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Opening Extract from...

I Can See You

Written by Karen Rose

Published by Headline

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By Karen Rose

Don't Tell
Have You Seen Her?
I'm Watching You
Nothing to Fear
You Can't Hide
Count to Ten
Die For Me
Scream For Me
Kill For Me
I Can See You
Silent Scream

KAREN
ROSE

I CAN SEE
YOU

headline

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a division of Hachette Book Group, USA, Inc., New York, USA.
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First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in Great Britain in paperback in 2010 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 7097 9 (B-format)
ISBN 978 0 7553 4655 4 (A-format)

Typeset in Palatino by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Dear Readers,

I introduce a new group of law enforcement officers in I CAN SEE YOU – the homicide detectives of Minneapolis and their 'Hat Squad.'

In reality, the Hat Squad is a group of homicide detectives in Atlanta, Georgia. I was intrigued by the concept and the tradition started by Lieutenant Danny Agan, Atlanta PD, retired. The homicide detectives of Atlanta are presented with a classic felt fedora soon after solving their first homicide – a gift from the other more experienced detectives. They wear their hats on the job, the fabric and styles changing with the seasons. In the words of Danny Agan, 'You dress the part, you dress like a detective, you get better results. It commands respect: Who's showing up to take charge of this mess?'

When I started this book, I wanted to pay tribute to the Hat Squad. The Minneapolis Hat Squad is a product of my imagination, but based on real detectives who strive to get justice for victims every day.

Hope you enjoy meeting this new group!

All my best,
Karen Rose

Prologue

Minneapolis, Saturday, February 13, 9:10 P.M.

She was shy. Nervous. Mousy. Midforties and dowdy, even though she'd obviously dressed for the occasion in an ugly brown suit. She shouldn't have bothered.

Martha Brisbane was just as he'd expected. He'd been watching her from across the crowded coffee shop for close to an hour now. Every time the door opened, she'd straighten, her eyes growing bright if a man entered. But the man would always sit elsewhere, ignoring her, and each time, her eyes grew a little less bright. Still she waited, watching the door. After an hour, the anticipation in her eyes had become desperation. He wondered how much longer her bottom-of-the-barrel self-esteem would keep her waiting. Hoping.

He'd found bursting their bubbles simply added to his fun.

Finally she glanced at her watch with a sigh and began to gather her purse and coat. One hour, six minutes, and forty-two seconds. Not bad. Not bad at all.

The barista behind the counter aimed her a sympathetic look from behind his horn-rimmed glasses. 'It's snowing outside. Maybe he got tied up.'

Martha shook her head, defeat in the gesture. 'I'm sure that's it.'

The barista flashed an earnest smile. 'You be careful driving home.'

'I will.'

It was his cue to exit, stage left. He slipped out of the side door in time to see Martha Brisbane huddled against the wind as she made her way to her beat-up old Ford Escort, mincing her steps in the two-inch heels that looked as if they pinched her fat feet. She managed to get to her car before the waterworks began, but once started, Martha didn't stop crying, not when she pulled out of her parking place, not when she got on the highway. It was a wonder she didn't run off the road and kill herself.

Drive carefully, Martha. I need you to arrive home in one piece.

By the time she parked in front of her apartment, her tears had ceased and she was sniffing, her face red and puffy and chapped from the wind. She stumbled up the stairs to her apartment building, grappling with the heavy bags of cat food and litter she'd purchased at the pet store before arriving at the coffee shop.

There was a security camera in the building's lobby, but it was broken. He'd made sure of that days ago. He swept up the stairs and opened the door for her.

'Your hands are full. Can I help you?'

She shook her head, but managed a teary smile. 'No, I'm fine. But thank you.'

He smiled back. 'The pleasure is mine.' Which would soon be very true.

Wearily she trudged up three flights of stairs to her

apartment, teetering on the two-inch heels as she balanced the heavy bags. She wasn't paying attention. She didn't know he stood behind her, waiting for her to put the key in her lock.

She set the bags down, fumbled for her key. *For God's sake, woman. I don't have all night. Hurry up.* Finally she opened her door, picked up the bags, and pushed the door open with her shoulder.

Now. He leapt forward, clamping his hand over her mouth and twisting her around into the apartment with a fluid motion. She struggled, swinging her heavy bags as he closed her door and leaned back against it, dragging her against him. A pistol against her temple had her struggles magically ceasing.

'Hold still, Martha,' he murmured, 'and I just might let you live.' As if that was going to happen. *Not.* 'Now put down the bags.'

Her bags dropped to the floor.

'Better,' he murmured. She was shaking in terror, just the way he liked it.

Her words, muffled against his hand, sounded like a terrified 'Please, please.' That's what his victims always said. He liked a polite victim.

He looked around with a sneer. Her apartment was a disgusting mess, books and magazines stacked everywhere. The surface of her desk was obscured by the cups of coagulated coffee, Post-it notes, and newspapers that she'd packed around her state-of-the-art computer.

Her clothes were pure nineties, but her computer was brand new. It figured. Nothing but the best for her forays into fantasyland.

He pressed the gun to her temple harder and felt her

flinch against him. 'I'm going to move my hand. If you scream, I will kill you.'

Sometimes they screamed. Always he killed them.

He slid his hand from her mouth to her throat. 'Don't hurt me,' she whimpered. 'Please. I'll give you my valuables. Take what you want.'

'Oh, I will,' he said quietly. 'Desiree.'

She stiffened. 'How did you know that?'

'Because I know everything about you, Martha. What you really do for a living. What you love. And what you fear the very most.' Still pressing the gun to her temple, he reached into his coat pocket for the syringe. 'I see all. I know all. Up to and including the moment you will die. Which would be tonight.'

Chapter One

Minneapolis, Sunday, February 21, 6:35 P.M.

Homicide detective Noah Webster stared up into the wide, lifeless eyes of Martha Brisbane with a sigh that hung in the freezing air, just as she did. Within him was deep sadness, cold rage, and an awful dread that had his heart plodding hard in his chest.

It should have been an unremarkable crime scene. Martha Brisbane had hung herself in the conventional way. She'd looped a rope over a hook in her bedroom ceiling and tied a very traditional noose. She'd climbed up on an upholstered stool, which she'd then kicked aside. The only thing remotely untraditional was the bedroom window she'd left open and the thermostats she'd turned off. The Minnesota winter had served to preserve her body well. Establishing time of death would be a bitch.

Like many hangers, she was dressed for the occasion, makeup applied with a heavy hand. Her red dress plunged daringly, the skirt frozen around her dangling legs. She'd worn her sexiest five-inch red stilettos, which now lay on the carpet at her feet. One red shoe had fallen on its side while the other stood upright, the heel stuck into the carpet.

It should have been an unremarkable crime scene.

But it wasn't. And as he stared up into the victim's empty eyes, a chill that had nothing to do with the near-zero temps in Martha Brisbane's bedroom went sliding down his spine. They were supposed to believe she'd hung herself. They were supposed to chalk it up to one more depressed, middle-aged single woman. They were supposed to close the case and walk away, without a second thought.

At least that's what the one who'd hung her here had intended. And why not? That's exactly what had happened before.

'The neighbor found her,' the first responding officer said. 'CSU is on the way. So are the ME techs. Do you need anything else?'

Anything else to close it quickly, was the implication. Noah forced his eyes from the body to look at the officer. 'The window, Officer Pratt. Was it open when you got here?'

Pratt frowned slightly. 'Yes. Nobody touched anything.'

'The neighbor who called it in,' Noah pressed. 'She didn't open the window?'

'She didn't enter the apartment. She tried knocking on the door but the victim didn't answer, so she went around back, planning to bang on the window. She thought the victim would be asleep since she works nights. Instead, she saw this. Why?'

Because I've seen this scene before, he thought, déjà vu squeezing his chest so hard he could barely breathe. The body, the stool, the open window. Her dress and shoes, one standing up, one lying on its side. *And her eyes.*

Noah hadn't been able to forget the last victim's eyes, lids glued open, cruelly forced to remain wide and empty. This was going to be very bad. Very bad indeed.

'See if you can find the building manager,' he said. 'I'll wait for CSU and the ME.'

Officer Pratt gave him a sharp look. 'And Detective GQ?'

Noah winced. That Jack Phelps wasn't here yet was not, unfortunately, unusual. His partner had been distracted recently. Which was the polite way of saying he'd dropped the ball more than a few times.

'Detective Phelps is on his way,' he said, with more confidence than he felt.

Pratt grunted as he left in search of the manager and Noah felt a twinge of sympathy for Jack. Officers who'd never met Jack disrespected him. *Thanks to that magazine.* A recent article on the homicide squad had portrayed them as supermen. But Jack had borne the brunt, his face adorning the damn cover.

But Jack's rep as a party-loving lightweight started long before the magazine hit the stands three weeks before and it was a shame. Focused, Jack Phelps was a good cop. Noah knew his partner had a quick mind, seeing connections others passed over.

Noah looked up into Martha Brisbane's empty eyes. They were going to need all the quick minds they could get.

His cell buzzed. *Jack.* But it was his cousin Brock, from whose dinner table Noah had been called. Brock and his wife, Trina, were cops, they'd taken it in stride. In a family of cops, it was a rare Sunday dinner when one of them wasn't called away.

'I'm tied up,' Noah answered, bypassing greeting.

'So is your partner,' Brock responded. Brock had been headed to Sal's Bar to watch the game. Which meant that Jack was at Sal's, too. *Damn him.*

'I've called him *twice*,' Noah gritted. Both calls had gone to Jack's voicemail.

'He's having drinks with his newest blonde. You want me to talk to him?'

Noah looked up at Martha Brisbane's lifeless eyes and his anger bubbled tightly. It wasn't the first time Jack had blown off his duty, but by God, it would be his last. 'No. I'm going to get the first responder back in here and come down there myself.'

Sunday, February 21, 6:55 P.M.

'Come on, Eve, it's just a little magazine quiz.'

Eve Wilson glanced across the bar at her friend with an exasperated shake of her head before returning her eyes to the beer tap. 'I get enough quizzes at school.'

'But this one is fun,' Callie insisted, 'unlike that psycho research project that has you tied up in knots. Don't worry. You always get the best grade in class. Just one question.'

If only it was the grade. A few months ago, getting A's was at the top of Eve's mind. A few months ago the participants in her thesis research had been nameless, faceless numbers on a page. The mug filled, she replaced it with the next. The bar was busy tonight. She'd hoped to numb her mind with work, but the worry was always there.

Because a few months ago Eve never would have entertained the possibility of breaking university rules, of compromising her own ethics. But she'd done both of those things. Because now the test subjects were more than numbers on a page. Desiree and Gwenivere and the others were real people, in serious trouble.

Desiree had been missing for more than a week. *I should do something. But what?* She wasn't supposed to know that Desiree existed, much less that she was Martha Brisbane in real life. Test subjects were assured their privacy.

But Eve did know, because she'd broken the rules. *And I'll have to pay for that.*

Across the bar, Callie cleared her throat dramatically, taking Eve's silence for assent. 'Question one. Have you ever gone on a romantic dinner to—'

'I'm busy,' Eve interrupted. For the next few hours there was nothing she could do about Martha and her other test subjects, but Callie's quiz was not welcome respite. *Do you believe in love at first sight, my ass. I hate those quizzes.* Which, of course, was the reason Callie insisted on reading them. 'Look, Cal, I took your shift so you could party.'

Callie shrugged the shoulders her cocktail dress left bare. 'Nice try. I had somebody to cover for me. You should be studying, but you're here, procrastinating.'

It was fair. Grasping three mug handles in each fist, Eve clenched her teeth against the pain that speared through her right hand. But until last year that hand couldn't hold a coffee cup, so a little pain seemed a small price to pay for mobility. And independence.

She lifted the mugs into the waiting hands of one of her

most regular regulars, quirking the responsive side of her mouth in the three-cornered smile that, after years of practice, appeared normal. 'Normal' was right up there with mobility and independence.

'You've been buying all night, Jeff,' she said, surreptitiously flexing her fingers, 'and haven't had a drop yourself.' Which was so not normal. 'You lose a bet?'

Officer Jeff Betz was a big guy with a sweet grin. 'Don't tell my wife. She'll kill me.'

Eve nodded sagely. 'Bartenders never tell. It's part of the oath.'

He met her eyes, gratitude in his. 'I know,' he said, then turned to Callie. 'Hot date?'

'You betcha.' Callie nodded, comfortable with the scrutiny she'd received since gliding into Sal's on ridiculously high heels. Her tiny dress would earn her significantly better tips were she to wear it next time she tended bar. Not that she needed any help.

Clerking for the county prosecutor was Callie's primary means of putting herself through law school, but she'd recently started picking up extra cash working at Sal's on weekends, her tip jar consistently filled to the brim. That dress combined with Callie's substantial cleavage would send her cup running over, so to speak.

Hopefully Callie's dress wouldn't give their boss any ideas, Eve thought darkly. *Because there's no way in hell I'm wearing anything like that, tips or no.*

So to speak. Eve squashed the envy. Never pompous, Callie was a beautiful woman comfortable in her own skin, something that Eve had not been in a long time.

Eve made her voice light. 'Her date's taking her to Chez León.'

Jeff whistled. 'Spendy.' Then he frowned. 'Do we know this guy?'

The 'we' was understood – it included every cop that hung at Sal's. Eighty percent of Sal's customers were police, which made the bar one of the safest places in town. An ex-cop, Sal was one of their own, and by extension so was everyone on Sal's payroll. It was like having a hundred big brothers. Which was pretty nice, Eve thought.

'I don't think so,' Callie demurred. Her date was a defense attorney, which earned him poor opinion among their cops. Callie agreed, which was precisely why she'd accepted the date. Callie's constant challenge of her own worldview was something Eve had always admired. 'But he's late, so I'm trying to get Eve to take this little quiz.'

'Is that that *MSP* rag with Jack Phelps on the cover?' Jeff asked, his lip curled.

MSP was the women's magazine that juggled Minneapolis-St Paul gossip, culture, and local concerns. Their recent exposé on the homicide squad had made instant, if temporary, celebrities of Sal's regulars. It was a decent piece, although it did make their cops into white knights, a fact that had embarrassed the hell out of the detectives.

Jeff gave Eve a pitying look. 'My wife made me take that damn quiz.'

Eve's lips twitched. 'Did you pass?'

'Of course. A man can't stay happily married without knowing how to BS his way through one of those things.' With a parting wink, he carried the beer back to his

waiting friends, all off-duty cops who made Sal's their home away from home.

Callie rolled her eyes when Jeff was gone. 'If he spent half the time he's here with his wife, he wouldn't have had to BS his way through this "damn quiz",' she muttered.

'Don't judge,' Eve murmured, dumping two shots of gin over ice. 'Jeff's wife works second shift at the hospital. When he's on days, he hangs here, then takes her home.'

Callie frowned. 'What about their kids? Who's watching them?'

'No kids.' But not from lack of trying, Jeff had confided one night when the bar was empty and he'd had a little too much to drink. The stress had nearly torn his marriage apart. Eve understood his pain far more than Jeff had realized. Far more than she'd ever let anyone see. Even Callie. 'I guess his house is kind of quiet.'

Callie sighed. 'What else should I know so I don't put my foot in my mouth again?'

Eve tried to think of something she could share without breaking a confidence. She wouldn't tell Callie about the cop at Jeff's table who was worried his wife was leaving him, or the policewoman at the end of the bar, just diagnosed with breast cancer.

So many secrets, Eve thought. Listening, keeping their secrets, was a way she could help them while she worked on her master's in counseling. If she ever made it through her damn thesis she'd be a therapist, trading one listening career for another.

But I'll miss this place. She'd miss Sal and his wife, Josie, who'd given her a chance to work, to support herself in the new life she'd started in Minneapolis. She'd miss Jeff

and all the regulars, who'd become more like friends than customers.

Some she'd miss more than others, she admitted. The one she'd miss most never came in on Sundays, but that didn't stop her eyes from straying to the door every time the bell jingled. Watching Noah Webster come through the door still caught her breath, every time. Tall, dark. Powerful. *Look, but don't touch.* Not anymore. Probably not ever again.

She looked up to find Callie watching her carefully. Eve pointed to a couple who'd confided nothing, but whose behavior screamed volumes. 'They're having an affair.'

Callie glanced over her shoulder. 'How do you know?'

'Hunch. They never socialize, are always checking their cells, but never answer. She twists her wedding ring and when the guy comes to the bar for their wine, he's twitchy. So they're either having an affair or planning a bank heist.' Callie chuckled and Eve's lips quirked. 'I suspect the former. They think nobody notices them.'

Callie shook her head. 'Why do people always think they're invisible?'

'They don't see anyone but each other. They assume nobody sees them either.'

Callie pointed to a young man who sat at a table alone, his expression grim. 'Him?'

'Tony Falcone.' Tony had shared his experience in the open, so Eve felt no guilt in repeating it. 'He caught his first suicide victim last week. Shook him up.'

'From the looks of him, he still is,' Callie said softly. 'Poor kid.'

'He couldn't forget the woman's eyes. She'd glued them open, then hung herself.'

Callie flinched. 'God. How do any of these cops sleep at night?'

'They learn to deal.' She met Callie's eyes. 'Just like you did.'

'Like we did,' Callie said quietly. 'You a lot more so than me.'

Yes, I dealt. But how well? Surgery could fix hands and minimize scars, but in the end one still had to *be*. It was easier here, surrounded by others who saw the darkness in the world. But when the noise was gone and the memories echoed in her mind . . .

Uneasy, Eve mixed another drink. 'We all do what we have to do. Some have addictions, some have hobbies. Some come here.' She shrugged. 'Hell, I come here.'

'To forget about life for a while,' Callie murmured, then shook off her mood. 'I'll take those out for you. It's the least I can do since I've left you with the whole bar tonight.'

Eve arched her right brow, one of the few facial features that still obeyed her command. 'It's going to Detective Phelps and his bimbo *du jour*.' Who were necking at a table next to the TV wall where everyone would see them. Eve didn't have to wonder if the choice was deliberate. Jack Phelps liked everyone to know when he'd scored.

Phelps should take a lesson from his way-too-serious partner. Eve stifled her sigh. Or perhaps Noah Webster should borrow just a smidge of Jack's cheek. Jack hit on her every time he came to the bar, but in the year he'd been coming to Sal's, Webster had never said more than 'please' and 'thank you' when she served his tonic water.

He came in on Mondays with Phelps, who'd order a

gin and tonic for them both. Phelps always got the gin, Webster always the tonic. Then Phelps would flirt with the women and Webster would nurse his water, green eyes alert, but unreadable.

For a while she'd thought he'd come to watch her, but after weeks had gone by she'd given up on any such notion. Not that she'd reciprocate any move he made, so the question was moot. Although her mind still stubbornly wandered, imagining what she'd say if Noah ever uttered the lines that fell so meaninglessly from Jack's lips.

Of course, fantasy and reality were very different things. This fact Eve knew well.

'We have to be fair here, Eve,' Callie said dryly. 'Katie's more than a bimbo *du jour*. She's been with Phelps for three whole weeks. That could be a record for him.'

Katie had come in with the other groupies after the MSP article had hit the stands and Jack had reeled her in like a walleye. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, Katie would be gone soon and Jack would move to his next conquest. 'So she's more the flavor of the month. You gonna take these drinks or not?'

'Not on your life. Katie doesn't like me much. You're on your own, pal.'

'I thought so. I have to talk to Phelps anyway. That magazine you found is Sal's copy. He wants Phelps to sign the cover so he can add it to the Hat wall.'

Sal had covered one wall of his bar with TVs, but the others were covered in photos, most taken by Sal, all of cops. One wall he'd dedicated to his favorites – the homicide detectives known as the Hat Squad for the classic fedoras they wore. The wall had, in fact, inspired

the *MSP* article. One day one of their staff writers had wandered in to Sal's and been instantly charmed. To the public, the hats were an unofficial uniform, but to the detectives who proudly wore them, the hats were a badge of honor. Every member of the squad owned at least one fedora.

When a newly promoted detective solved his first case, he was presented with a fedora by his or her peers. It was tradition. Eve liked that. As years passed and more murders were solved, the detectives supplemented their own hat collections according to their personal style and the season – felt in the winter, sometimes straw in the summer.

Eve had never seen Noah Webster wear anything but black felt. It suited him.

'I was wondering why Sal moved the picture frames around,' Callie said, pointing to the large, new bare spot on the wall. 'But not even Phelps's head is that big.'

Eve chuckled. 'Sal's done a collage. He got all the detectives whose pictures were in the article to sign the page from the magazine. Phelps's cover is supposed to be at the center.' She sobered. 'But Phelps won't sign it, even though Sal all but begged him.'

Callie's brows shot up in surprise. 'Why? Jack's not going for humble now, is he?'

Eve studied Jack, who was discreetly checking his cell phone for the third time in a half hour. He returned the unanswered phone to his pocket, and his lips to Katie's pouting mouth. 'Who knows why men like Jack Phelps do the things they do?'

A bitter frown creased Callie's brow. 'Because they can. Poor Sal.'

‘I promised him I’d ask Phelps one more time.’

Callie closed the magazine and Jack’s face stared up from the cover. He was a dead ringer for Paul Newman, down to his baby blues. And, Eve thought, he knew it. ‘You’re going to pander to that ego?’ Callie huffed. ‘You hate Jack as much as I do.’

Eve smiled. ‘But I love Sal. He’s given me so much and this means a lot to him. He found some old photos of himself wearing his hat before his accident.’ Before he’d been forced to give up the career that had been his life. ‘He wanted to do a Hat Squad photo exposé of his own. For Sal, I can pander to Phelps’s ego for a few minutes.’

Callie’s frown eased. ‘You have a good soul, Eve.’

Embarrassed, Eve put the drinks on a tray. ‘Watch the bar for me.’ But she hadn’t taken a step when the door opened, jingling the bell and letting in a gust of frigid air. Her eyes shot to the door before she reminded herself that it was Sunday.

She started to turn back to the bar, then stopped. Because Sunday or no, there he was. Noah Webster. Filling the doorway like a photo in a frame.

Suddenly, as always, all the oxygen was sucked from the room. He paused in the doorway and Eve couldn’t tear her eyes away. Dressed in black from his fedora to his shiny shoes, he looked, as always, as if he’d stepped straight from an old *film noir*. There was something edgy, almost thuggish in the way he carried himself, a coiled danger Eve didn’t want to find attractive. As if she’d ever had a choice.

He was linebacker big, his shoulders nearly touching the sides of the door, so tall the top of his hat brushed the doorframe most men cleared with ease. Heavy stubble

darkened his jaw and her fingers itched to touch. *Look, but don't touch.* The mantra was ingrained.

He closed the door and Eve dragged in a ragged breath. Normally she was prepared before he came through the door, defenses ready. Today he'd taken her by surprise.

'I'd say that's a yes,' Callie said softly.

'Yes, what?' Eve asked, her gaze hungrily following Noah, who was striding across the bar toward Jack's table. He was angry. She could feel it from where she stood.

Apparently Jack did, too. Eve watched the briefest shiver of alarm pass through Jack's eyes, followed by sly calculation, then wide-eyed surprise. He frowned at his cell phone and Eve remembered seeing him check it, three times. *SOB.* His partner needed him and here he'd sat, showing off his sexual prowess with his bimbo *du jour*.

'Yes to number six,' Callie murmured. 'Do you believe in love at first sight?'

Eve jerked her eyes to Callie and saw she'd flipped the magazine open to that damn quiz again. 'Will you cut it out? The answer is no. N-O.'

'Lust then. Can't say that I blame you. He's a lot more potent in person, all burly and broody.' She turned to the article and the picture of Webster. 'Doesn't do him justice.'

Eve refused to look. It didn't matter. She'd seen that picture hundreds of times. At home. In private. That Callie had seen her reaction to Noah's entrance *in public* was bad enough. But who else had seen? And worse, pitied her adolescent fascination with a man who'd never said more than please or thank you?