

## Epilogue

Five months later...

Matt felt like a bull in a china shop. A dirty bull, at that. He should have at least changed out of his work clothes before he walked through those glass doors, but he'd wanted to be early.

He glanced around. The guy in the suit at the far end of the room stared at him hard. Matt tugged the bill of his ball cap down further over his face and hunched into his coat, then realized that that probably just made him look even more criminal. Hell.

Deliberately, he turned to the acres of glass cases that surrounded him. Where to start? This area seemed to be chains and little dangly things. He moved on down. Watches. Looking around, he finally spotted a case of rings on the far side of the room.

As he passed the front door of the store, the bell attached to the handle rang as Monroe walked in, looking relaxed and happy in ragged jeans, t-shirt and jacket. Matt moved to shake his hand, relieved that his best buddy had actually shown. "I thought you'd forgotten."

Monroe grinned and slapped him on the back. "Nah, I just couldn't resist a few more minutes in bed. Gotta take it when I can get it, you know?"

Matt nodded, but he couldn't imagine being on call the way Monroe had to be. This year's fire season had been fierce and he hadn't been in town very much at all, even though it was almost winter. It seemed like as soon as one fire was battled down, his team was called to another.

Matt didn't know how Monroe did it, being on the run all the time.

The bell rang again and Gina's friend Madison came in the door, looking exactly as a person should in a place like this. Trendy and put together, her dark hair tossed by the wind. Much more so than the two of them standing in the middle of the floor.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Monroe straighten and he laughed softly to himself. Madison didn't put up with crap and Monroe was full of it. Could be interesting. "Anderson Monroe this is Madison Cleary, Gina's best friend. Madison, this is my buddy Monroe."

The two of them shook hands and exchanged smiles but Madison pulled her hand away quickly. For a split-second it looked like Monroe didn't want to let her go, but he did.

"Nice to meet you, Madison."

She tipped her head. "And you as well, Mr. Monroe."

“Nah, just Monroe.”

But she'd already turned toward Matt. “Have you looked yet?”

Matt shook his head and followed her as she went to the ring section. Of course she'd known exactly where it was.

Matt watched Monroe watch Madison from behind. She had exactly the look that appealed to his friend. Long, dark hair, pale eyes, trim shape. She was a nice woman though. He didn't want to jeopardize her friendship with Gina. “Monroe, I don't think she's your type,” he whispered.

Monroe didn't even spare him a glance. “Of course, she is. Every woman is my type.”

He moved forward to stand beside her at the glass case, but she shifted subtly away.

Matt shook his head. Sometimes his friend didn't see the obvious.

“Have you looked at any other stores yet, Matt?”

He shook his head as he stepped to Madison's opposite side. “Not very much. A couple of places. I thought you might be able to give me some insight.”

She nodded and peered into the cases. When the salesclerk came around she requested a couple of trays be pulled out.

They looked for several minutes but nothing appealed to him in the engagement section. Monroe pointed out big gems that would be too much for Gina. Madison's suggestions got closer to what she liked, but nothing just leapt out at him.

Until a shine of blue in the next section caught his attention.

When he leaned down to look more closely, he knew he'd found the one. The round sapphire was good sized but not too big. More importantly, it reminded Matt of Gina's eyes. “Let me see this one.” He stabbed a finger at the glass.

The manager stepped over and pulled the ring from the case for him. Matt felt awkward as he took the tiny thing in his hand. He'd never handled a piece of jewelry like this and he was afraid to drop it. “This is a sapphire, right?”

The manager smiled and nodded. “It is. A one-carat total weight natural round stone with another half carat of diamonds flanking it. The ring is fourteen karat white gold.”

Matt turned the ring and caught sight of the price tag. Wow. That was a lot of furniture money. But she was worth it. How could he not get it? It was the exact shade of her eyes.

Madison grinned at him and nodded her dark head. “That's perfect for her. She'll love it. She's a size six.”

He handed the ring back to the manager. "How soon can I get it sized?"

"Wait, you're buying it?" Monroe looked shocked.

Matt frowned at him. "Why did you think we came in here?"

His buddy shrugged and glanced away. "I just didn't think you were that close."

They settled the bill and the man disappeared into the back with the ring, promising to be out in a little while.

He turned to Madison. "Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it."

"It was my pleasure. When are you going to ask her?"

Matt swallowed heavily, fear crawling up his spine. "I have dinner reservations Friday. Maybe then."

She reached forward, gave him a quick hug and pulled away. "I'm sure you'll do fine. Gina will be overjoyed. She's nuts about you. You know that."

He nodded, though he didn't know anything of the kind.

It seemed like they got along great together, but it had only been six months. How did a person know they were with the one they were supposed to be with the rest of their lives? He loved Gina. He did know that. But would it be enough to last for the next fifty years?

Monroe snorted, leaning against the glass case. "I can't believe you're actually doing it. I can't believe you want to stay with the same woman for thirty or forty years."

The echo of the fears floating in his head made him pause.

"Nonsense," Madison admonished. "If you find the right person the years will be easy. Believe me."

A sad look crossed her face. Gina hadn't told him a lot about her friend, only that she was a jaded romantic at heart and a wonderful nurse.

Madison blinked and the sadness disappeared. "You guys have fun. I have to get to an appointment. Don't doubt what you feel Matt. Gina will love it."

She tossed Monroe a cool smile and sailed out of the store.

"Man, she's cute but that girl's trouble."

He glanced at his friend in surprise. "Why do you say that? I thought 'every woman was your type'?"

"Not that kind." He shuddered as he watched her walk across the street out front. "She's got 'commitment' written all over her. Dangerous."

“Just because you’re a commitment-phobe you’d pass her over? She could be really good for you and fun. But how would you know if you don’t go out with her?”

Monroe turned to stare at him and Matt realized how much he’d changed since he met Gina. Not too long ago, he’d been a commitment-phobe as well, but his tune had completely changed.

The manager came back with the ring, then, and handed it to Matt. It was so damn tiny. For curiosity’s sake he slipped it on his pinky, but it wedged after the first knuckle. He prayed Madison had been right about the size.

Monroe split when they left the store and Matt wondered if his friend had even heard his words. He’d seemed put out with him.

As Matt walked down the street to his truck, he wondered what kind of woman it would take to make Monroe fall as hard as he himself had.

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Gina glanced at the wall clock in frustration, chewing on a thumbnail. Matt was late. Dinner simmered on the stove ready to dish up as soon as he got home. Gabe had gone to a friend’s house after school and would call her in a couple of hours for a pick-up. She smiled at the thought of the look on his face when he saw what she’d gotten them.

She glanced at the corner of the room and was attacked with doubts yet again. Maybe they weren’t ready for something this big. Things had been going very smoothly in the household and she didn’t want to upset it unnecessarily.

Gabe had settled in as if he’d always been here, without even a whisper of concern for his incarcerated uncle. The boy’s injuries had healed quickly, but occasionally she still caught him glancing at the house next door as if he were afraid his uncle would come after him again. Chuck hadn’t been able to pay the rent while in jail so a new family had moved in. They seemed really nice and had a couple of younger kids Gabe could play with.

She grabbed the washcloth off the sink and wiped the counter down again, well aware she’d just done it.

Gravel crunched outside the house as Matt’s truck pulled into the driveway.

Gina was suddenly attacked by nerves. She shouldn’t have done it. Even though it had sounded like a good idea in her head, it probably wasn’t.

The front door opened and closed and she walked out to meet Matt in the hallway, running a hand over her hair in nervousness. When she saw his familiar shape, her anxiety eased a bit.

He grinned when he saw her. “Something smells good.” Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her lips.

Gina welcomed his touch, amazed yet again that she’d been the one to open his shell. When they were alone he reached out to her all the time. In public he was a little more reserved, but she’d learned to appreciate those touches all the more now.

She leaned into him, inhaling the laundry softener smell of his t-shirt and deodorant. He wrapped his massive arms around her, as she’d known he would. It had quickly become her favorite place in the world, wrapped in his embrace. She held him a little longer tonight to take courage.

He seemed to sense that something was wrong. “Are you okay?”

Gina felt him kiss the top of her head. Tears came to her eyes and her throat tightened with emotion. He knew without her even saying anything that something was wrong.

She pulled away, dashing the tears from her cheeks with her hands. “I’m fine. I just did something today that I hope you’ll be okay with.”

A frown darkened his eyes with concern. “Okay.” His arms fell to his sides.

Gina cursed herself inside. He thought something was really wrong.

“It’s nothing major. I mean, it is, but not big, big. Hell.” She turned back to the kitchen. “Wait here.”

She quickly crossed to the corner of the room to retrieve the item.

Matt’s mouth fell open in shock when she walked down the hallway to him. He didn’t say anything for several long seconds. Gina began to panic as the drowsy puppy woke and started to wiggle in her arms.

“I made the mistake of stopping at the animal shelter today and he looked at me like I was there just for him. I’ve been thinking, well, Gabe would probably love to have a puppy. And then I thought a little more and I wondered if you had ever had a puppy when you were growing up?”

Matt shook his head.

Gina ruffled the fur on the puppy’s neck and tried not to let Matt see how sad that made her.

“Every child needs a pet growing up. I’m sorry you didn’t have that. But I want to make it up to you now.”

He looked up at her, surprised. “This is for me?”

She nodded her head and stepped forward, close enough to transfer the squirming animal to his arms. Matt didn't seem to know what to do with him, but his big hands wrapped around the pup, holding him securely. The dog immediately began licking up one side of his neck and chin. The attendants at the shelter were unsure of the animal's lineage, but assumed because of the buff colored coat and his bulky size that he was part Labrador Retriever. Only a few months old, he was the last of a litter that had been dropped off.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about it. I mean, we're still settling in and all and getting used to each other. But I wanted to do something for you that would mean something."

She crossed her arms over her stomach when he still didn't say anything, afraid that she'd gone too far. "We can take him back if it's too much."

Matt flashed her a look. "No."

Wow. That was pretty definitive.

The dog managed to turn in his arms and plant a paw on each shoulder as he administered the tongue-lashing. Gina thought Matt was getting frustrated trying to get away until he chuckled and set the pup to the ground, then sat down on the floor beside him. The dog thought this was great and bounced around in excitement, going from corner to corner of the entryway, then circling back to gnaw on Matt's big hands.

A broad smile split Matt's face. She started to relax.

The pup found the hammer loop on the side of his jeans and attacked it with a vengeance, tossing his head and trying to rip it off. Laughing, Matt leaned back against the doorjamb and just watched.

Finally, he lifted his gaze to hers. "You know, I always wanted a dog when I was a kid, you were right about that. But Rick hated dogs. It just never seemed like the right time to get one. And I remember thinking it wouldn't have been fair to the dog."

Gina cringed, wishing she could go back and change how he'd grown up. But then, it was a catch-22. If she had, he wouldn't be the man he was now.

"But I think now is the right time. I mean, I'm here all the time now. I think I've kept my house just to have an out in case things didn't work, which I've half expected because this is still so new. I never expected to need you as much as I do, and want to spend time with you the way I do."

Tears filled her eyes at the heartfelt words. She felt exactly the same way. “I love you,” she whispered.

He nodded his head. “I know that. And believe it. Nobody else would have ever done something like this for me.” He stared at her hard for several long seconds before levering himself up onto his knees in front of her, completely ignoring the puppy. He swiped his hat off his head and dropped it to the floor.

Gina’s heart began to thud as he moved closer. She started to lean in to meet him for the kiss, but he held up a hand to stop her.

“Just a minute.” He slipped his hand into his hip pocket and pulled out a little black velvet box.

Gina felt her eyes widen. She covered her mouth to contain a gasp.

“Now, I had planned to do this Friday when we went out to dinner.” He paused to clear his throat. “But I can’t imagine a time more perfect than right now.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks and over her fingers, which were still covering her mouth.

Matt rested his hand on top of the box and Gina was humbled to see it tremble.

“Gina Carruthers, I know I’m probably not what you ever expected to end up with, but you are more than I ever could have imagined. I’m so damn in love with you it hurts. I can’t imagine not being with you. I promise to love you as well as I know how.”

The tears flowed even faster, but there was nothing she could do about it. Her heart was bursting with love.

When he lifted the lid she completely broke down. A ring with a blue sapphire stone in the center sat nestled inside. He pulled the ring from the box, dwarfing it in his massive hands.

“Would you do me the absolute honor of being my wife?”

Nodding, crying, she waited long enough for him to slip the ring onto her shaking finger before surging into his arms. She held him as tight as she could, overwhelmed with emotion. “I love you more than I can ever tell you. Of course I’ll marry you.”

They knelt there in the hallway wrapped in each other’s arms and were content.

With another kiss, Matt pulled back. “If you don’t like the ring, we can take it back. I only picked it because it was the same color as your eyes.”

Gina shook her head. “No. I love it. How could I not?”

Matt smiled and swung her into his arms, then pushed to his feet. “I thought you would. I want to see you stretched out on the bed only wearing that ring. How long do we have before Gabe calls?”

Excitement slammed through her at the thought of consummating their engagement. “Not for at least an hour. But we need to put the puppy away first.”

Matt looked down for the puppy, but the little dog was nowhere to be seen. Their romantic escape turned into a game of hide and seek as they looked for the puppy. And Matt’s favorite hat. But it was okay, because they were together.