particularly with a man like this one.

A chilly man, she registered, with a stern mouth and an unwavering gaze from sharp, say-nothing eyes, their color exactly as she remembered, somewhere between gray and green. His color choices of shades of gray, topped by a black leather jacket, gave him a steely look. Big, tall and ultra cool. The phrase *lean, mean, fighting machine* came to mind, as did...*unpretty*. Severely masculine. Remote. Imposing...intimidating. Not what she'd expected. Or remembered.

“Your dog?” he prompted, his tone bass low and surprisingly mild—as if he were speaking to a verbally challenged three-year-old.

“Yes...” She still hadn't found that other direction she was looking for, Memory Lane not being an option. When in doubt, spit it out. It had taken her the better part of a year to learn that simple concept. So the dog excuse it was. “She's, uh, having...puppies.”

“Maybe I should come back another time.”

If she let Zern get away, Clancy would kill her—if she didn't kill herself first. “No. No. Everything's under control.” *Hah!* He took another couple of steps deeper into the room. If his step echoed on the freshly polished hardwood, she didn't hear it, but she did catch the light scent of something like orange and sandalwood when he stepped past her.

Again they faced each other, but this time Deanne gathered up her stray brain cells and took control. “I know I'm looking a little...disorganized at the moment, but believe me, Mr. Zern—”

“Julius.”

She nodded. She was glad for his correction, because given what she knew of him, the Mister thing felt seriously strange. “Believe me, Julius, when you see Clancy West's work, you'll forget my dog's bad timing, and me...wearing jeans and slippers.” She smiled—as if she were in her right mind.

“I hope so.”

Ignoring his ambiguous answer, Deanne gestured to the stark white wall, where three paintings hung in symmetry. “There they are,” she said, not above stating the obvious. She'd spent all last night and the wee hours of the morning getting ready—cleaning, painting the walls and finally hanging Clancy's remarkable work exactly right. Other than the art, an ivory leather love seat, a tall lamp and an ebony lacquered coffee table, there was nothing in the room, making it appear larger than it was and settling the focus squarely on Clancy's work.

Julius Zern shifted his attention from her to the paintings.

Her stomach knotted, and she drew in some silent breaths. Waited. *How very different he was from...then.*

But then so are you, Deanne Moore. Thank God. Walking the few steps to the paintings, he leaned forward as if to study the brushwork. Deanne fisted and flexed her hands, determined not to break the silence and stay focused, despite her fuzzed brain from lack of sleep and her concern for Samba's plight in the kitchen.

Turning back to face her, Julius looked surprised and—yes! Impressed. “They’re brilliant. I’d like to—”

Another knock on the door. *This couldn't be happening.* “Excuse me.” Biting back an unbusiness-like curse, she headed for the door.

Don Summers, her vet, strode in before she got there. “Morning. Sorry, I’m late. Emergency surgery. An Airedale. In terrible shape—cuts like Samba’s.” He shook his head. “Third time this month some creep has done a number on a dog. Her owners found him roadside. Damn sick son of a—Sorry.”

“Will it be okay?” Deanne had been a dog owner for less than three weeks, but after having Samba, remembering how she’d looked that first day, cowering on her doorstep, her fur matted, the blood... She felt sick all over again.

“He’ll be fine as soon as the cuts heal. Bastard slashed the—But let’s get to Samba. Where is she?” He looked harried, as usual—as though he’d been blown backward in a wind tunnel.

“In the laundry room, off the kitchen,” Deanne said, her mind still stuck on the image of the abused dog.

Forcing another smile, she looked up at Julius. *God, he was tall.* Six-three, at least. “As you’ve probably guessed—this is my vet. Do you mind? It’ll only take a minute.” She was thankful Clancy wasn’t here to witness this fiasco—although knowing him he’d have gleefully

added to it.

Zern looked at her, then the vet. "I'll be fine."

"Thanks."

Julius watched the woman and the vet disappear into the kitchen, his gaze sliding to Deanne Moore's backside a second before she moved out of sight. A damn fine backside—the kind jeans were created for. Stellar from the front, too. Long honey-colored hair, blue eyes—dark, a night-sky blue—and a smile to melt crystal. But judging by the dazed and confused expression on her face when she'd answered the door, he figured she was working way out of her league and making a major effort not to let it show.

Again Clancy West's paintings drew his attention. Regardless of the woman's sales experience or lack of it, she had a damn good eye. West's work was some of the best he'd seen in a long time. Pure genius. Urban street scenes, gritty and uncompromising—they were painted boldly in shades of gray ranging from pearl to granite; the only color on the canvases the clothes and faces of the people populating them. The minimal use of color brought the subjects alive and gave the work a stunning energy. *Brilliant.*

His cell phone vibrated in his jacket pocket, and being temporarily abandoned by the artist's stressed-out agent, he pulled it out and glanced at the call display. Guardian, Inc.

"Kit?" he said.

"Yeah. Didn't want to bug you, Jules, but that call you were expecting came through. I just hung up. She wants to know if it's a go, and if it is, for you to be there next Saturday—a.m. For three days."

Julius and his partner, Joe Worth, were personal security specialists, their clients mainly businesspeople traveling with their families, people determined to ensure safety for their loved ones in an unsafe world. A world Julius knew very well, from firsthand experience. The work wasn't something he had to do, but it was something he cared to do—perhaps was fated to do. Still, he wasn't keen on spending time in Paris looking out for the latest cover model featured in *Vogue*. But at sixteen she *was* still a kid... Being stalked, according to her worried mother. "Tell her yes. And load up on the particulars, will you?"

"Got most of them, and I booked a Friday late-afternoon flight—just in case. But I'll confirm the rest." Only nineteen, Kit was the resident brainiac and go-to guy at Guardian, Inc.

"Thanks—and, Kit?" He glanced at his watch.

"Uh-huh."

"Will you swing by the house and take Lily and Brutus for an extra long walk this morning? I'm going to be here awhile." Lily and Brutus were his two chocolate Labs, a brother and sister, and the only family he allowed himself. Anybody ever abused them—in the way Deanne's vet described—they'd be the ones needing emergency surgery. Point in the disorganized Deanne Moore's favor—she had a dog.

"Sure. See you."

Julius clicked off and stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

Moore's raised voice drifted in from the kitchen. "Oh, my God, when is she going to stop?" She sounded desperate. "Is she going to be okay?"

The vet mumbled something Julius couldn't hear.

He ambled toward the open doorway. Hell, he already knew he was going to buy the paintings, but if he had to wait for a whelping bitch before he did, he might as well take a look at her pups.