



GRAY'S ANATOMY

By

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Chapter One

“Okay, take off your pants.”

Gray Kennebeck gazed hard at the woman standing behind a long card table. The cramped room backstage in the Scope Coliseum in Norfolk, Virginia sweltered in an unbearable summer heat. Sweat rolled down his face, but he wasn't about to wipe it away in front of this shark.

It was bad enough he'd been herded through the arena without so much as a 'Thank you for bailing us out by filling in for our regular company doctor.' Of course, they didn't have to know he needed the job.

“Are you shy?” the woman asked, peering over the wire-rimmed eyeglasses perched at the end of her nose. She looked too young to sport *Little House on the Prairie* schoolmarm specs.

“No,” Gray replied. “Never been asked to do this on a job interview.” Even in this professional wrestling atmosphere, this was considered odd. Why would a doctor's body be subject to inspection? Was the work that brutal? He shivered.

“What? Did you want a song and dance?” she asked.

“Your name would be nice.”

The woman, with a succulent honey color to her skin tone, stepped around the table littered with papers and an opened laptop, and exhaled in obvious exasperation.

“Come on, man. I don't have all night. I was told you were good, and a professional.” She folded her arms.

He poked his chin out. “Trust me. I am. I don't see why I need to drop my pants.” He put his hands on his hips.

The stance must have seemed defiant to this towering but lean woman, who immediately planted her hands on her hips.

“I do it to all the guys I use. Don't get sensitive about it.” She tucked her long, curly black hair behind her ears. “I need to see what your body looks like.”

Use? So now he was some stud-for-hire? He furrowed his eyebrows and took a step back. The screams from the crowd in the coliseum permeated through the walls at that moment. The scene was surreal. Part 'Jerry Springer', with the cheers providing the soundtrack for this bizarre scenario, and part bad porno, where all he would need would be the overgrown '70's moustache and the electric guitar-laden music to pipe into the small room.

This woman had on no makeup, and from the way she kept pushing her hair away from her face, she probably would have been happier to have it tied back. She wore jeans, and her sneakers looked like they had been dragged down many a dirt road. The name of her company, UEW, Ultimate Extreme Wrestling, vandalized the front of her white t-shirt in flaming red letters across her chest with the 'U' and the 'W' poked out to the side in a particularly beautiful, rounded fashion.

Not a company he thought he would be working for when he graduated from medical school fifteen years ago. As the saying goes, work was work and, as his best friend/attorney had said, right now appearances meant everything.

“If you're not going to drop your pants and show me what you look like, then what are you doing here?” This time she took a tentative step back.

Realizing she mistook him as a big, hulking grappler, Gray's head swelled. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. Relief waved over him as he relaxed his shoulders.

"I'm the doctor," he said.

Now she furrowed her eyebrows. "The Doctor?" She turned to the table and retrieved a piece of paper. "I thought your stage name was The Annihilator."

He opened his mouth to clear up the misunderstanding then stopped. He hadn't had a good laugh in a while. Might as well play this for what it was worth.

"My assistant, Hobby, said you had your own costume." She looked around him. "I don't see your bag. Did you bring it?"

"I left my bag in the car," he said.

She moved closer to him, seeming pleased with the friendly gesture. "It's about time you loosened up. Ready to get on with this," she glanced at the paper, "Toby? Or would you rather be called by your stage name, The Doctor?" She set the paper on the table.

"Doctor is fine, uh..."

"Tommie Balford." She rubbed her hand on her jeans then presented it. He was surprised by her firm grip. She gave him three solid pumps and let go.

When Gray's best friend, Danny Boy, gave Gray the scoop about UEW, all he'd been told was the owner's name was Tommie and the owner was tough. He would have to thank his buddy for not tipping him off that Tommie was also a woman. As an attorney, Danny Boy should have known better. Gray knew nothing about law, but he did know about disclosure.

"You're Tommie Balford? I'd assumed you were a--"

"A man? I get that a lot, well, until people see me." She smiled.

Her cheerful expression lit up the dank room. He fought back the urge to ask this rough-and-tumble but tempting goddess on a date. Although he'd abandoned that playboy side of him a long time ago, he couldn't deny that not so gentle stirring just below his belt that signaled to him that this woman was not a patient. Then again, she just might be an empty-headed gold-digger looking to land a doctor.

"And what is Tommie short for?" He wanted to know how this stunning woman owned and ran one of the toughest professional wrestling companies in the country.

"It's short for who gives a crap."

That was how she ran the company, with a no-nonsense, ballsy attitude that made grown men like him do a double take.

She continued. "I don't have time for chit chat. So, are you going to drop your pants or what?" She looked down at her watch then shook her head. "I'm missing Mo's first match."

Gray reached for his belt. Oohs and ahhs from the audience in the arena filtered into the small, dingy makeshift office as though they were excited to see him too. From the way Tommie stared at his hands on his belt, she appeared anxious to see what he had under his Dockers. She wrung her hands. Shifted her weight from one side to the other. Had she just licked her lips?

A smile slithered over his face. Far be it for him to deny a beautiful woman pleasure.

Before snaking the brown leather belt through the buckle he stopped. What was he doing? He didn't have Chippendale aspirations. Even he couldn't go this far with the joke. He had to let her off the hook...and himself.

"Look, I should tell you something." He lifted one hand. "You see, I--"

She stomped up to him. "Don't tell me." She grabbed his belt and pulled it through the clasp. "You're shy. You're a born-again Christian and you don't undress in front of a woman you're not in love with."

At this point, she had his belt undone and was now working on his pants. Her hands worked so fast he couldn't stop her.

That wasn't entirely true. He didn't want to stop her. The rich perfume coming from her hair hypnotized him. He welcomed the relief from smelling the stale cigarette-and-wet dog hair stench wafting in the air.

Tommie continued. "You have a bad rash. You haven't waxed your legs." She looked up, capturing his gaze. "I've heard that excuse more times than I care to talk about. Or my favorite." She undid his pants and yanked down his zipper. "You're married. Yeah, like I do this for pleasure."

Her clear, light blue eyes behind her glasses stunned him.

His pants fell to the floor and he stood cemented to the spot in his blue jockey boxers. Not since college, when he'd pledged for a fraternity, had Gray been in a position like this. Thank God the air conditioning kicked on and cooled all parts of his anatomy.

Tommie meandered around him, observing him like he was a farm horse. "Very nice," she said from behind him. "Good strong legs. Nice ass. The women will like that. And no scars." She walked back around to the front of him and pulled up the front of his white button-up shirt to the center of his chest. She let out a long, low whistle. "What a six-pack. You must do a thousand crunches a day."

This time he recognized her wildflower scent. Strange to imagine that this tough talking woman could have anything soft wafting around her. He also heard a crack in her voice and saw her swallow hard. He hoped she couldn't feel the pounding of his heart as he watched her observing him. The goose bumps that formed on his arms and legs threatened to uncover his cool appearance.

"I try to take care of myself." He trembled when she touched him.

She must have noticed because she gazed into his eyes again and stepped back, letting go of his shirt.

She scanned him from head to toe. "What are you, about six-five, six-six?"

"Six-two and a half." He wondered if by this point he could lift up his pants. But since she was the one to jerk them down initially, maybe she would want to pull them back up too. A man could dream.

"We'll just say six-four. By the time you put your boots on, no one will be able to tell." She cocked her head. "Two-fifty?"

"Two-ten."

She nodded. "Two-fifty."

She chewed on her lower lip. Such a casualty for her thinking process. They were the fullest lips he had ever seen. He imagined kissing them would be like nibbling on a juicy peach. Succulent, tasty, firm. He licked his lips but could only taste the bitter

iced tea he'd had before this bizarre meeting.

"So, what's your thing?" she asked.

Gray nearly gasped at the inquiry. "Excuse me?"

"What's your angle? What are you known for? What do you do to make an impression?" She waved her hands in the air, punctuating each question.

"I help people. Kids really." He'd led her on but he wouldn't lie.

She nodded. "It's different. But we get a lot of kids to the show. They need a hero. With your looks, I would've made you a different type of character." She cleared her throat then averted her gaze.

Was she blushing now?

Cute.

"You'd appeal to our female fans. You could be Doctor Love." She rubbed the back of her neck with her hand.

"Doling out a prescription of good loving?" He wanted to play in this character creation game too.

Shaking her head, she said, "Leave the creativity to us."

"Or you could be a heel and portray a stupid frat boy. You've got that arrogant but attractive thing going on."

"Hey, I used to be in a fraternity." Now he was starting to feel silly with his pants pooled around his ankles.

She snorted. "Figures."

And just what had made him stupid as a fraternity guy? The all-night beer chugging games? The panty raids at three a.m.? Posting a doctored picture of the university dean in a two-piece bikini on the school's website?

Yeah. Now that he thought about it, he had been kind of stupid back then. Only Tommie didn't know him to make that assessment yet.

"Have you been approached by Slamstastics?"

Gray shook his head. He didn't know who or what a Slamstastics was but from Tommie's grimace, it must have been something bordering on being the Anti-Christ.

"Sex appeal instead of raw talent seems to be the thing nowadays." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I could present you at the *Home Invasion* pay-per-view. You could do a run-in during a match, maybe with Junior Vickers."

It was crazy. Gray was a doctor. He'd graduated at the top of his class. Despite his current suspension from the hospital, he was still a well-respected doctor. Yet the idea of doing a professional wrestling match with one of his childhood idols made his insides flip flop like a fish in an empty barrel.

"I've never pushed an unknown like you before." Her gaze returned to his. "Something tells me that you could be good for our company. You've got the look. I just need to make sure you're good on the mat."

The passion in her eyes for her business slowed his heart. What was he doing? He wasn't down for using people for his own amusement and it was apparent that what this woman was looking for was a serious employee.

"Now that I think about it, you couldn't do the frat boy thing. That bit of gray in your hair makes you look a little long in the tooth for a wrestler. How old are you?" She grabbed her bottled fluorescent orange sport drink. Arguing with him must have really

tapped her electrolytes.

"Too old to be doing this." He couldn't go on with this deception anymore. If he was serious about killing off the old Gray and recreating a new and improved Gray Kennebeck, he needed to take things seriously. He reached for his pants.

"You don't want to wrestle for me now?" She set her bottle down on the table.

"I never was going to." He offered a pleasant smile but her scowl signaled that perhaps he'd gone too far with this joke.

Tommie tilted her head back and let out a long sorrowful moan. "You'd think after a year of doing this I would learn to recognize the legit guys from the crazy ones." She turned away from him. "Hope you got your thrill, whoever you are. You know your way out."

Gray had blown it, blown it big time. Heat rose to his face that no amount of ice tea could extinguish. After lifting his pants, he approached her. Counting on his soothing bedside manner, he hoped he could smooth things over with Tommie. It wasn't the job he wanted anyway, but he didn't need any bad word of mouth going around about him. Not now.

With a hand on her shoulder, he said, "I didn't mean to--"

Tommie's body stiffened before she jumped. "Look, I'm being nice." Threat laced her voice. "You had better get out of here or--"

"Or what?" Not that he was trying to stare this woman down but he wasn't the jerk she thought he was. He took a step closer to her, pants still held up by one hand.

The gesture triggered something in Tommie, evident by her wide-eyed almost frightened expression. Darting to the corner of the room, she picked up a baseball bat. Doing her best imitation of Sammy Sosa, she held it up as if she were ready to take a big swing.

"Whoa!" On instinct from treating hostile patients, Gray grabbed the top portion of the bat. "What do you think you're doing?"

Tommie tried pulling the weapon from his grip. "I get sick and tired of dealing with guys like you. Just because I'm a woman you get your kicks coming in here and parading around like I'm supposed to be impressed with your body or something."

"Back up here. You're making a huge mistake." He took another tug but Tommie held the bat like a grudge. If he could wrestle away scalpels from drug addicts in the middle of the night in the E.R., he could surely get a childhood toy from this Amazon.

At least the addicts eventually gave up.

Not ready to concede, she planted her feet and continued with her tug-of-war match. "You perverts all try to jump on me like I'm some sort of barfly or easy catch. Here's a newsflash for you, buddy. I don't date the talent. If you don't get your ass out of my office right now, I'm going to give you a permanent part in your head!" She pulled on the bat again.

"Calm down and hear me out." With one hand still on the bat and the other holding up his pants, he pulled the bat close to his body, drawing her to him since she wouldn't let go.

With each of her panting heaves, he felt her chest rising and falling. That 'U' and 'W' were feeling really good now pressed against Gray's chest.

For a moment, the tiger-like rage in her eyes appeared to soften to a nice kitten-like expression. Good. Maybe she would listen to reason.

Tommie swallowed uneasily while glaring. Tightening his grip on the bat, he knew if she gave another good jerk, she would be able to secure it and give him that unwanted part. His sweaty hand had barely a hold on the wooden weapon, but he hoped Tommie didn't know that.

With her lips just inches from his, it would have been effortless to kiss her.

Wait! What was he thinking? This woman wanted his head on a platter.

Like she wanted to stamp out a flame, she hammered her foot on his. Pain shot through his body, from his foot to the top of his head and back down again like one of those carnival strength test games with the mallet and the bell at the top. She'd definitely rung his bell. With a twist of her body, Tommie took Gray off guard and finally jerked the thick bat from his grip.

Grunting a curse, Gray dropped his pants and stumbled backward. His feet tangled in his trousers and with a thud, he fell on a concrete floor covered by the thinnest carpet made on the planet.

He held up his hand. "You are not going to hit me."

"Oh no?" She choked up on the bat again as she took a step closer.

Enough with playing with this woman. He had to take her down. With a sweep of his foot on the side of Tommie's ankle, he made her fall forward, landing on top of him and dropping her equalizer. On instinct, Gray wrapped his arm around her tiny waist. Her hands landed on either side of his head, her face hovering over his. What a position.

Her soft body molded against his. This time he panted. His fingers tapped the small of her back like a jazz trumpeter playing a solo. If he didn't know any better, he could have sworn that the crowds in the arena had stopped cheering. An electric sizzle buzzed in his ears. Why couldn't all job interviews end with a beautiful woman on top of him?

Tommie huffed. She wriggled her body. Big mistake. His skin tingled.

"You can do a Side Russian Leg Sweep but you're not a wrestler." She swept her stray hair from her face. "Who are you then?"

"I'm--"

The door swung open. On the other side stood the young man who had brought Gray to the room earlier. He stared at the Gray-and-Tommie sandwich on the floor.

"Okay, this is new," the young man said in a monotone voice. "If you were like this with all of our company doctors, maybe we would manage to finally keep one."

She broke her gaze from Gray to look at the other man. "Hobby, isn't this--"

"I told you the new wrestler couldn't start tonight." Hobby walked into the room.

Swinging her legs to the other side of Gray's body, Tommie sprang to her feet. With a brave attempt at gaining some composure, she straightened her t-shirt and jeans and cleared her throat. She snatched her bat from the floor then wrung her hands around it as though she wanted it to be Gray's neck.

Even though Gray must have outweighed the thin man by at least a hundred pounds, he accepted Hobby's assistance to his feet. Once he stood, Gray pulled up his pants and fastened them quickly.

“Gray Kennebeck. *Dr.* Gray Kennebeck at your service.” He extended his hand to her.

Instead of accepting it, she jabbed him in the stomach with her bat. It wasn't hard enough to hurt, just get his attention and force the air out of his lungs.

She held the thicker portion of the bat in one hand and folded her arms. “You knew I thought you were a wrestler and you let me take off your pants and touch you and--” Her words trailed off.

“I tried to tell you, but--”

“But what? Never seemed to find a good time?”

“Maybe I could have said something when you were pulling off my pants.”

“Or when you pulled me on top of you.”

Hobby handed her a black hair scrunchie, which she snatched from his hand. At least he was right about her wanting her hair pulled back. She threw her bat onto the table and with a couple of twists, she had her black mane secured into a tight bun.

“I'm sure one day we'll look back on this situation and laugh.” Gray decided to start at that moment with a hearty chuckle.

Her face never broke.

“How could you think this guy was a wrestler? He's in khakis and loafers,” Hobby said, pointing to Gray's pants and shoes.

Gray glanced at her. “You thought I had potential, right? At one point you thought I would make a good wrestler.” He had to lighten the mood in the tension-filled room.

“Yeah, well, the only thing I think you're good for is the unemployment line.” She picked up her bottle and headed to the door. Glancing at Gray before she left, she said, “Sorry you wasted a trip out here, Dr. Kennebeck.”

* * * *

After sitting in a darkened room for the last hour, watching the remaining show on a monitor, Tommie had to blink a few times to adjust her vision to the now blinding arena lights. She rubbed her temples as she strolled down the ramp, heading to the ring in the empty arena. Her hard steps echoed off the arena walls.

Taking a deep breath, she inhaled the remaining popcorn-beer-smoky smell into her lungs. To combat the stench, she popped a stick of gum in her mouth, chomping on it like she was chewing on someone's heart although she was sure hearts didn't taste wintergreen fresh.

She'd broken her own rule; never let them see you sweat. That damn Dr. Kennebeck had made her sweat, stammer and lose her cool. It was bad enough the male wrestlers thought, and said openly, Tommie was unfit to do her job because she was a woman *and* because she'd never wrestled before.

Had they known wrestling was in her blood, they wouldn't give her a hard time. Hell, they probably would have kissed her feet if they knew her family heritage. She wouldn't trade off on her name and lineage. If anyone found out that a gorgeous face had thrown her off, she would never gain their respect. She'd lost respect for herself being sucked in *again* by a frat boy.

She'd showed that Dr. Kennebeck. Gave him his walking papers quick. No one embarrassed Tommie Balford and got away with it, especially not some spoiled, rich kid

like Gray. If the man were standing in front of her now, she would tell him off. If there was a next time, maybe she could manage not to let her voice crack.

Her roadie crew laughed and joked among themselves in a group next to the ramp. They were a loyal bunch, hanging on with the expectation that she could make this ragtag company into something great. She couldn't let any of her employees down. Wrestling was her life, her business.

Tommie cursed under her breath thinking about Dr. Kennebeck. No one had ever rattled her like that. Not even the jerks that wanted to buy her out. However one incredible looking man, with his pants around his ankles, made her into a quivering, babbling mess.

"Okay, hit the ropes, Mo. I want to see how you look in the ring," Tommie demanded once she got to the ring.

The stocky young man with blond dreadlocks nodded and ran back and forth across the mat, hurling himself against the ropes. Tommie eyed his form, the way he caught the rope just under his arm and which leg he jumped from on the recoil. He had a natural ability.

Most of the guys she'd employed had that edgy look about them. Mohawks, tattoos, missing teeth, really bad body odor. Cuts and bumps all over their bodies.

Gray Kennebeck was nothing like that. He was tall, had a great head of sun-kissed hair--even if it was a little gray at the temples--straight, white teeth, and carrying an intoxicating aroma of soap and expensive, musky cologne.

When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she whipped her head around, thinking for a brief moment Dr. Kennebeck had come back for round two. Instead she saw Junior Vickers. Her shoulders eased down as she fought hard to keep from smiling.

In his baseball hat bearing the name of the company, Junior stood next to her, a twinkle in his silver-blue eyes and a smile as long as the eastern coastline. The beard Tommie had been begging him to shave covered his face. Thanks to the August sun, Junior's leathery skin bronzed to an even darker shade.

Junior brought his hands to his hips and looked at the young man in the ring running back and forth. "He looks good."

Tommie returned her gaze to Mo. "Yep. We were lucky to find him. Too bad I missed his match." She adjusted her glasses on her nose.

"Yeah, he put on a good show. Where were you?" Junior repositioned his hat.

Tommie thought of the whole office scene again. The moment the memory went to her pulling down Gray's pants she shook her head. "Tied up with a potential new employee. It didn't work out."

"Too bad. We could use more new blood."

Tommie wondered if Junior wished they had more new talent so he could finally retire. When she'd started UEW with Junior as her lead performer, he wasn't getting the big matches anymore and he was fading into pro-wrestling obscurity. He had done so much for the sport, and for the business to turn its back on him was unacceptable. Now he was a star again.

Junior leaned down toward her. "Have I told you what a great job you're doing?"

Tommie smirked. Smiling, as a boss, showed weakness. So why had she flashed her pearly whites at Dr. Kennebeck in her office? At the time she couldn't fight the impulse. Whenever the man showed off his deep dimples, she felt compelled to respond

in kind.

Tommie needed to pull herself together and be that tough-as-granite boss she knew lurked inside of her. "You don't have to say that," she said.

"And you look nice today," Junior continued.

"You definitely didn't have to say that." She shifted away.

"But you could use some makeup and your hair could be done up a little."

She turned to him, her jaw clenched. "Junior!"

"What? A man can't be proud of his daughter and still want her to look like a lady?"

Mo halted his sprint inside of the ring. Scanning the arena, Tommie wondered if he had overheard their conversation. Even her roadies had gotten quiet.

Mo trotted to the ring ropes then leaned over them. "Want me to keep going?"

Tommie exhaled. Her heart slowed to its normal rate. "No. Take some bumps now."

Again, he nodded and fell flat on his back, arms outstretched, palms down and head tilted upward. Mo executed the perfect bump, but right now Tommie concentrated on her father.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, pulling him away from the ring although with the slams to the mat, it would have been hard for her employees to hear them anyway. "Do you want all of the wrestlers to know?"

"I don't give a hoot who knows. You're my kid and I'm proud of you." He held up his fist, which was as big as a whole chicken. "Anyone gives my little girl a hard time and I'll knock him on his ass!"

"Junior." She softened with his gesture. At that moment she wanted to fold right into his protective arms, a position she hadn't been in with him in well over twenty years. He could have asked for the moon and she would have roped it herself.

Despite the tender moment, Junior stepped back from her. "But I know you, Tommie. You could always take care of yourself." He stared into the ring. "Just like your mother. She didn't need me either."

Tommie's chest tightened. Him pulling away from her brought back memories of when she was a child. Why couldn't he give her that personal connection? Why was he always running from her?

She heard footsteps behind them and turned to see Hobby coming down the ramp.

"What is it, Hobby?" Tommie stepped further away from Junior. Bad enough there was a rumor going around that she and Junior were lovers. She had to be careful how she acted.

"Gray is still here," Hobby said, almost out of breath.

"Who?" Junior asked.

"Dr. Kennebeck," Hobby replied. "I asked him to stay."

Tommie glanced over at Junior. "This is private, Junior. I'll talk to you later."

"Doctor? Are you sick?" Junior asked and crossed his arms.

"No. It's nothing." She didn't want to tell Junior about the Sports Entertainment Commission. He would really blow his stack over the news that the commission would close them down if they didn't get a company doctor. With his high blood pressure, she wanted to keep Junior relatively calm.

"Are you pregnant?" Junior asked and covered his mouth, probably to suppress a smile. She could see him happily bouncing a grandchild on his knee.

"Junior! I'll talk to you later." She glared at him until he finally nodded and made his slow trek up the ramp.

Tommie pulled Hobby close to the ring. She glanced up at the top of the ramp and saw Gray standing there, waiting, looking as sexy as when he was in the office alone with her. "What's Shock Doc still doing here? I told him to step."

"I asked him to stay. No, strike that. I *begged* him to stay." Hobby set his clipboard on the canvas mat.

"Sorry you wasted your time." She turned away from Gray.

Even from the distance she'd seen his hazel eyes. He looked as though the sun had bathed him all over to give him that warm glow. He probably just went for his first session at the tanning salon. Preppy guys like him wouldn't know hard work if it sat in his lap.

Looking at him now, she couldn't believe she'd held a bat to him. Last time she had to break out Ol' Trusty, the guy she'd interviewed lunged for her and shoved his hand up her shirt. Never would she be that vulnerable again.

With Gray, she'd wanted to make him nervous, make him see she wasn't a pushover like a lot of the wrestlers thought when she'd started her company. He didn't know that she would never mar a perfect face like his.

"You know you need this guy." Hobby pointed to Gray. "The Sports Entertainment Commission is coming back in a couple of days to see our new doctor. Do you want them to see that we have no one and be fined and shut down so that we don't have our pay-per-view?" He picked up his clipboard and flipped it around. "Flyers have already gone out for *Home Invasion*. You're supposed to be cutting those spots for the cable company. Everybody's been working hard to prepare for the show. Get over the embarrassment. It was a misunderstanding. Go up there and shake that guy's hand and welcome him to UEW."

With his head turned, looking at something backstage, Tommie admired Gray's great noble nose, chiseled jaw line, and full lips.

He had to go. She couldn't have him make her lose her concentration her every time she looked up, especially a guy who probably wouldn't take the work seriously.

"If this guy showed up, we can find someone else," Tommie said.

Hobby dropped his head and groaned so loud Gray turned to them.

"I'll tell him." She started up the ramp, taking long, deliberate steps.

Aside from making her the butt of his joke, Gray hadn't done anything wrong. If she'd been thinking, she would have figured it out. Most wrestlers never question being asked to take off their clothes. She wanted to know what was underneath his Dockers. Still did.

She rubbed her eyes. As she approached Gray, Tommie kept her face straight and hard. This was business. The best business decision was to go with someone more professional. Yep, that was it.

Before she could even get out her standard dismissal speech, Gray spoke.

"I'm sorry for what I did in your office earlier." He sounded sincere. "I was being childish, and I wasted your time."

Damn. Now he picked a time to be sweet and earnest? She should have screamed that she didn't need him while she stood at the end of the ramp. That way she didn't have to look into his sultry eyes again or see those full lips that she wanted to kiss, especially when he'd pulled her close in her office.

After letting out a long breath, she said, "Dr. Kennebeck, thank you again for coming here and staying to talk to me."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Gray said, his voice a deep growl.

She rubbed her hand up her arm to get rid of the newly formed goosebumps. "I don't know if--"

"Junior's down! He collapsed!" a crewmember screamed from backstage.

Chapter Two

Tommie dropped down next to Junior on the floor in the backstage area. Although he was conscious, he blinked several times and panted. She tried controlling her quivering bottom lip by sucking it into her mouth and chewing it, which also kept her from screaming. Her hands trembled, barely able to catch one of his flailing hands.

"Stand back! Give him some air!" Tommie took Junior's hat off. "What's wrong, Junior? What happened?"

"Dude was just walking back here then fell like blam!" a roadie said, emphasizing the word 'blam' in an Emeril Lagasse-type way.

"Get a doctor!" Tommie demanded.

"I'm here." Gray got down on the other side of Junior. Cradling his head, he stared into his eyes. "I need for everyone to take a step back, please. I need some light."

The worried crowd hesitated moving.

Gray lifted his head and screamed, "Get back now!"

The crowd jumped, leaving a circle around the trio of about five feet deep.

"What's wrong with him?" She held onto Junior's hand with both of hers.

"Can you hear me?" Gray asked Junior.

"Sure I can. All of Virginia can hear you, buddy," Junior replied, his speech slower than normal.

"What's your name?" Gray pried open each of Junior's eyelids.

"Junior Vickers, the toughest s.o.b. this country's ever seen!"

The crowd snickered and some applauded.

"Tell me what happened, Junior. Do you feel a pain in your chest or anywhere else?"

"I just slipped and fell. Y'all are making a big deal out of nothing. I've had worse bumps like this in the ring." He struggled to sit up but Gray held him down.

"Hold on, partner. Let me get your pulse real quick." Gray glanced up. After diving into his pants pocket, he pulled out his car keys.

To Hobby he said, "Go to my car and get my bag from the front seat. I drive the silver Volvo parked at--"

Hobby interrupted him. "This has never happened here before. What should I do?" He wrung his hands together.

So Tommie's calm, cool and collected assistant did unravel.

Tommie snatched the keys from Gray's hand and threw them at her assistant. "Go get his bag and snap out of it. Move!"

Gray directed him on where his car was parked. Hobby picked the keys up from the floor and scurried off.

Surveying the backstage area, Gray's gaze stopped at a stretcher. "Does that work?"

"It's a prop," Tommie replied.

"That's not what I asked. Does it work? Does it roll? Can we adjust it?"

She would let his smartass attitude go this time. "Yes, it does."

Gray jogged over to the stretcher, impressing Tommie with his hustle. Lugging the rolling apparatus behind him, he brought it to Junior and lowered it.

He glanced at the crowd and pointed to Mo. "Big man, give me a hand."

"I can do it." Tommie put her hands under Junior's shoulder and thigh.

"He's probably too heavy for you."

"One." She wasn't about to be stared down but anyone, even the man who could help her father. "Two."

Gray slipped his hands under Junior's body.

"Three!"

They both lifted him at the same time and placed him on the stretcher. She led the gurney down the hallway to the small room they were in before.

"Tell me what happened, Junior," Gray said, holding onto Junior's wrist as he looked at his watch.

"I told you. I slipped. I lost my balance and fell. That's all."

Tommie could hear the frustration rising in his voice. She knew first hand Junior hated to be fussed over. Out of nervousness, Tommie chewed her gum faster.

Hobby rushed into the office with what looked to be a black overnight bag. "Is this it?" he asked.

"Yep. Open it and take out my stethoscope." He laid Junior's arm back down next to his body.

Hobby pulled the listening device out of the bag and handed it to Gray. As soon as the equipment hit Gray's hands, he put it in his ears and put the disc onto Junior's chest.

"What are you doing? I told you I'm fine." The normal rate of Junior's speech picked up.

"Shut up and let me listen to your heartbeat." Gray kept one hand on Junior's shoulder, to hold him down. The room remained quiet while he did so. Even Junior sat still for him and that man couldn't be still even at his own funeral.

Gray brought the stethoscope down around his neck then retrieved his bag. He pulled out a blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around Junior's thick arm.

"Are you on any medication?" Gray asked him.

Junior remained quiet.

"Blood pressure," Tommie blurted. "He's on blood pressure medication."

"Thank you." Gray glanced up at her as he inflated the cuff. He gazed down to Junior. "Did you take your meds today?"

"Yeah. Maybe. I can't remember." Junior attempted to sit up again.

"Stay down or I'll staple your shoulders to this stretcher," Gray said between gritted teeth.

"Junior, you can't remember if you took your meds? That's important." Tommie's voice sounded softer than she would have liked.

"I know. Don't you think I know? I live with this, not you."

Junior's harsh words cut into her, deep. Since it seemed like he was fine with the whole boss-employee relationship instead of the daughter-father, she would do the same.

"I can't keep booking you if you don't take care of yourself. Take the medicine

and don't give me any more lip. I need you in the ring and not laid up in some hospital," she said as she stood by him.

He looked into her eyes and didn't turn away. Suddenly, she felt seven years old again. Although she didn't break her gaze, remembering how much he hated gum chewing, Tommie did stop chomping her gum.

Gray removed the cuff. "Your blood pressure is high. I don't think you should be engaging in any strenuous activities for a couple of days."

"A couple of days? I ain't got that kind of time. I'm scheduled for a match with Wild Man tomorrow night." Junior finally sat up slowly. "No, I'll be fine."

Gray glanced over at Tommie. "As a doctor, I'm suggesting to you that you keep this man from wrestling for at least two or three days. An overnight stay in a hospital might not be a bad idea either."

Tommie's gaze went from her father to Gray. Gray may have been able to control her father for a moment but he didn't know the man. Wrestling sustained Junior.

"We'll see how he is tomorrow night. If he's not better, then maybe we can have you do a run-in. Nothing too hard."

Junior jumped from the gurney and strolled to the door. Glancing at Tommie, he said, "I'm going to wrestle tomorrow night." Then he disappeared out of the room.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Not used to seeing her father look so weak, it felt like she had been holding her breath since she saw Junior on the floor.

Now Gray, he could help him, had helped him. None of the other doctors talked to Junior the way he had. They had all been afraid of the person to treat the patient.

Gray must have seen Junior as more than just a character in a show. Gray's attentive, smart, no nonsense manner proved he would fit right in with the company.

"I'm going to make sure everyone out there knows where we're going to be tomorrow night," Hobby said and closed the door behind him.

Gray packed his medical equipment back into his bag and grabbed his car keys.

Tommie was never great with apologies, but she took a deep breath and attempted one anyway. "You did pretty good here."

Gray only smirked.

"No one's ever gotten Junior still enough to get his pulse let alone his blood pressure."

"He needs to be admitted in a hospital and watched overnight. As his boss, you either tell him to do that or cut him loose," Gray said.

"It's not that easy."

"Why?"

Tommie remained quiet. She wasn't about to spill family history to this stranger.

"Fine. Don't tell me." He hiked his bag onto his shoulder. "I had a feeling back there before all this happened that you were going to give me my walking papers again."

Tommie opened her mouth but Gray kept going.

"That's fine. After what I've seen and done here, you're probably right. I'm not the person for this job. Good luck with your search." He extended his hand.

With great reluctance, she shook it, steadily increasing the pressure. "I should at least pay you for your services today."

"It's on me." He pulled his hand away and sauntered to the door.

After he walked out, Tommie rested against the table and lowered her head.
“Damn.”

* * * *

Being inside Danny Boy's Pleasure Palace, also known as Danny's rec room in his home in Virginia Beach, Gray felt like he was nineteen again and back in college where he and Danny Boy first met. Twenty years later and the man still liked to be called Danny Boy. Of course to his colleagues at the law office of Bellamy, Bellamy and Jones, he was Daniel Riley.

“Thanks for telling me about Tommie Balford,” Gray said before dropping the white, hard ball with an image of a naked woman onto the foosball table.

“What are you talking about, dude?” Danny Boy even talked like he was back in college. All they needed were some pizza boxes all over the floor and a marijuana plant in one of the closets and he would be transported back to UVA again.

“Tommie's a woman.” Gray dropped the ball and flipped one of the handles to try and get an instant win. Danny Boy was still too quick for that.

“Really? I've never met her. I heard about her from the other attorneys in the office who represent the local Sports Entertainment Commission. I just knew she had to be a guy. Said the owner was a real hardass.” Danny Boy, diminutive in stature with the same curly reddish-brown hair he had in college, still looked like a freshman.

“I can only imagine what a female owner of a pro-wrestling company must look like.” He grimaced and shivered. “Man, I'm sorry I sent you over there.” Danny Boy twirled two of his handles at the same time nearly scoring until Gray stopped him.

“She's not what you think she would look like, although your co-workers are right about her being difficult. She's...kinda...cute.” He purposely left out the fact that the woman pulled down his pants and said that he had a nice ass, although he secretly smiled about it.

“Really? So are you going to, uh--” Danny Boy trailed off just as Gray shot the ball across the table.

“No, man. As a matter of fact, I turned the job down.”

“You what?”

Gray shot the ball into Danny Boy's goal. He raised his arms into the air.
“Loser! Bow down to your master and kiss my feet.” Strutting to the refrigerator in the corner of the room next to a Kiss pinball machine that had been autographed by all of the original members, he pulled out bottled water for himself and a Heineken for Danny Boy. He twirled around the huge, ornately carved mahogany pool table that sat in the middle of the room.

“What do you mean you turned down the job?” Danny Boy asked again.

Gray handed the green bottle to Danny Boy and twisted off the top to his water.
“Just what I said.” He took a healthy swig of water and positioned himself at the table.
“You ready to get your butt whupped again?”

When he didn't hear a response, Gray peered at his friend. Danny Boy had a look of disappointment on his face. He remembered that same look when Gray had overslept and arrived late to pick him up from the airport one time their senior year of college.

“What's wrong? It's not like it was the best job on earth. I can find something.” Gray set himself back up at the table, ready for a second game.

"No, you don't understand. You can't just find something. It has to be in the medical field, preferably as a doctor while you still have your license."

Gray finished off his water, quenching his suddenly dry mouth, and set the empty bottle on the foosball table.

"Gray, I'm serious, man. Now as your friend *and* your attorney, I can tell you that you stand a better chance of the hospital board finding in your favor if they can see you can be trusted again. You've been out of work for a month and a half. I had to pull a lot of strings to find you that job."

"It's not enough that I've been offered a job while suspended and I turned it down? Doesn't that show something?"

"Yeah, it shows that you're too afraid to be responsible again."

It was as though Danny Boy read his thoughts. Gray blinked when he said that and had to sit himself down on one of the plush black leather couches.

"Remember when we were both freshmen and used to watch wrestling in the student lounge every Saturday?" Gray asked.

Danny Boy nodded and leaned against the table across from Gray.

"There I was yesterday, working on none other than Junior Vickers."

"No way! *The* Junior Vickers? He was like our idol back in the day." Danny Boy crossed his feet at his ankles and braced himself on the table with his hands.

"Yep. So I'm going through the motions of getting his blood pressure and heart rate, and suddenly I realized that I helped one person."

Danny Boy shrugged. "So? What's wrong with that? Isn't that a good thing?"

"No. Not when I want to help so much more." He scratched his head. "Just like you want to be partner in your firm, I want to have my own clinic. How am I supposed to have that working for a traveling road show? My family already thinks I'm a screw-up."

Danny Boy sighed and sat on the couch next to him. "You're a great doctor. The hospital will see that and take you back. Unfortunately, you messed up and you have to pay the consequences."

"I messed up because I cared too much?"

"No. You cared and got caught. You can't keep playing Robin Hood. Taking meds from the hospital and giving them to the poor."

Gray cut Danny Boy off. "But the patients need them." He shook his head. "And I always replenished the drugs. I wasn't stealing."

"You were to the hospital."

Gray didn't feel so great just now. He had never felt lower or more unsure of himself than he did now.

Ever since he could form a thought he'd known he wanted to be a doctor. Looking down at his hands, he wasn't even sure if his talents were worth anything.

Danny Boy patted him on his shoulder. "You're going to be fine. You're going to get through this. I guarantee you. And when you do, I'm going to slap you with the biggest bill you've ever seen."

"Oh, true friend coming out now." Gray laughed.

"Nah, here's a true friend." Danny Boy stood and walked up a short flight of steps to where his office was. He thudded back down with a piece of paper in his hand and handed it to Gray.

Gray read Tommie's name and an address on it. "What's this?"

"That's your girl's office address according to our records. Go to her and beg for that job. Hopefully no one has filled it by now."

Gray rubbed his thumb over the paper and forced a smile on his face. He had to do this. He was slowly running out of money, tapping into his savings at this point. And if he'd ever hoped to practice medicine again, he needed to take this job.

* * * *

"Come on down and watch the best pro-wrestling show this side of the Mississippi," Tommie said into a microphone.

Putting this small recording studio in her house in Chesapeake, Virginia was the best investment she'd made since opening her company. No more making appointments for studio time or paying huge fees.

"No, that's boring," Bix said. "Jazz it up like I know you know how."

Bix had been Tommie's best friend since kindergarten when they used to make each other do dares.

"I don't understand why you don't do this. You're my media relations person," Tommie said, leaning back in her desk chair. Aside from interviewing new wrestlers, her den had been converted to her UEW office.

"Okay, how about this." Tommie leaned close to the microphone. "Hey, all you crazy kids out there. Why don't you come over and see me...and the best wrestlers on the planet Saturday night in the Richmond Coliseum."

Bix nodded. "Getting better. Lower your voice a little and seduce the listeners."

"What do you want me to do, french it?"

"If it'll get the seats filled in the arena, yeah! Don't forget that our viewers are boys ages twelve to seventeen, and men ages twenty-one to thirty-five. I think those are the horniest age brackets for the male species."

Tommie clapped her hands and laughed. "You are a hoot, Trixie McBixter." It was a stupid nickname, even dumber than Bix, which was short for Beatrice. Ever since junior high, Tommie had so dubbed her that if to only make Bix laugh.

Bix stood. She was petite and a good six inches shorter than Tommie. Without makeup and in her cutoff denim shorts and 'Mean People Suck' t-shirt, she could pass for a teenager instead of the twenty-eight year old woman that she was.

"Well, I aim to please," Bix said, smoothing her hands down her body in a seductive but comical fashion.

Growing up, Tommie and Bix would tell people they were cousins, sometimes even sisters. It wasn't hard for them to pass themselves off as being related with Bix being Filipino and Tommie being a product of an interracial relationship. The only differences were that Bix had straight, long chocolate-colored hair and beautifully almond shaped eyes, and Tommie had curly black hair and blue eyes.

"Speaking of aiming to please, how is that hot little number you have wrestling for you now. What's her name? Selena?" Bix asked as she retrieved a box of ginger snaps from a desk behind them.

"You mean UEW's answer to Jennifer Lopez? She got pregnant and quit."

"She was straight?" Bix handed Tommie a cookie. "Oh well. I could have changed her. All she would have needed was one good woman."

“And you’re the one for the job, right?” Tommie took a bite of the hard snap and let the flavors of the ginger and cinnamon roll around on her tongue.

“Hey, when I’m good, I’m good.”

It had taken Tommie by surprise when Bix had revealed during their senior year in high school that she was a lesbian. Tommie thought she was just joking until she saw her with a parade of girls every week.

Tommie clicked the record button to do her seventh take when her cell phone rang. Glancing at the Caller I.D. screen first, she saw it was Hobby.

“What’s up, Hobby?” Tommie clicked off the recording session.

“Trouble. Have you heard from the Sports Entertainment Commission yet?”

Even through the phone, Tommie heard Hobby’s nervous way of clicking an ink pen in and out in rapid succession.

“No, should I?”

“They just called here. They’re going to be making a visit tomorrow to meet our new doctor. Please tell me that you and the Good Doctor kissed and made nice.”

Tommie glanced at Bix who busied herself by picking at something on her thumbnail. How could Tommie tell her that they would be fined so much money that they would have to close down before the show? Worse yet. How would she break the news to Junior?

“Thanks for the heads up. We’ll be fine.”

“But--”

Tommie disconnected the call before Hobby could impart some more of his wisdom. Unless a miracle came through her front door, UEW wouldn’t be fine. Their last chance walked out with her blessing.

The doorbell rang and Tommie looked at Bix strangely. A look of realization waved over Bix’s face and she set the box of cookies back onto the desk.

“The newspaper proofs. I had them delivered here. I almost forgot.” She ran up the three steps to the front door.

Tommie took a deep breath as she turned back to the microphone. Sexy, huh? She could turn on the sexy if needed.

She pressed the record button on the panel and purred the spot. “Are you all ready for some hot action? Well I’ve got it in the place to be. The Richmond Coliseum Saturday night at seven o’clock. The hottest pro-wrestling action you’ve ever seen. Ten intense matches, and the best bodies on the East Coast. Buy your tickets on-line on our web site at UEW dot com, or at the box office on the day of the show. Hope to see you there.” She clicked stop and heard applause behind her.

“Was that better? I aim to...please.” Tommie turned around in her swivel chair to see Gray standing in the doorway. He had on...a suit. On a hot August day he had on a blue suit with a white shirt and red tie. He looked like a politician, and it made her wonder what he was after...and how he had found her.

Bix wriggled by him and padded back down into the den. “This guy says he’s applying for the company doc job. I guess we lost another one, huh?”

Tommie stood. In her bare feet, denim shorts overalls and bright, yellow tube top she suddenly felt underdressed compared to him. She had her glasses off but her hair was still pulled back into a bun.

"I see how you get so many male fans now," Gray said. "That was lethal."

"What are you doing here? In my home?" Tommie folded her arms.

"I'm sorry. My friend, the one who gave me the tip about the job, gave me your business address. I didn't know you worked out of your house." He was about to take a step down into the den until Tommie rushed up to him, making him maintain his stance at the top of the stairs.

"You haven't answered my question," she said again, this time standing at the base of the stairs gazing up at him. "What are you doing here?"

Gray smiled. "Interviewing for the position of UEW company doctor, that is if you still need one."

"I thought you said you didn't want it."

"Do you two know each other?" Bix asked, probably feeling a bit left out.

"I'm sorry." Gray extended his hand to Bix. "Hi, I'm Dr. Gray Kennebeck."

"Bix Labrador." She shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

"What kind of name is Gray?" Bix asked.

"A family one. Just think about *Gray's Anatomy* when you think of my name."

Bix rolled her eyes. "Sounds like a joke you've used since med school. Did you get a lot of dates with that one?"

"What kind of name is Bix?"

"A nickname." Bix glanced over at Tommie. "Short for Trixie McBixter."

Tommie bit her lip and tried hard not to laugh.

"Your parents must have really had it in for you when you were born."

Bix laughed and nodded. "Funny. You're a funny guy."

He smiled and gazed back at Tommie. "Although I initially said I didn't want the position, I have changed my mind. Were you still looking?"

And how! The man had impeccable timing. Only she wouldn't let him know that. He wouldn't be seeing her sweat again.

"Well, actually, we--"

Bix butted in. "Need for you to go sit in the dining room, which is right through the living room, and Ms. Balford will meet you in a minute. She has to get her questions in order."

Gray smiled wider and turned. Tommie grabbed Bix's arm and pulled her from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you and Dr. Love together. He's hot. I would never do him but for you, he's just what the doctor ordered." Bix stood on the coffee table next to Tommie and reached behind Tommie's head. She removed the pencil holding her hair in her traditional tight bun and brought her curls around her face.

Slapping her hands away, Tommie stepped back. "What are you doing?"

"Gotta sex you up. You're looking a little too dowdy."

"Dowdy's fine for a job interview." Tommie looked down at her attire. She couldn't interview someone in what she was wearing. She shook her head and headed for the other doorway that led to the back hallway to her bedroom.

"Oh no you don't. You had better not change." Bix had an amazing ability to read her mind. They were truly best friends of the soul.

“But I can’t--”

“You can do anything you damn well please. You’re Tommie ‘Ball Buster’ Balford. Now go in there and get your man.”

With a not so gentle nudge to the doorway, Tommie stumbled to the steps and took them slowly. Trying to look older, she put on her glasses and slid them down to the end of her nose as she walked to the living room. The nubbly fabric in the Berber carpeting tickled her feet as she made her way to the dining room.

She saw Gray, his back to her, looking out of the back window. His jacket draped his back. He even looked like he had gotten a haircut. That made her suspicious. Why the sudden change of heart?

Tommie cleared her throat making Gray spin around. “Ready to get started?”

“Sure.” Gray put his hands on his belt. “You want me to undress now or later?”

Chapter Three

Tommie sat across the table from Gray. "A sense of humor," she began. "That's needed in our business."

She tried staring into his breathtaking eyes, a task that seemed impossible at times. After removing her leg from under her butt, she planted her feet onto the floor. She clasped her hands together and set them on the table to look somewhat professional but the overalls and tube top squashed that image.

"You've intruded on my life. Not even my wrestlers come to my house." She couldn't let him know that she needed him. Desperation never looked good on her.

"So what you're saying is that I have to do my level best to charm you so that I can stay for longer than a minute." Then he unfastened a button on his jacket.

Secretly, Tommie was glad he was back, and it was for more than just for the position as their doctor. He peaked an interest in her she hadn't felt in a long time. A romantic interest. A sexual interest.

"Let's get down to business, Dr. Kennebeck." She folded her arms to at least show some disinterest.

Gray looked around her intimate dining room and sighed. "Give it to me."

"What?" she asked.

"The interview. Your questions. We're on the same page, right?"

"Right." His relaxed look threw her for a moment. Clearing her throat, she continued. "Where did you obtain your medical degree?"

"University of Virginia. I interned at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters in Norfolk then eventually worked in the E.R."

So he was a local boy at heart. No wonder he had that surfer look. Hair just on the rumpled, shaggy side, but it worked for him. Perpetual, light tanned skin. Easy going demeanor. Fine like Williamsburg wine.

"You're from the Tidewater area?" Tommie asked just to satisfy her curiosity.

"Born and raised in Virginia Beach. What about you? Are you from here, too?"

She glared at him, wary of how to answer. "I ask you the questions."

He shrugged. "Sorry."

"Have you ever been to jail or convicted of a felony?"

He tilted his head. "You can't ask me that."

"Yes, I can. I just can't not hire you on the basis of your answer." She smiled feeling confident that she had all of her ducks in a row.

"I've been to jail once."

Tommie pinched her leg to keep from looking so shocked. Dr. Gray went to jail? Impossible. Did he forget to say 'please' and 'thank you'?

"For what?" Tommie asked.

Gray smiled. "Is that relevant?"

"Just curious. Just want to make sure my guys are safe around you."

"I didn't murder anyone." He peered at her and quickly followed, "And I didn't rape or sexually assault anyone either." He waited a beat then continued with his answer.

"My first year of college when I was pledging for a fraternity I helped the brothers break into a liquor store. I was the lookout guy. But when the police came I was the only one who got caught. Although I refused to give up my friends, I had a clean record and since nothing was actually stolen, they dropped the charges after I spent the night in jail."

"Oh." It was the only thing she could say. She wanted to know more about him but that would have been inappropriate at this point.

"I guess that doesn't make me too dangerous." He smiled.

"I'll be the judge of that." She picked up a pen and tapped it on the table. "I knew you were in a frat. And frat guys are always trouble."

"At some point that little ice chip on your shoulder is going to have to melt."

"Excuse me?"

"This tough girl attitude you have. It may work with the other wrestlers but it doesn't work on me." He loosened his necktie and unbuttoned the top button. "And stop with the frat guy stuff. That was twenty years ago."

Tommie heard a snickering outside of the dining room doorway.

"Bix, have you gotten the proofs yet?" Tommie called.

After waiting a beat, Bix appeared in the dining room.

"No, not yet," Bix said, tugging at her shirt and looking more like a teenager. "I guess I'll wait by the front door for the courier."

"How about you wait *outside* the door? I really don't want to be disturbed."

Tommie pointed to the front door.

Bix smirked as she sauntered out of the room.

"Where were we?" Tommie asked.

"You were commenting about my checkered past," Gray said.

"No, I wasn't. But I'll move on. Did you have a resume with you?"

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper folded lengthwise. Like a blackjack dealer, he slid it to her. Tommie accepted it but almost felt funny about reading it in front of him.

"You're prepared. I like that in a man," she said as scanned the contents.

"You do?" he asked.

She glanced at him and saw him smiling. Her face felt like a lit match danced over both cheeks. Why did she make that stupid comment about a well-prepared *man*? She should have talked about him as an applicant. A good-looking, tall, broad-shouldered applicant who should have the Surgeon General's warning on him cautioning women that being around Gray could be addicting.

She started at the top of the paper. He lived in a condo down at the beach. Educational background matched what he had just said. Employment background matched. He even included a section where he talked about his hobbies. Fishing, scuba diving, rock climbing...skydiving?

"You jump out of planes for fun?" she asked as she set the paper on the table.

"You can't imagine the rush you get from feeling totally free. You really do feel like you're flying." He had a gleam in his eyes as he talked about it. "You have to trust yourself to do something so dangerous. No turning back. No second guessing. You should try it sometime."

"No thanks." She shook her head.

"Too afraid of going on the wild side?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I run the toughest set of wrestlers in the U.S. What do I have to be afraid of?" Tommie snickered.

"So. All you do is run the company. You're not on the mat doing the stunts. How hard can running that business be?" Gray asked.

"Ah, insult the boss. I must have missed that part of Business 101 when the professor talked about nailing the perfect interview." Tommie cleared her throat. "I guess the only thing I need to do now is tell you about my business and see if you're still interested. We're on the road about two hundred fifty days a year but right now we just travel up and down the East Coast. Will being away from home so much bother you? Do you have a wife or children at home?" Bix would have been proud at the clever way she asked if he was married or had any kids.

"No and no. Traveling wouldn't bother me. I have nothing keeping me here."

She heard a tone in his voice when he answered as though he had another deeper meaning behind it. She could relate. Working all of the time. Living on the road. No time for a personal life.

"Aside from taking care of the wrestlers when they are injured after their matches, I also want you to do regular health screenings. I want their heart rate and blood pressure checked before each match. I want you to make sure that wrestlers on medication are actually taking their meds. And I really want you to make sure none of my guys are doing 'roids or any other illegal drugs. You would be my eyes and ears."

"I can do that. But if I accept the position, I want to feel like the suggestions I make are respected. If I tell you that someone is doing drugs or if someone needs some urgent care, I don't want to be blown off. If this is a serious position, I want you to treat it as such." Gray's voice boomed through the dining room.

"I'm still going to make my final decisions but, yes, I will take your suggestions to heart."

"And what about pay?" Gray asked.

Tommie wrote the salary on a piece of paper, the amount she and Bix had agreed to pay the next company doctor they hired. She passed it to him and hoped he wouldn't fall out of his chair with laughter. The amount was as much as what a first year resident would make. At least that was what the last five doctors had told her. It was all that they had in the budget to spend, but it was necessary.

Gray eyed the paper, not even picking it up. Then he glanced up at Tommie who did her best to look determined and sure by setting in her jaw and holding up her head.

"Does this mean that on the road my room and board will be paid for by the company or do I have to cough up that money myself?"

She cracked her knuckles before answering. "You will have to provide your own room and board."

He let out a chuckle. "I have to tell you, Ms. Balford, this is not a lure. At my last employer I was paid almost double this."

"And why aren't you still with your last employer?" Tommie still needed to figure out what it was that brought Gray back.

Gray remained quiet too long before answering. "Differences of opinion."

Didn't fully answer her question but from his body language she could tell that he

wouldn't be going into that topic any further.

"With the pay-per-view special coming up in a couple of months, we're counting on the windfall from the show to help boost everyone's salary. You would get a raise and a bonus if the show goes well."

That was the hope. She'd already promised her performers and crew that if the show was a hit then there would be big time bonuses all around. As it was, she had cut her own salary in half to go for the doctor's salary. Thank God her house was paid for.

"So do we have a deal?" he finally asked.

It would be a mistake to work so close to him. For the business, it would have been a mistake not to hire him. Who was she kidding? She wanted him.

"We have a deal." She extended her hand. "Welcome to the UEW family."

He accepted her hand. "Thank you for this opportunity. You won't regret it."

"You're welcome." She shook his hand longer than she should have until it seemed awkward. With a tug, she pulled her hand back. By this point, Bix strolled back into the house with an armful of folders and papers.

"Are you two all done?" Bix asked and set the papers on the couch.

"In the office." Tommie pointed toward the den.

"Okay. Okay. Jeez, don't have a coronary." Bix glanced over at Gray. "You see what you get to work with? She's a slave driver. She's Martha Stewart on acid. She's--"

"Getting a little tired of the metaphors." Tommie interrupted.

"I'm sure she won't be that difficult to work with. I look forward to my first day," Gray said as he headed to the door.

"So we finally landed a doctor?" Bix peered at Tommie who only squinted her eyes at her and balled her free hand into a fist behind Gray's back. Bix shook her head and lifted her packages into her arms. She groaned and stomped toward the den. Tommie would have to remember to torture Bix after he left.

"I'll need you to start tomorrow morning. Hope that's not a problem." She handed him the name and address of her gym where her wrestlers worked out.

"Not one bit." Gray grabbed the doorknob but before he could open the door, Bix piped in another comment.

"Do you have references for us?" Bix asked.

Tommie turned back to her and widened her eyes. She was trying to get him out with a clean getaway. What was Bix doing now?

"In case we need to check out your shaky past, give us at least three." Bix smiled.

Oh yeah, nail polish remover right in Bix's favorite polish. That would teach her.

"Seems strange since I already have the job. But if that's what you all need, I'll be more than happy to provide that information." Gray turned back into the house and reached into his inside pocket. He produced a pen and went back to the dining room table. "Is it okay if I write them on the back of my resume?" he asked, taking a seat in the chair she had sat in before.

"That would be perfect," Tommie answered.

It was weird seeing him sit at the head of the table, her chair. The stark white dining room walls illuminated him so that he stood out. Seeing him at her long light oak table, he sat regally like he owned this place. This man deserved to have battle scenes painted in his honor with his suit of armor waiting for him in the corner of the room.

Tommie wanted to tell him to move. For the last two years, that had been her spot. Then again, it was just a chair and he was just a man.

"We want close friends and business associates. No former employers, please," Bix said. She hopped around like she enjoyed the process more than Tommie.

"What are you doing?" Tommie asked between gritted teeth.

"You'll see. Watch the master work." Bix winked. Gray stood and returned the pen to his pocket as he strolled back to the door.

"Anything else before I go?" he asked.

"Can you pee into a cup and give us a blood sample?" Bix asked.

This time Tommie punched her dear friend on her arm. "No, that should be it." She opened the door for him.

Once out of the house, Tommie said, "Okay, what was all that back there. References? What are you doing?" Tommie retrieved the resume from the table while dropping the business card in its place.

"What am *I* doing? I'm trying to get you the skinny on your man there." Bix padded down to the den with Tommie following behind her.

"He's not my man. He's barely my employee." Tommie would just have to keep reminding herself of that every time she saw him.

"Bull." Bix set the papers on her desk, knocking over her box of ginger snaps. "Besides, don't you want to know more about Dr. Delicious? What better way to do that than to call some of his closet friends?"

Tommie glanced over the list of three people he had written. Daniel Riley, friend/attorney. Gerald Starkey, business associate. It was the third name that gave Tommie cause to pause. Constance Wiley, M.D., friend. Not business associate as he had so labeled Gerald Starkey. And not even a follow up label like 'friend/attorney' like he did with Daniel. He had called her his friend. Maybe there was something more. Maybe she was his girlfriend. Remembering his interview, he'd said there was nothing keeping him there for him not to go on tour.

Tommie cursed under her breath but apparently it was loud enough for Bix to catch.

"What's wrong? Did he write down bogus names like we used to when we applied at all of those fast food places? I personally like Frank Spankenstein and Joseph Blow myself," Bix said and laughed.

"No, it's just--uh! I can't believe I'm letting little things like this bother me." Tommie threw the paper onto her desk that butted against Bix's.

"What are you talking about?" Bix picked up the box of cookies from the floor.

"I don't need more complications in my life. I have UEW and it's hard enough running that without the constant threat that it could be shut down at any moment."

"You've hired a doctor. Everything's cool. You're the only one making this complicated." Bix twirled a cookie in between her fingers before she eventually popped it into her mouth.

A knock at the door prevented Tommie from further arguing with Bix.

"You get it this time. I got it the last time," Bix said.

Tommie rolled her eyes and jogged to the door. She had already wasted good commercial recording time to deal with Gray. She didn't need any more distractions.

Behind the door was the distraction du jour.

Gray. His jacket and tie were off and he had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Tommie would have never dreamed that forearms could weaken her but looking at Gray's tanned set, she had to brace herself against the door to keep from buckling.

"Yes?" Tommie asked as she stood in the doorway.

"I think I may have left my car keys in your house. Mind if I take a look?" he asked.

Without verbally answering, she stepped aside and allowed him passage. He headed straight to the dining room and looked around the table until he eventually got down on his hands and knees.

He did have the most perfect backside she had ever seen. Tommie stared at him crawling around on her floor. In all honesty, he would have made a pretty decent looking wrestler. And in her fantasy, an even better lover.

She imagined he would be patient but demanding from the way he dealt with Junior. He would be wild and reckless from the way he talked about skydiving. And he would try to take control, of course 'try' being the operative word.

Bix found that moment to come into the room. She glanced into the dining room at Gray. "You got him on his hands and knees now. You work faster than I thought."

"Very funny. He forgot his car keys." Tommie crossed her arms over her chest.

"You mean like the way I used to forget my purse over that girl's apartment, the one I had a crush on?" Bix nudged Tommie on her arm.

"Found them." Gray held up the keys.

"Sorry, didn't mean to intrude again," Gray said as he sauntered by her. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

"You bet!" Bix gave him the thumbs-up sign. Gray started out the door when he was met head on...by Junior.

Tommie gasped. It must have been loud enough for Gray to hear because he gazed at her.

"Close that door. You're letting the air out," Junior said in his normal, gruff fatherly way.

Why did he pick that exact moment to come over for a visit? And why in the world did Gray forget his keys?

"I thought you said you didn't have the wrestlers over to your house," Gray said.

Tommie cleared her throat and put her hands on her hips. "Not that I have to explain myself to you but Junior is part owner of the company." That wasn't a lie. Junior had given her about a third of what was needed to get the company off the ground. He had been a silent partner, helping her out with the talent.

"Haven't we met before?" Junior asked and adjusted his baseball hat on his head.

"I'm Gray Kennebeck. I was the doctor who worked on you a couple of days ago." He extended his hand to Junior.

"Oh yeah. You said you were going to staple my shoulders to the stretcher. Now I remember you." Junior shook it and walked into the house without much fanfare. When he approached Bix, he gave her a kiss on her cheek then continued into the kitchen.

"So do you all live here together?" Gray asked.

"No, of course not. We're all partners. That's it. We're...close."

Gray observed the way Junior patted Bix on her shoulder as he talked to her. Then Bix glanced over at Tommie and winked. When Tommie gazed at Gray, his eyes were wide and he nodded his head.

"I think I get it. It's the new millennium. I'm a modern thinker. I didn't realize it was *that* type of situation." Gray smiled again and walked back out. Tommie closed the door behind him instead of trying to defend herself. Maybe thinking she was a swinger would keep him at bay.

Tommie strolled into the kitchen where Junior and Bix sat at the table.

"Did you kiss the doctor before you sent him on his way?" Bix asked and winked.

"Are you dating that guy?" Junior asked.

"No, I'm not seeing him." Tommie leaned against the doorframe. "And thanks to you two, he thinks I'm a bisexual."

"So." Bix leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs at the ankles.

"Is that what he said?" Junior jumped to his feet, ready to defend Tommie's honor.

"No, he didn't say it exactly." She sat at the table.

"So what was he doing here?" Junior sat back down.

"What are *you* doing here?" Tommie quickly followed.

"I can't come visit now? It's bad enough we have to act like we're not even related at work. Now I have to schedule visiting times with you? This is ridiculous." Junior pulled off his hat and set it on the table.

"You know things would get complicated if that got out."

"Complicated. I think that's your daughter's favorite word today," Bix said. Things were finally falling into place for her. Everything would be all right.

"So did you ever find out why he came back?" Bix asked.

"No. Not really."

And that would be her first question to him. If he had something in his background that could potentially hurt her business, she needed to know.

Chapter Four

"The game, my friend, is Eight Ball. And you are about to get your ass stomped!" Danny Boy hit the cue ball into the set, crashing them around into a scattered pattern. Nice. But no balls went into the pockets.

"You would have been proud of me," Gray began as he lined up his shot. "I went over to Tommie Balford's office, which by the way is her house, all decked out in a suit. Had my resume with me. I even listed you as a reference."

"You want me to vouch for you? Are you crazy?"

"Apparently." Gray made his shot. Two balls into a corner pocket.

"So? Did you get the job?" Danny Boy asked.

Gray glanced up at his friend. He smiled then took another shot. "I got the job."

In obvious mock relief, Danny Boy wiped his brow. "Cool. You only have to keep the job until the case is settled."

"If I win, I can get my job back, right?" Gray took another shot but missed.

"Sure, if that's what you want. I would think that you would want to work for the cute thing at UEW though," Danny Boy said.

"I think she plays both sides of the fence and she has more than enough players in her game." He thought about the way Junior interacted with Bix, and especially remembered the way Bix winked at Tommie.

"You're kidding? She's bi? Well if she's bi you still have a chance." Danny Boy nudged Gray's arm. "And if she is bi, she can invite other women to join you."

"You're a pig, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one." Danny Boy lined up his shot and missed again.

Gray was never turned on by the prospect of being with more than one woman, only because he'd been there and done that in his youth. Besides, with Tommie, he wouldn't need anyone else. She would be more than enough for him.

Gray got down and made his next three shots. The last shot was the eight ball. "Eight ball in the side pocket." He called. He glanced up at Danny Boy who was chewing on his thumbnail. "If I lose the case, what can happen to me?"

Danny Boy sighed. His face became very serious and he dropped his hand down to his pool stick. "The hospital board and the courts can move to have your medical license taken away."

He could lose his job over his principles.

"Eight ball in the side pocket," he repeated. His shot bounced off the edge.

"Come on. Get your head straight. I've never known you to throw a pool game. It'll be okay."

"And what if it isn't? All I ever wanted to be in my entire life was a doctor. If I can't be that..." Gray looked down.

"Then tell me what's up with the whole meds thing. You're not a thief. You were our lookout man back at that liquor store job. Dude, you did time for us and now you're going to tell me that--" Danny Boy stopped and gazed at him.

Gray stared back at him until he saw Danny Boy's eyes widened.

"You're covering up for someone, aren't you?" Danny Boy asked. "That's the only way something like this could happen."

He snickered. "What are you talking about? You're crazy."

Only he wasn't. Danny Boy had hit it right on the head. Gray couldn't tell his friend the truth. He had made a promise.

"This is your career we're talking about. Don't act dumb," Danny Boy said.

"I," Gray glanced at him, "know what I'm doing."

Danny Boy's Harley-Davidson phone v-roomed, halting the conversation. He laid his stick on the table and went over to miniature motorcycle.

"Daniel Riley." He glanced up at him and a wide smile crept up. "Yes, Ms. Balford, I am a friend of Dr. Gray Kennebeck."

Gray leaned his stick against the table and walked over to Danny Boy. He already had the job so he wasn't sure why he was feeling so nervous about this conversation. His palms were sweaty and he had to put them in his pockets to dry them.

"I can honestly tell you that Gray and I have been close friends for over twenty years." Danny Boy stared at him. "He's the most generous man I know. Dependable, reliable, trustworthy. He would be a great asset to any company."

Gray patted him on the shoulder and mouthed the words 'thank you.'

Danny Boy nodded and turned his back to him. "Uh, yes...Uh huh...Right." He paused a short while then continued. "What's his penis size? You need to know that?"

"What?" Gray reached around him to grab the phone but he ducked and swerved his small frame out of Gray's way.

"I hate to tell you that he's very, very, um, let me put it to you this way. He has a great personality," Danny Boy said.

"Oh, you are dead!" He grabbed the phone and put it to his ear. "Hello? Hello?" All he got was a dial tone.

"Did you think she was still on the phone?" Danny Boy said in between his hysterical fits of laughter.

"You little jerk." He slammed the phone down but couldn't help laughing also.

"She's got a hot voice. I can imagine what she looks like."

Gray didn't have to. He thought he was going to crawl out of his skin earlier that day when she had on that bright, yellow tube top. It showed off her wide shoulders, her rounded breasts and tapered waist completely. Her glasses didn't even bother him. And to see all of her hair down again was a true treat. He remembered smelling her wildflower scent whenever he had walked by her.

Then he saw Bix, Junior and her together. An over-the-hill pro-wrestler, a hot little Filipino woman with a sarcastic wit, and a tough-talking beauty. Something was definitely going on between the three of them, more than just a partnership.

"Are you sure you don't want to ask her out? Sounds like a once in a lifetime deal." Danny Boy walked to the fridge and pulled out two beers.

Gray held up his hand. "I have to work in the morning."

"So do I."

"That's okay. And no, I'm not going to ask her out because she's going to be my boss. Besides, she's already made it clear that she doesn't date anyone at work. And if

I'm going to win this case, I won't be working there for long anyway. Why start something I know is going to end soon?"

"You *are* old. You do it for the great sex, buddy."

He rolled his eyes. "I must have skipped that part in the gentleman's handbook."

"You don't need to be a gentleman as long as you're a doctor. Look at yourself, dude. You're a chick's wet dream. What happened to that old Gray who used to love 'em and leave 'em?"

"Please let me know when your brain graduates from college." Gray smiled then a thought crossed his mind. If Tommie was going down his references list, she would be getting to Connie soon. He didn't know why he put her name on the list. Deep inside he felt like she'd owed him.

"Look, Danny Boy, I have to go." Gray hopped up the steps out of the den to head to the front door.

"What? We haven't finished the game yet," Danny Boy said as he trailed him.

"Just do like you always do. Tell people that you beat me even though we both know that's a lie." Gray opened the door and smiled back at him.

"I don't do that...all the time."

Gray unlocked his car door. Before hopping inside, Danny Boy screamed, "Good luck with the new job tomorrow."

He waved back at him. Before backing out of the driveway, he dialed Connie Wiley's number. It continually rang. She was either on the phone and didn't want to click over to the second line, or she wasn't home. His stomach knotted thinking about those two women talking to each other.

He backed out of the driveway and drove straight to Connie's house.

* * * *

"Is this Constance Wiley?" Tommie asked as she sat at her desk.

"This is Dr. Wiley." Her tone dripped with a haughtiness Tommie would have likened to the queen of England. A definite New England tone in her voice. Hopefully the woman wasn't a shrink.

"Dr. Wiley, my name is Tommie Balford and--"

"Did you say Tommie?" Dr. Wiley asked.

Tommie took a deep breath. No way was she going to let this woman snub her over the phone. "Yes, I did."

She heard the woman make an audible hmph and thought she even heard her chuckle.

"As I was saying before I got interrupted, I am calling regarding Dr. Gray Kennebeck." She crossed her legs and kicked her foot back and forth. Gray actually considered this cold fish of a woman a friend? He needed to get out more.

"Gray? You're calling about Gray? Are you the police? Has something happened?" Dr. Wiley had an urgency in her voice that made her finally seem human. Her tone also oozed with an intimacy that grabbed Tommie's curiosity.

"Yes, he has applied for a position with my company and he listed you as a reference," Tommie said.

"Oh, he has? What is the name of your business?"

"UEW."

“What is that, dear?”

Tommie hated that she called her ‘dear’ like she was part of her wait staff.

“Honey, it’s a professional wrestling company. Dr. Kennebeck will be my staff doctor.”

“Oh God!”

The woman might as well just put a gun to Tommie’s chest and shot directly into her heart. How dare she try to belittle a business she grew up in, a business she helped create into something new and different. How dare she make fun of her life.

“I just need a reference from you about Dr. Kennebeck and then you can go back to getting your nails done or your fat sucked or whatever it is that you’re doing.” She no longer felt the need to be polite since Dr. Wiley was not extending that same courtesy.

“Do you know who I am? I am the head of the pediatrics department at Beach Hospital. I have saved hundreds of lives. And I have mended children who have tried performing dangerous stunts they have seen *your* wrestlers do.”

Tommie was so tired of people pointing their fingers at her and wrestling instead of looking in their homes and at themselves.

“And you obviously have a God complex.” Tommie stood and paced.

“I feel sorry that Gray feels he has to resort to working for a business like that and for a...*person* like yourself.”

“And I feel sorry that he actually considered you a friend. I’m going to assume that he must have a heart of gold to put up with a person like you and take that as your reference. Carry on, Con Wiley!”

The nickname she’d called that woman fit her. Constance, or Con as Tommie thought of her now, probably was all peaches-and-cream to her friends and business associates. To Tommie, she was pure evil. Plus it made Tommie feel good to rub some dirt on that polished demeanor of hers.

She slammed the phone down almost breaking it in half. Tommie pulled a scream from her toes, through her body and projected it from her head, not just her mouth.

It was rare that Tommie let anyone get to her but something about that woman she instantly didn’t like. It went beyond her condescending manner. It may have been the way she talked about Gray like he was a pet rather than a human being. And what did she mean by saying she felt sorry that he had to resort to working with her? What’s more, she had had a feeling before she picked up the phone she was going to have a bad experience.

Bix rushed into the office, “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I got off the phone with Queen Bitch herself.” She put her hands on her hips.

“Who?”

“Dr. Constance Wiley, one of Gray’s references.”

“Oh, it’s *Gray* now not Dr. Kennebeck?” Bix folded her arms and nodded.

She rolled her eyes. “You are such a kid.” She walked by her and into the kitchen.

“What are you going to do tonight? It’s so rare that we get a day off. Why don’t you come out with me and Angel?” Bix swayed back and forth like she was dancing.

“No thank you. I’m going to stay at home and plot our next moves. I want to make sure everything goes perfect with the pay-per-view.” She pulled out a bottle of

apple juice from the fridge and headed to her bedroom.

"All work and no play makes Tommie a dead woman!" Bix yelled to her as she walked down the hall.

"Be sure to lock the door on your way out and have a great time tonight."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Page me if you need me."

Tommie heard the front door close just as she stepped into her bedroom. This was her true sanctuary. Pale peach walls with white trim. Tan carpeting. Except for her bed, she kept the same bedroom set she'd had from childhood. And all over her walls were pictures of her family and friends. She even had a picture of her mother with her new husband at their home in Jamaica.

It was a shame her parents couldn't stay together but they were better apart than they ever were as a couple. She had seen that first hand whenever Junior was able to make it home. It was a strange life, first of all being a product of a black woman and a white man. Then having to explain to friends that her father was a professional wrestler.

Tommie stared at the large picture of her and her father that set in the middle of her dresser. She was living the life she wished she had as a child and loving it. Yet she felt there was still something missing. The emptiness in her heart hadn't been filled yet.

* * * *

Gray knocked on Connie's door instead of ringing the bell for the third time. He knew she was home because her Mercedes was still in the driveway. Through her frosted glass at the top of her front door, he saw an image coming toward it. He heard the tumblers in the locks jingle and the door opened.

"Hello, Gray," Connie said. Her blond hair was mussed as well as her makeup. He couldn't tell if the dark circles under her eyes were from lack of sleep or her makeup or a combination of both. She had a few more wrinkles in her face than he had remembered and she was wearing slacks and a silk shirt left untucked.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She stepped back from the door and sauntered barefooted to her kitchen.

"Just lovely. And why shouldn't I be? I have everything, right?" Her words sounded desperate and slurred. He stood at the kitchen doorway as she retrieved a glass from the counter.

"Gin. Would you like some?" She took a healthy gulp of the alcohol.

"No. And it looks like you should be laying off the stuff, too. What happened?" He tried taking the glass from her but she twirled away from him.

"Everything happened." She glanced at him. "Nothing happened. Does it matter? A good day or bad day, I just need some relief. No one's here to be with me. Take care of me. I'm alone." She crumpled to the floor and curled into a ball.

He couldn't stand to see her like this. She had been his mentor through his internship. He had learned everything about being a good doctor from her. Now, she was just a whisper of her former self.

He crouched down next to her and stroked her hair. "It'll be okay. I promise."

Connie looked up at him, black streaks streaming down her face. "I just feel like at any moment I'm going to lose it all. The chair at the hospital, my house, my life."

"Where's Lawrence?" No matter what was going on with Connie, her husband Lawrence seemed to be the only one to keep her together.

Connie's chin quivered and the tears rolled again. "He left me two months ago." She buried her face into Gray's neck.

He lifted her to her feet, pried the glass from her hand and set it on the counter. "Come on. Let me get you to bed. You need to sleep this off."

She wept the entire way to her bedroom, even as Gray tucked her into bed.

"You're going to be fine. Everything's going to work out. You just need to lay off the booze and get some help." He patted her hand.

"Gray." She shook her head while patting his hand. "My star pupil. I knew you would go far in life. And now where you are? Look at what I've done to you. A professional wrestling company?"

So Tommie had called her. And he wondered now if Tommie got the sober or drunk Connie, not that it mattered. Connie had been hard on him the first time they'd met. It was only recently that she softened.

"I'm so sorry. I should have told the board that I was the one taking the drugs." She put her hand to her face, covering her eyes. "I'm going to come clean and tell them what I did, what I did to you." She cried even harder. "All the lies."

"No. The wheels are already in motion. I'll say I did it. Get yourself cleaned up and don't worry about me. I'll be fine." She positioned herself on her side with her back to him and curled into a fetal position. After pulling a blanket over her body, he crept back downstairs.

He couldn't let Connie down. When no one else, besides his parents, believed in him when he was in medical school, Connie stood by his side. She made sure he got to sit in on experimental medical procedures whenever she found out about them. He would do whatever he could to protect her, his friend.

* * * *

Tommie looked down at her watch for the tenth time in less than five minutes as she stood in the noisy gym. She had gotten there early to meet with Gray and tell him what was going on as far as the commission was concerned. Plus she wanted to prep her coaches on making sure the wrestlers all performed safely for the day. After having a sleepless night, she had to have a hitch-free day.

She even made sure to clean the gym a little. The free weight area had each bar bell and dumbbell back in their intended slots and off of the floor. The nautilus machines were all wiped down. Clean towels were left folded next to each machine. Bix vacuumed the thin red carpet before she ran off to hand deliver the radio and TV spots for *Home Invasion*.

Tommie attempted to cover the sweaty, rusted metal stench with a whole can of Lysol and with scented wall plug-ins. It kind of worked. Only when Tommie moved her head too quickly did she find that putrid smell again.

At exactly nine o'clock, Gray strolled into the gym. He had on loose-fitting jeans, sneakers and a blue t-shirt that she could tell even from across the room that it brought out his eyes. He had a black bag in his hand and a smile on his face. She felt a tightness in her chest that she had one time thought was just indigestion but now knew it had something to do with how Gray filled out a pair of jeans and looked in his t-shirt.

"Good morning, boss," he said. "By the way, what am I supposed to call you?"

"Tommie is fine," she said.

"You can call me Gray."

"I had planned to."

A loud crash in the ring caught her attention and she whipped her head to the action. Ed, an older coach, had a folding chair in the ring with a large dent in the seat.

"No! No chair shots today! Just mechanics!" Tommie wagged her finger as though she were admonishing a dog.

Ed threw the chair out of the ring and it crashed on the wooden floor not covered by a padded mat.

"I've never worked anywhere where people actually practiced beating up one another." He set his bag down by his feet.

"Never got into politics, huh?" She glanced over at him.

"Cute."

She drew her bottom lip into her mouth and chewed on it. She had to tell Gray about the commission and the real reason he was there. One thing she had always been was honest. She didn't want to start being deceptive now.

"Gray, I want to tell you something before it's too late." She nodded her head toward the back of the gym where it was a little quieter and private.

"I think I know what you're going to say." He smiled.

"You do?" How would he know about the commission? And why did he have that silly smile on his face?

"Oh yeah. It's been obvious since we first met. But I think in order to have a good working relationship, we shouldn't go out together."

"What?" She screamed so loud that the wrestlers stopped right in the middle of the ring. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" The smile dropped from his face.

She could hear her heart beating in her head and she was so upset that her hands tingled. "Is that bag full of mirrors because you obviously enjoy yourself?"

"So you weren't going to--"

She cut in. "No! I told you I don't date the talent. You are my employee and therefore you are considered talent."

"I'm sorry. I just thought that there was something between us." He waved his hand back and forth between the two of them.

Her vision blurred, she was so angry. "You are the most conceited man I have ever met. I'm sure you are fine at your job but as a person you suck."

"I read your signals wrong. No use bursting a blood vessel over it."

She stomped toward the ring and strangely had to take a breath midway. Not enough sleep again. She had to buy a better mattress.

"The only thing I'm going to burst is your skull if you even suggest something like that again." She folded her arms and glared at him.

Instead of looking intimidated like most of the guys she admonished, he sauntered toward her. Leaning over to her ear, he whispered, "All I'm suggesting is that you use all of your employees' talents. You seem a little wound up. I could relax you. Just give me some music, some lotion and an hour to work."

She couldn't stop the moan that sounded through her lips. "Is that supposed to impress me?" From the way she whispered the inquiry and how sweat poured from her

face, the answer became clear. If she didn't stay away from Gray, she would take him up on his more than generous offer.

The gym doors opened and two men in suits walked inside. Needing the space, Tommie stepped away from Gray and fanned her face with her hand. She was glad now that she decided to put on the slacks instead of her normal jeans. She plastered a smile on her face and approached the men.

"Ms. Balford?" the taller of the two men said.

"Yes." She extended her hand.

"I'm Mr. Everhart with the Commission."

"Yes. Pleased to meet you."

"This is my business associate, Mr. Lowenthal."

"It's a pleasure to meet you and to be around your wrestlers. I grew up watching Junior Vickers with my father," the younger man said. Mr. Everhart poked him in the side with his elbow.

"I'm glad you enjoy our shows. The men and women work hard to put on a satisfying," she glanced at Mr. Everhart, "and safe show." She undid the top button of her shirt. Even with two industrial sized fans running she couldn't cool down.

"Before we meet your doctor, Ms. Balford, we need to discuss something," Mr. Everhart said.

She glanced over at the ring where Gray stood watching the wrestlers work out.

"After you gave us the name of your new doctor we did some checking up on him. I'm sure you did the same."

"Yes, I had some excellent references. Gerald Starkey, Daniel Riley and Dr. Constance Wiley." She would never forget that woman's name as long as she lived.

Mr. Everhart furrowed his eyebrows then glanced over at his partner. "Really? You contacted those people and they all vouched for him?"

"Yes. Why?" She undid another button. She felt the sweat forming on her chest and rolling down between her breasts. Damn Gray. With only his words, he got her hot and sweaty. She suddenly felt the urge to sit down but she locked her knees back to keep stable.

"Currently Dr. Kennebeck has been on suspension from Beach Hospital for the last couple of months because of theft. Daniel Riley is his attorney. And there has been some question about whether or not Dr. Wiley is involved in the case somehow. Were you aware of this when you hired him?"

Tommie didn't answer him. She instead pivoted herself around and stormed over to Gray. Here she felt bad for not telling him about the commission and he had left out a very important detail about his life.

Theft? She didn't need that right now. She thought she had found the perfect doctor. The closer she got to him the worse she felt, even to the point of nausea.

Tommie grabbed Gray's arm and turned him around. "Why didn't you tell me about the hospital hearing?"

Gray's mouth hung open. He peered over at the two men then back to her. "Who are they? Is that the police? What did they tell you?"

"Don't worry about them. I'm the one in your face." She jabbed her finger into his chest.

Gray stared into her eyes, obvious that he would not back down. "I was going to tell you. I didn't think it would affect my job."

"Wouldn't affect your job? I just hired a convict!"

"I told you I was acquitted," Bruiser, a wrestler in the ring, screamed over to Tommie.

She pointed to Bruiser. "Not you!" Then she poked her finger into Gray's chest again. "I trusted you and you lied to me."

"I never lied. You didn't ask me about it so I didn't say anything. I was sure I would get off. When I did, I had planned on going back to work at the hospital where I was suspended."

It was all making sense to her now. No wonder he came back for the job. He needed it. She pulled her shirt from out of her pants and wiped her forehead.

"Are you okay? You're looking a little pale," Gray said and stepped closer to her.

"I'm fine. It's you who needs to worry." She glanced over into the ring again and saw Ed dragging in a table, more than likely showing the group how to properly put one another through it.

"No! No! No! No tables right now. No chairs. Just do holds and bumps. I can't believe you're doing this today. With the commission here and--and--" Tommie put her hand to her chest. The tightening she had felt when she first saw Gray hadn't stopped. It had gotten worse. And the blurriness elevated to full on darkness.

As Tommie fell back, holding her chest, she remembered seeing her wrestlers watching her go down. Then she heard Gray's voice.

"Tommie! Tommie! Say something! Someone call 911!"

Chapter Five

Tommie stirred and blinked several times before she focused on a large Mylar balloon at the foot of her bed. Straining her gaze, she read 'Get Well Soon' on its heart shape. After running her tongue over her dry, cracked lips, she swallowed. She put her hand to her chest to try to remove the elephant that must have still been sitting on it.

She looked toward the window. Underneath were Junior and Bix, sleeping peacefully albeit, seemingly, uncomfortably.

On her other side she saw Gray sleeping in a chair looking just as awkward. His long legs were stretched out in front of him with his head tipped back and his hands resting on his stomach.

Tommie tried sitting up but she still felt drained of energy. What had happened to her? She couldn't have had a heart attack. She was only twenty-eight years old for goodness sake!

She reached for a tan pitcher by her bed for some water and in the process knocked over a cup. Gray jumped immediately and rubbed his eyes.

He rushed over to her bedside. "You need something? Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been hit in the chest with a baseball bat. What happened to me?" She ran her fingers through her hair. It was then she noticed all of the IVs and wires attached to her arms and chest.

"You had something we call in the medical field a stable angina." He poured some water into a clean cup and brought it to her lips. She put her hands around his warm hands to take a sip. He set the cup back on the tray and gazed down at her.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Think of it as a cousin to a heart attack. Among other things, stress and excitement brought it on." He studied her EKG printout. Then he checked her IV.

"I had a heart attack?" She put her hand to her chest. It was the one organ she had paid little attention to. Her mind had mattered the most.

"Kind of."

"What's the difference?"

"This didn't damage your heart. You're going to be fine. You've been treated, and I would think in a few days after some observation, you will be able to go home." He leaned down close to her face. "I'm sorry I made that joke earlier about the blood vessel."

She wanted to hold his hand. "It's your fault anyway."

He blinked.

"That joke you made about relaxing me got me all excited."

Then he smiled. "Who said I was joking?"

She moved her hand to reach for his but stopped. After clearing her throat, she asked, "Will I need surgery? Am I going to die?" She never felt so vulnerable in her life.

Gray stroked his hand over her hair. He leaned in even closer to her. His warm breath tingled her flesh. She could almost taste his lips.

"You're going to outlive us all," he said.

She felt her throat narrowing as she fought hard to hold back the tears. Gray's attentiveness went beyond having great bedside manner. Smiling would have been appropriate but she wanted to maintain her hard countenance. She was still his boss, even as she remained weakened, physically and mentally.

Putting in too many hours. Not getting enough sleep. Worrying about every little detail. Was it all worth her health? She turned her attention to Junior.

Yes, it was worth it. Junior was worth it.

Gray squeezed the call button next to Tommie.

"Bix and Junior came here as soon as they heard. We've been here all night." He went down to the end of her bed to retrieve her chart. "Thomasina, huh? So that's what Tommie is short for."

She would have argued with him but right now she didn't have the strength. A nurse came into the room. She split her gaze from Gray to Tommie.

"Hey, Debbie." He flipped another page on her chart.

The nurse blinked and smiled. "Dr. Kennebeck. I thought that was you. How good to see you again." The short, rotund woman hugged him. "When are you coming back?"

"Soon I hope." He glanced at Tommie.

The last thing Tommie remembered was arguing with him about the charges against him. She was going to fire him. Now she felt safer with him than with anyone else in the world.

"Debbie, can you get her another bag? Hers is about to run out." He pointed to her drip.

"Sure, Dr. Kennebeck."

"I'll check her pressure and take her temp if you can get me her results of her chest x-ray and blood work."

She winked at him. "Anything for you."

Debbie pulled another bag from a cabinet and within a few seconds had it changed out. She adjusted the blanket around Tommie's body. "Consider yourself lucky, young lady. Not only did this man save your life but he's taking really good care of you." She patted Tommie's hand and walked out of the room.

"You saved me?" Tommie asked.

"Simple CPR. Anyone could have done it." He wrote something on the chart and placed it on the bed next to her feet. He wrapped a cuff around her arm and let the automatic blood pressure machine do its work.

The thought of Gray's skilled hands on her bare chest, attempting to pump life back into her body, warmed her heart.

"I was going to fire you," she said as the cuff deflated after its tortuous tightening.

"I know. I would have deserved it. I should have told you about theft claim and the suspension. I'm sorry." He wrote some results on her chart then grabbed a thermometer. "Open."

She opened her mouth without arguing and let it rest under her tongue.

"I should have also told you about my plan to leave when the claim is settled. That way you could have been prepared to be looking for my replacement."

Leaving. He still wanted to leave. How could she think he would want to stay? What kind of career could he have being a wrestling company doctor? Tommie knew there was no future in that. Seeing Gray take charge in a stressful situation, he deserved to run his own hospital.

"I think this is the longest we've been in contact with each other without arguing. That might be a record." He raised his eyebrows comically.

Tommie laughed even with the thermometer in her mouth.

"Oh my stars in heaven. Do you realize that this is the first time you have laughed in front of me? I should have had a camera to take this picture." He removed it from her mouth.

"No pictures. I'm hideous right now."

"Not to me." He glanced at her then dropped his gaze down to her chart where he wrote that result down as well. Was it her imagination or did he actually blush? Even without her glasses and with the light over her bed being the only illumination in the room, she could tell.

Now on him, blushing was sexy. As soon as her heart fluttered thinking about what other parts of his anatomy may have had a rush of blood at the moment, she put her hand to her chest and took a deep breath. She didn't want to get too excited again.

"Are you okay?" He put his hand on top of hers.

She glanced at him and opened her mouth but nothing came out. All she could do was nod. Thank God her neck muscles still worked even if her vocal chords seemed paralyzed at the moment.

Bix yawned. When she noticed Tommie was awake, she screamed. Scurrying to Tommie's bed, she climbed in it with her. "Tommie, are you all right? I was so scared. All I heard was that you collapsed at the gym and something about a heart attack. That's not true, right?" Bix glanced at Gray.

"With treatment and rest, she'll be fine," he said.

Bix's scream must have woken Junior because he struggled to his feet soon after and hobbled to her bedside. "How are you, kiddo?"

"Better. Much better since you are all here." She held Bix and Junior's hands.

Junior glanced over at Gray. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Junior, stress and excitement did me in," Tommie said, attempting to save Gray.

Junior looked down at Tommie. "No, I mean did he bring you to the hospital?" He gazed back at Gray.

"Yes, sir, I did," Gray replied.

Junior put out his hand to him. "Thank you." He and Gray shook hands. "Thank you for saving my--"

Tommie squeezed his hand gently. Even if she was weak, he couldn't be.

Junior continued. "Thank you for saving her."

Debbie returned to the room a few minutes later with her results. Instead of viewing them there, Gray left the room. Tommie almost missed him.

"You know, he's been really good to you here," Bix said. "He made sure we got in here and stayed with you all night. They were going to kick us out of the room. It's a good thing we hired him. He seems like he cares."

And now Tommie was starting to feel something for him too. A lot of it had to do

with the way he had fawned over her. His seductive suggestion didn't hurt either. And she could tell that it had more to do than just making sure he had an employer. He cared. She put her hand over her heart. This time she wasn't afraid of feeling the organ flutter.

"Are you okay? Are you feeling pain again?" Junior asked.

"No. My heart is fine," she said and smiled.

"I feel like I'm responsible for--" Junior's words trailed off and he pointed to her.

"No, this is me overdoing it as usual." She placed his hand on her chest.

"Me and my bad ticker. My bad blood. I'm killing you. I've done this to you."

Tommie had never seen her father cry. The tears she had fought back for Gray earlier she let them go freely for Junior. He hovered over her and kissed her forehead. While cradling her head into his hand, he kissed her again on her cheek.

"I love you, baby girl. I would die without you," Junior said into her ear.

"I know." It was all she could say. Tommie heard footsteps coming toward her room and she quickly wiped her eyes. Junior stood erect and wiped his face into his shirtsleeve.

Gray came back into the room without the x-rays and blood work information. "I looked at your x-rays. They looked good. Small blockage here and there but nothing that can't be treated. Your blood work came back fine. I talked to your attending physician and he thinks you'll be able to go home by after a couple of days."

"That's great," Bix said and kissed Tommie on her forehead.

"Bix, I need for you to pack some clothes and things for Tommie." He glanced down at Tommie. "She's staying with me."

* * * *

After arguing for two hours between Tommie, Bix and Junior about Gray's decision to have her stay with him while she recovered, Gray was finally weakening them. At least he hoped he was. He couldn't stand the thought of Tommie working herself up into another attack, something worse this time. She had Type A personality written all over her.

The idea of her staying with him came out of the blue. It had been a while since he had the company of a woman at his beach condo. Too long. He'd almost forgotten how great it was to wake up holding a soft, beautiful woman. Not that he would have asked her to sleep with him. As beautiful as she was and as much as he wanted to give her the high hard one, as Danny Boy would say, he respected her conviction to stay away from her employees. It was a good idea, even if at the moment Gray wanted to change her mind.

As far as the idea of Tommie staying with him, she was holding out. He could tell she wasn't used to having someone make decisions for her, and she certainly wasn't going to let her weakened condition change that.

He saw something soft in her eyes after he had told her she would outlive them all. He meant it. Although he hated that this had happened to her, he hoped that the angina at least melted the block of ice around her heart.

"I can't stay with you. I have a business to run," Tommie said. She adjusted her bed so that she was sitting up.

"Let Bix and Hobby run it." Gray looked over at Bix. "Tommie needs her rest so she can fully recover. I know how to take care of her and you guys are going on tour."

"That's another thing. If you stay home with her, who is going to be the company doctor?" Bix asked.

"I can pull some strings to get an intern to cover if needed." Gray nodded.

"No. No intern. It has to be a doctor." Tommie waved her hand in the air.

"I don't like the idea of her staying with some strange man. No offense, buddy." Junior turned on the light in Tommie's room.

"And just who are you to her?" Gray asked. This guy was just her lover. He was coming off like he was her dad or something. He needed to just step back.

Junior's chest puffed up as he put his fist on his hips. "I'm her--"

Tommie cut him off. Tommie glanced over at Gray. "Look, the decision is not yours to make." She peered over to Junior. "And it's definitely not yours either. It's mine. And I've decided to stay at my own home. I can take care of myself." She grabbed Bix's hand. "And I have friends who can take care of me, too."

Gray, with his head slumped down, let out a long sigh, whistling through his nose. Although her circle of friends may have the best of intentions, he knew how to take care of her. "I think this is a big mistake. You're going back to the place that gives you the most stress. How is that going to be helpful to you?"

Bix jumped from the bed. "I'll be there to take care of everything. Tommie wouldn't have to lift a finger."

Gray looked back down at Tommie. If he even caught a look of doubt in her eyes he would have pounced on it and kept up the argument. She didn't waffle. She looked confident even as her eyes were at half-mast. Then again, maybe she didn't trust him now that she found out about the charges against him. And if she knew the details, he understood her reservations for staying with him.

"If you change your mind, and I hope you do, you have my number." Gray stepped over to the side of her bed. He leaned down and kissed Tommie on her cheek. He didn't know why he had done it. He barely knew this woman and she was his boss. For some reason, after he thought about how he had pumped his hand on her chest when she collapsed at the gym and the way he had held her hand as the ambulance rushed to the hospital, he felt he had earned the right to get some payment. A simple kiss anywhere on her was enough. For now.

He grabbed his bag, shook Junior and Bix's hands, and walked out of the door. She still had his number. Maybe she would call him. He hoped.

* * * *

After spending a week at the hospital, eating their rotten food and watching how other pro-wrestling companies were televised more than hers, Tommie was relieved to be back home again. Although she had promised Junior, Bix and Gray that she would take it easy, she found it so tempting to make a few calls and get back into the swing of things.

"Yes, I can get you those radio spots by nine tomorrow," Tommie said to a sales person at WRES, a popular urban radio station. "I can bring them so you can start playing them on--"

The call was suddenly disconnected. Tommie looked at the receiver at first then craned her neck around to see Bix standing behind her with the phone unplugged.

"What are you doing?" Tommie eased herself out of her chair and shuffled over to Bix.

"I was just about to ask you the same question." Bix snatched the phone from Tommie's hand. "You know you're not supposed to be any where near work. You're supposed to be resting. Don't make me have to get Dr. Feelgood over here."

The mention, even slanted, of Gray made Tommie's stomach flip and her heart beat a little faster. She'd enjoyed the way he had fought to have her stay with him. As tempting as it was to be in his condo, having him flit around and do whatever she wanted, she couldn't do it. She hadn't been in a significant relationship in a while and wouldn't even know how to act around him. Not that staying with him would have led to anything. She would have made sure of that. However she didn't want to give him the wrong impression. She could still take care of herself.

Now that she thought about it, Gray probably wouldn't have done whatever she wanted anyway. She had seen first hand how he liked to have things his way. He would have tried to control her in some way.

Besides, Gray had seen her at her worst, her most vulnerable. She had a bad heart, physically and emotionally. Why would a man want to risk working her up to the point where she has another stable angina, whatever that was? Gray had told her that it didn't damage her heart. So why was it that she felt something was missing from it?

"I can't just sit in this house and do nothing." Tommie plopped herself on the couch in her office/den. "I feel useless. I feel like everyone thinks they have to walk on eggshells around me because they think I'll break. Do you know how many voicemail messages I got from the guys telling me to take it easy and to get well soon?"

"Isn't that sweet?" Bix sat next to Tommie and curled her legs under her body.

"No, it's not sweet. I had those guys eating out of my hands because they thought I was tough and strong. Now they think I'm weak. They think--"

"They think you're the greatest thing since sliced Wonder Bread and they can't wait for you to come back to work," Bix said, interrupting Tommie. "Trust me. I've talked to them. Just because someone is nice to you does not necessarily mean that they're trying to get over on you. Take Dr. Juicy Bootie for instance."

"Can you for once call him by his real name?" Tommie shook her head. After about a week of not seeing Gray she kind of missed him. She missed their verbal sparring. She even missed his smartass remarks.

"You're very protective over your boy, huh?" Bix swaggered her head. "As I was saying, that was awfully sweet of him to offer you take you in like a stray."

"A stray. Thanks, Bix. As though I couldn't feel any lower than I do right now, you go and cheer me up as always."

Bix leaned forward and put her hand on Tommie's knee. "You know if you had said that you were cool with staying with him and having him take care of you, I wouldn't have fought it. But you seemed so against it that I stood behind your decision. I think it would have been good for you to get out of this house, get away from the business and do something selfish for a change. The world's not going to fall apart because you decide to get in some good quality time with a good looking man."

"But--"

"And you are *way* overdue on the nookie aspect of your life."

Ah, Bix, the Miss Manners of relationships.

"I'm not going to have sex with Dr. Kennebeck so stop joking about it." Tommie

leaned her head back on the couch and looked up at her pebbled ceiling. Bix was all wrong about her. What Tommie needed was to get back into the swing of things with the business. Having control was the only thing that made sense to her. Now that was all gone. Once the *Home Invasion* show was over she would relax then.

"Okay, I'll stop teasing you. But," Bix began as she dug through her saddlebag purse next to the couch, "if you did think about having sex, I have just the thing for you."

Tommie was almost afraid to ask what was in Bix's big bag of tricks.

"Remember what we used to do in college every Friday night around this time?" Bix hid whatever it was she had pulled out of her bag behind her back.

Tommie noticed it was about ten o'clock at night.

No. Bix couldn't have done it. It had been almost ten years since they had done what Tommie thought Bix was talking about.

Bix whipped her hand in front of her and thrust a DVD case into Tommie's face. "Tah dah!" Bix giggled. It was a porn DVD, and a gay one at that. It was stupid but when she and Bix were in college, every Friday night they had a night of beauty and watched gay porn. "Only a man would know what a man would want," Bix had said the first night they watched *Gay Cop*.

Tonight's feature was *Dirty Trucker*. Had to be a classic.

"Bix--"

"Oh come on, Tommie." Bix's voice rose as she tilted her head. "Don't say no. It's been so long since we've done something this idiotic. I have a whole bag of frozen red grapes in the freezer. And I just got this awesome new polish from the beauty place up the street. The color I got is called hurl but I think it looks more like a peach to me."

Tommie's life in a nutshell. She was going to watch a gay porn movie about a truck driver while eating frozen grapes, admittedly her favorite snack, and putting on a color polish called hurl.

"Why not? The doctor said that once I felt comfortable about having sex that I could proceed with caution." Tommie folded her legs on the couch.

After retrieving the grapes from the freezer and popping the disc into the player, Bix jumped back on the couch. "You're not having sex. You're just watching it."

The movie started with a tight shot of a truck grill pulling out to a view of the driver behind the wheel, a fairly attractive man wearing a baseball hat and a blue flannel shirt. He was okay looking for a blond haired brown-eyed man. Tommie liked her men with dark hair and light, mysterious eyes. When she thought about the dirty blonde haired, except for that distinguished gray at the temples, and hazel-eyed Dr. Gray, her toes curled.

So as not to alert Bix, Tommie took a deep breath, and grabbed a couple of the frozen, red orbs from a sandwich baggie. She popped one into her mouth and allowed it to melt a little before she bit down and chewed the sweet treat.

Bix shook the bottle of polish and set it on the coffee table. "Give me your hand."

Tommie presented one hand to her. Bix picked up a file and began shaping Tommie's nails. The sound of a truck horn coming from the TV caught her attention.

The driver in the movie stopped his truck and allowed a young male hitchhiker inside.

"Need a ride?" the driver asked.

"You bet. Do you mind if I tag along?" the young man asked.

"Oh, yeah, like we don't know what's coming." Bix split her attention from the TV to Tommie's nails. "Why don't they skip all of this talking and get to it?"

"I like them better with a story line." Tommie didn't mind the talking, the sharing, the romance, if you can call it that, before the actors went at each other with reckless abandon. That was what she wanted in her own life. It wasn't enough to just be physically attracted to someone. She wanted to be able to share with him too.

"You would, you nerd." Bix blew off the nail dust from Tommie's fingers then picked up the polish.

"So you asked about sex with your doc?" Bix asked and blew on Tommie's nails.

"No, he just told me some things to be careful of. *He* brought up sex." It was comforting to hear that she could have sex whenever she felt comfortable, not that it was a possibility. The one man that seemed interested she'd turned away on more than one occasion, even after he mentioned he felt chemistry between them.

Maybe if she had just admitted Gray was right, allowed him to kiss her, and had her way with him in her office, then she wouldn't have been a bundle of nerves, so full of stress that her body let her know it was time to slow down.

"You know it's okay if you like Dr. Sexy. No one's going to think less of you if you do," Bix said. She finished polishing Tommie's nails and she pulled her hand away.

"I don't care what anyone thinks."

"Then call him up and tell him that you want him to come pick you up in his Volvo, take you to his house and have him give you daily massages." Nonverbally, Bix summoned Tommie's other hand, currently sticky from the frozen grapes.

Tommie raised herself from the couch and went into the kitchen to clean off her hand. It was at that moment under the rush of the warm water that she remembered Gray's own hand.

The trip to the hospital had been a blur. The pain remained etched in her memory. The bright spot had been a strong but tender hand had held hers the entire way to the hospital, Gray's hand. Not that Junior wouldn't have done the same thing but Junior's hands were callused, not like the hand that had held hers.

His hands would feel great against her skin, touching her breasts, her back, her arms, everywhere. She would want him to explore her body and make the experience new for him. As a doctor, she knew he had seen a lot of bodies. She wanted hers to be the one he would never forget.

"Hey! What are you doing in there? You're missing the best part!" Bix screamed, interrupting Tommie's fantasy. Tommie turned off the water and dried her hand on a dishtowel.

As soon as she walked back into the den she was met with a vision of one man giving another oral sex in a bathroom stall.

"You should have heard the line the guy gave him before all of this happened. 'Is this seat taken?' I love porno!" Bix clapped her hands and laughed.

Before Tommie could concur or object, her phone rang. Bix, too enraptured with the movie to even notice, didn't even flinch. Tommie picked up the cordless phone in the kitchen since Bix had left the den phone unplugged.

"Hello," she said.

"Oh, hi. I didn't think you would be the one answering the phone."

Gray's voice weakened her knees and she had to brace herself against the doorframe.

"I'm not crippled." She softened her tone. "I'm getting stronger every day."

"And you're taking your medicine?"

The concern in his voice wrapped around her mind like a flannel blanket. She could almost see him standing in front of her, his hand stroking her cheek.

"Of course. Bix never lets me forget it. I'm fine. How are my guys?" She wanted to know how he was doing but it was no use pulling him into a personal conversation.

"They really miss you. They don't seem as intense as they were when you're around. I guess because Junior seems so down now."

Poor Junior. He was taking this harder than she was. Tommie couldn't believe he had blamed himself for her attack.

"He's very worried about me. But I'm fine. Really."

"He's not the only one worried."

Since the scare with her heart, she knew that nothing could happen between her and Gray but work. She was almost glad that he might be going back to work at the hospital if he won. She would be rid of one big temptation.

"Listen to this, Tommie!" Bix turned up the volume on the TV until the only thing that could be heard through her cozy house was the sound of moans and gasps.

"What's that?" Gray asked just as Tommie stumbled into the living room to get away from the noise.

"Uh, nothing. Just something stupid Bix and I are doing." She put her hand out to turn on the light.

"Is there someone else there? A guy?"

He almost sounded jealous. Tommie's toes tingled and a spark of electricity went through her spine.

"It's not what you think. We're--" Just as she was explaining herself, her foot hit something hard in the living room and she fell over onto the floor with her head brushing the corner of the coffee table on its way down. The phone flew out of her hand and bounced over to the other side of the room.

What in the world had she tripped over? She knew exactly where every stick of furniture sat in her living room. And she hadn't rearranged anything.

She managed to pull herself up onto the couch and turn on the light. A box was positioned between the couch and the coffee table. Or maybe that was where it landed after she had tripped over it. Bix must have left it there. This was why she demanded that all office supplies go down into the office immediately.

She saw the phone lying sideways on the floor and she crawled over to it, her head throbbing on each step. Just as she put the phone to her ear, she heard Gray screaming, "I'm coming over!" before he hung up the phone.

She had made enough noise to wake the dead but Bix didn't even notice. Tommie rose to her feet and staggered to the bathroom. Peering at her reflection in the mirror, she grimaced at the large knot forming on her head.

"Hey, did you see the flyers came in?" Bix asked as she came up behind Tommie.

Tommie turned around, one eye squinted and her hand on her forehead. “I noticed. Thanks for leaving the box in the living room.” She turned back to the mirror.

Even though Tommie laced her statement with sarcasm, she was thankful the box was left on the floor. If she hadn’t tripped over it while talking to Gray he would have never had an excuse to come over...and she wouldn’t have had the guts to invite him.

Chapter Six

"That's it. You're coming home with me." Gray crouched next to Tommie to tend to the nasty looking bump on her head, although it relieved him to see just a bump.

He'd gone through some pretty horrific scenarios for what may have happened to her when she suddenly dropped the phone and he'd heard her moan in pain. Had the angina upgraded to a full-on heart attack with no one but the guy moaning in the background to help her? Then when she hadn't answered him when he kept calling her name, he felt compelled to drive straight to her house and get her himself.

"Hold on there, buddy!" Bix put her hand to his chest when he stood, a feat since he towered a good foot over her. "Toms here is okay. She's not some injured puppy you just found on the street. Just a little bump. No big deal. You patch her up."

"Patch her up? She's not a rag doll either." Gray glanced down at Tommie as she sat on the couch, a bag of ice on her head and a weary expression on her face. He had to get her out of the house.

"I'm also sitting right here. You two don't have to talk about me like I'm not in the room." Tommie removed the ice pack from her head. In its wake remained a purple and red swollen hump, shiny from the condensation from the pack. "And I'm not a dog or a doll."

Gray peered down at Bix who put her fists to her hips. "I don't think you can look out for her. Where were you when she fell and hit her head?"

"Tommie and I were doing our regular Friday night routine when she left the room. Oh wait. She left to answer *your* call. So if you're so concerned about her getting rest, why did you call her?"

A regular Friday night routine? What was that? Some kinky sex game? Gray scanned the room to see if the routine man was still around.

No sound. No culprit. He took a deep breath. What was that chemical smell? Was that fingernail polish? He did notice that the fingernails on one of Tommie's hands were covered in a salmon color. Was she making a fashion statement or just didn't have time to do the other hand? Seemed every time Gray encountered this woman he learned something new, different.

"Someone's got to look out for her," Gray said. "She could have a concussion now. She has to be awakened during the night to make sure she's okay. I don't think you can tear yourself away from, well, yourself to even do that."

Bix stomped her foot on the floor. "Oh, give me a break. You don't know me or Tommie."

"I don't?" He shot Tommie a hard look. "Let me guess. It took you all of an hour, maybe two, before you were doing something business related, right?"

"So she took one call while I was getting the mail. Big deal."

"Aha! I'm right!"

"Enough." Tommie struggled to her feet. She put her hand on the arm of the couch probably to steady herself.

Staring at Gray, Tommie said, "What is your deal with me? Do you treat all of your patients this way when you were a--"

"Were?" he interrupted her. "I still am a doctor. And, yes, I have shown all of my patients this level of care."

"Even inviting them to your home? Please. Look, this is cute between us. I saved you by hiring you. You saved my life, literally. You don't owe me anything and I don't owe you anything. Let's just leave it at that and drop this conversation. Drop the idea that I'll stay in your precious little beachside condo. I still expect you to be at work with or without me." She headed down a hallway.

"Then I quit," Gray said to her back.

She stopped but kept her back to him.

"Well that's a rotten thing to do." Bix shook her head.

He kept his eyes on Tommie, hoping at some point she would turn around and say something. "If your main concern is that I stay on the road with your guys and that's the reason I can't stay at home and take care of you, then I'll quit."

Tommie finally pivoted around, her eyes shining brightly in the dim hallway like a tiger's glowing eyes in a jungle brush. "Oh no you're not trying to blackmail me into this. Who do you think you are to try to come into my house and take over my life? If you want to quit, fine. But don't make it seem like it's for my benefit."

Stubborn. Her strength drew him to her. The way her tendrils framed her face made him dizzy.

"Okay, wait." Bix held up her hands to them as she stood between them. "Why don't we have a happy medium?" She peered over to Tommie. "You stay at home for a couple of weeks and let Dr. Dudley Do-Right come over once a day to check you over." She turned to Gray. "You do your job and stop trying to be her keeper."

"I'm not trying to do that." At least he didn't think he was trying to do that. It wasn't often that he felt an overwhelming urge to protect someone the way he wanted to with Tommie. Not that Tommie was the fragile type. She had proven time and time again that she needed no one. Maybe he was trying to prove her wrong. Or maybe he was trying to prove to himself that he could be responsible.

"I don't bargain," Tommie said simply. "I'll be at work tomorrow."

"You're going back to work? You're not cleared for that. I'll do everything in my power to make sure you stay at home and take care of yourself." Gray shook his head.

"You would do that to me?" She snapped. Then her face softened. Tommie's lips parted slightly and her eyelids lowered. Her arms dropped down to her sides. "You would do that for me?" she asked almost in a whisper.

She was softening, trusting him, he hoped.

Tommie continued. "If you're there at work, fine. If not, that's okay, too. I'm tired of stressing over things I can't control. That includes my heart." She stared at him until she had to look away as though she wanted to say something else but instead fought against the urge. Or maybe it was fear.

"But you can control your condition," Gray said. "With my help, you can--"

"Just do your job. That's all you need to worry about." And with that, she walked away, disappearing into a room at the end of the hall.

"I guess she told you," Bix said to Gray and poked him in his arm.

"I heard that!" Tommie called back.

* * * *

The fact that Gray stared at Tommie as she sat backstage in the North Carolina arena did not escape her attention. At first it was a little annoying. The quick looks away every time she'd noticed. The way he stood no more than three feet away from her.

Then the attention became...beautiful. Gray was protecting her, the way no one ever had. She had always looked out for herself. She had to. Junior wasn't home, and her mother started dating after she and Junior split faster than Tommie could ask, 'Where's Daddy?'

Tommie didn't have time for a meaningful relationship. She moved around way too much to establish one. At least that was what she told herself after so many failed relationships.

Bix one time called her a serial dater. Since Tommie walked away from her job as a stockbroker, sold her large colonial home in Williamsburg and liquidated all of her assets in order to start UEW, she didn't have time or energy to date again.

"Start Firestarter's music," Tommie said in her headphone microphone. She had to get her mind off of Gray and on to business. She couldn't waffle on her own self-imposed rule for dating the talent.

She looked over at Gray this time. A fine specimen of a man. She would love to inhale his scent again.

A burly giant wearing all red with flaming hair to match, jumped up and down as his pounding music blared in the arena and filtered backstage. He knocked into Tommie's table, jostling the contents on it and making her jump. She thought she was used to Firestarter's jittery attitude by now. Had she been paying attention to him instead of wondering whether Gray was going commando or not, the bump wouldn't have caught her off guard.

"Hey!" Gray stepped in between the table and Firestarter. "Be careful around her."

As touching as Gray's gesture was, Tommie had to assert herself. "I'm fine, Dr. Kennebeck," she said, straightening out the monitors and notepad. "You're here for the wrestlers. I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, dude." Firestarter put one of his ham-sized hands on Gray's shoulder and the other one he used to pat, or rather pound, on Gray's chest. "Why don't you take one of your thermometer's and shove it up your--"

"Hey!" Tommie jerked up and put her hand onto the red menace's shoulder. "Get out to the arena. Now!"

Firestarter snorted and bolted through a black tarp curtain.

"You." She pointed to Gray. "In the back room. Now." She gave Hobby some directions and stormed down the hallway. She opened the last door and kept it open until Gray galloped through it. Once inside, she positioned herself with her back to the closed door.

"What you did out there was way out of line," Tommie began. "I can handle myself with the guys. I am not one of your patients. I am your boss. That's it."

"You're really into defining roles for people," Gray said and folded his arms,

those well-toned arms he must have gotten from playing tennis or surfing. Couldn't have been from working out.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was a frat boy. I'm your doctor. I mean, *company* doctor. You're my boss. Bix does this. Hobby does that. We can't be friends. You can't be nice."

"I *can* be nice. I didn't fire you after hearing about your sticky fingers."

"You also don't know the facts."

Tommie opened her mouth but before she could get the words out Gray interrupted her.

"And you're not going to know anything about it either. It has nothing to do with what I do here." Gray stared at her for a while. "Why won't you take what happened to you seriously? You had a real episode with your heart and you act as though you're getting over the sniffles." He stared at her intensely. "Don't you care about your life?"

She melted. The icy wall she had around her self, her heart, slowly dissolved until it formed a pool around her feet. He wanted to help her so much. She knew it was out of genuine concern. He wasn't trying to get her into bed. He wasn't trying to control her life. If anything, he was trying to prolong it. But why? He would be leaving her, her company, soon. He had already said that.

"I don't get you. Does someone like me turn you on?"

She saw him raise his eyebrows and she realized what she'd said and rephrased her question.

"I mean do you get off on helping someone with an obvious medical condition rather than just routine stuff with the guys?"

He took a careful step closer to her. With his index finger, he pointed to her chest just below the hollow in her neck. "I just want to make sure that this doesn't get damaged, and that you'll be around to sign my paychecks."

Tommie couldn't help but smile. She hoped, though, that he couldn't feel her heart pounding away from his slight touch. She swallowed hard, a gesture he didn't miss.

"Something wrong, Tommie?" he asked, his voice so low it triggered her heart to a new level of acceleration.

She couldn't tell him. What could she say? Although she was his boss, she wanted to jump his bones and have some good ol' fashion meaningless sex? The bad part about that was she didn't think she wanted it to be meaningless. He was the first man she ever wanted something more substantial. Not a relationship. Not even a commitment. She didn't know what she wanted to call it. A promise maybe. A promise to never leave, to always be by her side, to let her be the woman she wanted to be.

"Well?" he asked.

Instead of responding verbally, Tommie cradled his face in her hands and kissed him hard. She closed her eyes so as not to catch his expression, good or indifferent. In his powerful hands, he grabbed her arms right above her elbows.

Gray could have easily pulled her off of him. To ensure that she kissed him longer, she slid her tongue into his mouth.

His moan vibrated their lips. Soon his hands slipped down to her waist. He pulled her in close, so close she felt his impressive bulge pressing against her stomach.

Gray brought one hand up and settled it underneath her breast. Tommie,

determined to not be so afraid of living, took that hand and moved it up to her breast. The touch made him moan even louder. He leaned into her more. Her pebbled nipple brushed against her bra cup until all she wanted to do was pull the damn piece of underwear off and have Gray caress her heated flesh.

Stay with the sexy doctor for a few days? Tommie started to seriously consider the prospect now.

Tommie broke from the kiss first. Neither said a word, just stared at each other, breathless. As she was about to respond, the door slammed against the back of her, knocking her forward into Gray's strong arms. He caught her and moved her away from the door.

"What are you two doing? Dancing?" Bix asked as she stepped into the room.

With the knock to the back of her head, the situation came into light. What the hell had Tommie done? She kissed her employee? Furthermore, she liked it. As much as she enjoyed being held in the safety of the terminally handsome Dr. Gray Kennebeck's arms, Tommie stood on her own accord and straightened herself out.

As she rubbed the back of her head, the blow not even being cushioned by her bun, she said, "Why is it that lately whenever I'm in a room with you I end up getting hurt?"

"You're clumsy, I guess." Bix combed her fingers through her hair.

"You wanted something, Bix?" Tommie put her hands to her hips and hoped beyond hope that she wasn't blushing.

At least with Bix's interruption, Tommie didn't have to admit what had just happened between her and Gray. She had already laughed in his face when he brought up the prospect that there was an attraction between the two of them. She didn't want to hear him say he was right. Nothing was more annoying than an arrogant man.

"Yeah, Firestarter bit another fan. Said the guy was making fun of him. Guess our boy doesn't really get the pro-wrestling business."

Tommie sighed. Not another potential lawsuit. She rubbed the back of her neck.

"We need you out there to calm the fan down and stuff. You know. Give them that warm, fuzzy Tommie Balford apology. Oh, and something's wrong with the lighting. You know Wolf won't perform if the lighting's not right on him. Did I tell you that our emcee is losing his voice?"

The more Bix talked, the more Tommie's heart, and head, pounded. Tommie would have thought that Bix would have handled some of these problems.

Hobby rushed into the small makeshift office in his usual attire, t-shirt, jeans, skater sneakers with a clipboard in his hand and a headset parting his messy brown hair.

"The emcee is losing his voice," he said almost out of breath.

"So I heard." Tommie put her hand to her forehead.

"You know, the offer to stay with me still stands." Gray's expression was so full of pity that it almost made her sick. Where was the lust that was in his eyes just moments before? Oh God. Had he actually kissed her out of pity?

Tommie finally said, "No." She exhaled as though she had been holding her breath for twenty years, four months, two weeks and a day. It felt so good she said it again. "No."

Bix shook her head. "What do you mean, no?"

"I'm not going to handle those problems." She looked at Gray. "And I'm definitely not staying with you." Tommie put her hand to her chest. "You're part owner. You and Junior. Both of you handle those problems. I'm going to take care of myself for a change. Since we're not touring next week, Bix, you can use this time to get the publicity out for the pay-per-view. Get Junior and Hobby to keep the wrestlers training." She fixed her gaze directly on Gray. "You take care of the bitten fan."

"Of course." Gray nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Bix asked. "Are you quitting?"

"Of course not. But I'm pushing myself too hard. I need to take a break before *Home Invasion*. A week should do me." Although she said that calmly, her insides screamed that it was against her nature to not work. What the hell was she thinking? She took a deep breath and hoped she would have enough strength to not change her mind.

"Tommie, you can't do this now. We need you." Bix stomped her foot like a spoiled child.

Tommie approached her best friend and put her hands on her shoulders. "I need to do this for myself otherwise I'm going to have a short life."

Tommie turned to Gray. "And you don't worry. I'll still be able to sign your paychecks." She turned her gaze to Bix. "And you. Don't mess up anything, and don't read too much into what I'm doing. I love you but you're right. I need to take care of myself." Tommie strolled by Bix and down the hallway. She felt more liberated than she'd ever felt in her life.

* * * *

By the end of the show, buzz of Tommie taking time off ran rampant through the backstage. At first the stares and the whispers behind Tommie's back bothered her. Then she learned to take it in stride. She was the owner of the company. If she wanted to take a week off, that was her right. And no one was going to convince her otherwise.

The door to her cramped, makeshift office in the arena in Charlotte, North Carolina flew open and Junior stood on the other side. Her heart fluttered momentarily. She hadn't thought about how he would have reacted to all of this. Then again, it wasn't his decision either.

"What is this I hear about you quitting?" Junior stomped up to her.

"Close the door, Junior." She knew a conversation with him would eventually turn into a screaming match. Junior did everything at a high volume. One trait she picked up from him that she wished she could hand over to anyone else.

He turned back to the door and slammed it. Then he marched back to her. Before he could say anything, Tommie opened the conversation.

"My heart thing really has me nervous." She packed her laptop into her bag and was sure to keep her head down as she spoke. "I want to make sure I'm in great condition for our big pay-per-view."

"But you're not wrestling. You're just sitting on your butt backstage."

She was sure he didn't mean it in the callous way it came out but it still hurt to hear him say that. "Thanks. Glad to know I'm appreciated around here."

"I didn't mean it that way." He approached her and put his finger under her chin. He lifted her head so that she had no choice but to look him in the eyes. "I know you do a lot around here. Some people here aren't motivated enough to do anything when you're

gone.”

His statement made her wonder who he meant until he broke his gaze from her and walked back to the door. Was Junior thinking about quitting?

“Do *you* want to quit?” She stepped around the thin card table to her weary father.

He tipped his baseball cap back and rubbed his forehead. It may have been because of his match an hour before, but he looked tired. The lines and wrinkles in his face were set in deep like he was a piece of oak and someone had carved them there.

“Wrestling is all I know, darling. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t do this.” He smiled and swallowed her in a hug with his long arms that for some reason made her breath catch.

A good business person would have probably let him keep wrestling until his knees, back and every other joint in his body were blown, then let him go. A good daughter, however, would have told him to leave this hard and crazy business.

She pulled back from him. She’d been selfish to think that creating this company for Junior so that they could have the close relationship she had always wanted as a child was right for him. It was even worse that she recognized his subtle hints to quit and she never acknowledged them. Maybe it was time she stopped and listened to him.

“Dad, maybe you should--” She stopped. She couldn’t choke the words out. She wasn’t firing her father. She was allowing him to live. She was giving him the out that he needed just like she was taking for herself.

“Should what?”

“Retire.” She spat the word out and clamped her mouth shut before she could do anymore damage.

“Retire? Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you need to. You’re tired. Your health is not in the greatest condition.”

“Wrestling is in my blood. I am the king of the pay-per-view. Did you know that I was the headliner in the very first pay-per-view show ever?”

She nodded. “I know.” Little did he know, she had his life chronicled in a scrapbook she’d started when she was ten years old. The last entry was the match he won against Axman. That was last week.

“Just because it’s easy for you to walk away, doesn’t mean that we all can do that. I thought I raised you to be tougher than that.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe you said that. You of all people can talk to me about walking away? Amazing.” She snatched her bag off of the table.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She grabbed the doorknob and yanked the door open. Her hot temper came from Junior too. “It means that if I’m tough it’s because I made myself that way. No one was around to raise me to be this way.” She gazed at him hard. “No one.”

She’d never seen Junior speechless but there he was with his mouth agape and his hands on his hips. She walked down the back hallway until she saw the back of Gray. Although her body immediately reacted to the sight of him with her nipples hardening again and her stomach quivering, she was not in the mood to deal with him either. Not that he would have been unpleasant to her but she could sense that he would have

probably argued with her to stay and have him watch over her. She wasn't in the mood to explain herself a second time.

She changed her trek to another side hallway that led to the parking garage under the arena. The shadowy garage smelled of car exhaust and oil spots dotted the cement floor. She normally didn't walk around by herself but she wanted out so badly that she never thought about her own safety.

Fishing through her bag, she pulled out her car keys. If she wasn't so tired, she would have driven all the way back to her home in Chesapeake, Virginia. As it was, she wanted to get to her hotel room and slide into a hot bath while listening to some soothing music like D'Angelo or Maxwell.

As she sighed, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Screaming, she whipped around and with a kick worthy of a Rockette, she caught her would-be attacker squarely between the legs. The man crumpled to the ground with a groan and rolled up in a fetal-like position. Tommie gathered herself and ran toward her sensible Toyota Camry. She didn't know who it was who'd touched her but she was sure he wouldn't do it again.

"Tommie," the man groaned.

A few feet from her car and she stopped. How did he know her name? She turned back to the attacker who was struggling to get to his feet. Although he had his head down she could tell it wasn't Gray. Still weary, she took careful steps back to her car. She wanted to be ready in case this man found some untapped strength to bolt toward her.

As her back met with the car, the man stood semi-erect. Even bent over she could see that he was a fairly tall man, and a little heavy obvious by the way the buttons on his shirt strained around his stomach. His dark skin tone looked almost like the shade of her stepfather. She prayed to herself that she hadn't actually kicked her own stepfather in his family jewels. Her mother would have never forgiven her.

"Tommie Balford." He coughed and rested his hands on his knees, his face still looking down to the floor. She unlocked the car door, feeling secure that even if he found the strength to run after her that he wouldn't have been able to catch her.

"Who are you?" she asked after throwing her bags onto the passenger seat. "How do you know my name?"

The man finally lifted his head. He looked familiar. His face had small almost delicate features. His shaved head and light brown eyes made him almost appealing, if she didn't suspect he was some sort of stalker.

"You don't remember?" He coughed again and tried to stand up straight.

It was rare that she put herself out there for fans to see. Thanks to the Internet, fans knew the ins and outs of her company more than she did. She even got some fan mail thanking her for bringing back real wrestling with minimal storylines. She hoped this wasn't one of those fanatics.

"Should I know you?" She kept her key ready in her hand in case this guy felt froggy.

"Maybe not. It has been almost a year ago." He sauntered to her almost with a limp. She'd really done some damage on him.

She thought back a year ago. That was when she started UEW. She met with so many people then. Promotions, arena reps, ticket sales reps, gym owners, commercial

real estate owners.

When he got close enough to her, she decided to stop him in his tracks. "So are you going to tell me who you are or do I take another kick?"

He stopped. "Please don't. I'd like to have kids someday."

Where did she know him? His face looked so familiar.

He presented his large hand. "Since you don't remember me, I guess I'll have to reintroduce myself. Hayes Hamilton."

She thought for a while before taking his hand. She let his name bounce around in her head before it sunk in who he was.

She took his hand. "Hayes Hamilton. Are you slumming it tonight, Mr. Hamilton? Shouldn't you be off doing something for Slamtastics? I hear you're up to three romances in your wrestling company. One involving two women. Guess that brings in the young, male viewers, huh."

"No one wants to see the same dog-and-pony show all of the time, Tommie. Can I call you Tommie?"

"No."

"So this is what I'm thinking, Tommie. My offer from a year ago still stands. I'll take your tired little road show off your hands. Now the price has gone down a little because you've tarnished the names of some fine up-and-comers. But I'm sure with the Slamtastic spin on their characters, even I could resurrect the dead."

How could she have forgotten about this pompous jerk? As soon as she'd gotten a nice stable of wrestlers to come to her company, this guy popped up already wanting her to close down. She wasn't falling for it then and she wouldn't be folding now. Not while she was on the edge of turning her company into something big.

"Why don't you worry about your own company and leave it up to healthy competition? And you can stop stalking me." She sat down in the driver's side and slammed the door. She started the car just as Hayes knocked on the glass.

She must have done something pretty horrible in her life to end up dealing with people like him. She powered her window down.

"I hate to burst your bubble, sweetie, but I'm not stalking you."

She wanted to kick him again for calling her sweetie. Who did this man think he was? Just because he was in Gucci from head to toe did not make him Sean 'Diddy' Combs.

"I had a show over at the Charlotte Coliseum. You didn't know that?"

"Unlike you, I don't have the distinct pleasure of watching your every move. I do have a business to run." She lied. She had known Slamtastics was in town. It seemed that wherever she went, his company was sure to follow. It was almost like he was trying to bully her out of the business.

"See, that's where you make your mistake. You always have to keep your eye on the competition. Otherwise you might miss out on something like say a new up-and-coming talent whose name rhymes with 'go' and he's trying to do just that."

She jumped out of the car and didn't pay attention to how fast her heart was racing. "Oh no you're not trying to take Mo from UEW. He's one of my best."

"I know. Such charisma. Such raw talent. It's a shame he has to waste it all here where he's barely seen. He should be with me and my company where he'll get the

exposure he needs.”

“Yeah, and be crippled for life.”

“A little medical insurance is not going to stop these guys--”

“And women.”

“--from having aching bones and torn muscles.”

“Fine. He’s under contract.”

He snickered. “Honey, even if you sue him, the money he’ll make with us will more than cover the expense. Eventually when I have him, the rest will soon follow.”

“No, they won’t.” She hoped.

He reached into his pocket of his black, silky looking pants and pulled out a card. It was a business card but on material that was hard and plastic, almost like a credit card. It didn’t help that it was gold. She didn’t even have business cards unless you counted the ones left over from her stockbroker days.

“If you change your mind about selling, give me a call.” He held the card to her face but she kept her hands gripped to the car door. She wasn’t giving up her company. Not to Hayes. Not to pressure. And definitely not to her medical condition.

Hayes smirked and slid the card into her front jean pocket just as Gray walked up to them. She turned to him and saw him staring at Hayes’ hand down at her pocket and the proximity of their bodies. She was sure it looked more intimate than it was.

“Are you okay?” Gray asked.

Hayes looked over at him. “Who are you? Security?”

“The doctor.”

Hayes peered down at her. “I didn’t know you had a doctor character.” Before she could answer, he continued. “You look to be in good shape. Interested in a job? Minimal wrestling. Great storylines. And you work with some of the most beautiful women in the business.”

“I like my job here. Besides, I’m already working with the most beautiful woman in the business.”

Tommie turned her head so fast that her neck ached in the motion. Was he serious? Now her heart was pounding for a different reason. And she was plotting how her week off sabbatical could get her around her own rule of dating the talent.

She pushed Hayes back from her. “Thanks but no thanks. I think I’m doing fine.” She sat back in her car.

Hayes leaned down, rested his arms on the door and poked his head inside.

“You know it’s not over between us, right?” He sucked his teeth. “I’ll be in touch. I know a smart woman like you knows to do the right thing.”

She put the car in reverse, nearly dragging his pompous ass with her. It was great to see him jerk up after stumbling. With a wave, he strolled back to a shiny black Mercedes SUV.

In her side view mirror, she saw Gray creeping up the side of her car.

“I’m coming up to you. Don’t run me over.” He held his hands up as though he were being robbed.

“Very funny.” She threw the car in park and leaned her head back.

“So who was that guy?”

The tone in Gray’s voice sounded more like jealousy than concern. No matter

how much she tried to fight it, she liked feeling like he may care about her.

"No one for you to concern yourself about." She rubbed her hand over her tired, itchy eyes.

"How did I know you were going to say something like that?" Gray smiled.

"Should have figured you can take care of yourself."

"Yeah. Right." Maybe the tough girl attitude wasn't what she wanted, especially not with Gray now. It would be nice to have someone look out for her not because of business or guilt. Maybe it was time to let the ice melt. The kiss definitely started her thawing process.

"Will I see you again after today?" Gray cut a quizzical gaze at her.

Tommie didn't answer. If she listened to her body, she would have gotten mixed messages. Her hands became sweaty but her heart pounded in fear and anticipation.

Not waiting for her to respond, Gray finally said, "I guess this is the last time I'll see you for a while. Be sure to stay up with your medication and your doctor appointments. And especially take it easy and--"

She cut him off. "Want to go get something to eat?"

His silence said volumes. He must not have been ready for her invitation. She wasn't ready either.

Her fingers tapped on the steering wheel. "Well? I know it's late but I'm not ready to go back to my hotel room now. I really don't want to be alone."

"What about Bix or even Junior? If you need to talk, why don't you--"

"Yes or no. That's all I want to hear." Sometimes the tough girl attitude was necessary for decisive answers.

"Yes."

"Good. Then let's go."

Chapter Seven

Denny's. Not the most romantic place in the world for a first date, but Tommie wasn't about to invite Gray back to her hotel room for mints on her pillow. And this wasn't really considered a date. Just a meal with a...co-worker. No, an employee. She was still his boss, a boss who had kissed her employee.

"I know this is not a place you would normally come to, especially at three o'clock in the morning." She blanketed her lap with a green cloth napkin.

"Why do you do that?" Gray scratched his head and leaned back.

"Do what?" She wondered if he had seen her obsessively straightening out her utensils on the table. It was a habit she thought she broken herself out of years ago.

"Make assumptions. You know I spent many a night in Denny's eating my share of their Grand Slams."

Just when she thought she could put her finger on Gray, his type, he surprised her. "Why here?" Her eyes scanned the almost empty restaurant. A couple of scruffy looking men inhabited the bar in front of the kitchen. A noisy group of young men and women took up residence at a corner table. Tired waitresses nested at a corner booth right by the front door, waiting for the next customer.

"They're open twenty-four hours. It was a lot quieter than my dorm room with two other extremely horny roommates. And I had a huge crush on this one waitress." He stretched his long arms across the back of the bench. "But I guess you don't want to hear about that just like you don't want to talk about our amazing kiss earlier this evening."

Tommie swallowed hard. "I haven't had the greatest of days. It would be nice to hear something uplifting." She bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. "Tell me your Denny's story."

"Big shock that you would skip the most important thing that we should talk about."

The fluorescent lighting along with the dark wood trimming and hunter green chairs and benches gave the place an almost autumn type feeling. Dark but cozy. A brilliant marketing strategy.

Before Gray could get into his story, a waitress came to their booth and got their orders. After hearing his confession, it was no surprise that he ordered a Grand Slam breakfast. For nostalgia, Tommie ordered a slice of cherry pie topped with vanilla ice cream.

Once the waitress brought Gray his sweetened iced tea and Tommie her tall glass of ice water, Tommie couldn't wait to hear his story, which he seemed to have changed his mind on telling. He took a hefty gulp of his tea, commented on how the further south you got the better the tea was, but said nothing about the crush.

"You really want to make me beg, don't you?" She twirled her straw in her water, stabbing at the occasional bobbing ice cube. She could smell the hickory scent of bacon wafting in the air and the sweet smell of pancakes mixed with it. She almost wished she'd ordered a breakfast instead of her pie.

"Depends on what you're talking about." He twisted his lemon wedge, extracting the juices into his tea.

"Your crush. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine." She wouldn't beg.

"Ah, that. My first year in college I would go to the nearby Denny's to study. Sometimes I would go to this other place called Auntie Anne's but Denny's was my favorite. As a college student I didn't have much money so I would order a coffee and get the refills while I crammed for biology or anatomy or chemistry or whatever class I was taking that I needed my whole brain."

She laughed at him. He smiled that wonderfully mesmerizing smile with dimples so deep, it was as if a sculptor carved them in his face.

"This one waitress was always so nice to me. Her name was Veronica. Hot Puerto Rican woman with this wild hair and great brown eyes." He gazed at her. "You remind me of her sometimes."

"I'm not Puerto Rican." She took a sip of her water. Now he was making assumptions about her.

"I didn't say you were. Your attitude reminded me of her."

Now she was making assumptions about him. She needed to stop that.

He continued. "She was really tough. Guess she had to be working the overnight shift and serving a bunch of drunks and poor college students. I was studying one night. The bones in the human foot. You'd be surprised at how many there are. I guess I looked more exhausted than normal. She would come by my booth every fifteen minutes to wake me. Finally she sat right at my booth, grabbed my book and said 'Okay, tell me all of the bones in the foot. If you get them all right I'll give you a free breakfast.' Needless to say with my belly growling I made sure to get every name right. True to her word, she fed me."

"So you had a crush on her because she gave you free food." She felt relief knowing that his crush wasn't anything sexual.

"I didn't say that either. It was nice of her to feed me. But I had a crush on her because she had this amazing heart."

Without really thinking, Tommie put her hand to her chest as though her own physical heart was being put into question. As though he had realized what he said, he quickly followed up his statement.

"And you do too. You care about those men and women who work for you like they were family. And that shows."

"Thanks." She twirled her glass in between her hands.

"So what about you?" He finished off his tea and it took no time for the waitress to fill it back up again.

"What about me?"

"Who was your first crush? Or is that type of information still off limits?" He tried peering into her eyes.

She didn't know what it was, but she felt all right talking to him about her life.

"I was a senior in high school. Dr. Norman Phillips." She couldn't believe she was talking about this. She hadn't even confessed this to Bix.

"Norman?" He snickered.

"Not everyone can have a cool name like Gray."

“So you think my name is cool?” He smiled even wider.

She had to coolly get out of answering that question. “Anyway. He was my psychology teacher. He was still fairly young. In his late twenties, early thirties I think. But I thought he was incredibly smart and deep and funny. He had this way about him. Confident, you know. Like nothing could hurt him.” Her mind wandered off thinking of how he was the only teacher, or person for that matter, who ever really listened to her. He was the only one who let her talk about her family, growing up as a biracial child and missing her father.

“And what did he look like?”

“Tall. Kind of lanky. Incredible blue eyes. Balding but it didn’t matter. He was still sexy. And he had these dimples that--” She peered her eyes up to Gray when she realized she was going too far into details about another man. “Sorry. You’re a guy. You wouldn’t appreciate hearing about another man.”

“That’s the first assumption you’ve gotten right.” He tapped his fingers on the table. “So what happened to Dr. Phillips? Ever keep in contact?”

“Not really. I mean I would go over to the school the week it was about to start because I knew the teachers would be setting up for the new year. We would sit and talk for hours. But then he found another job at a school up in Maine. He had family there from what I understand. I didn’t see him again. In some ways, he reminds me of you.”

He furrowed his eyebrows and set down his tea. “How’s that?”

“He knew where he wanted to go in life and he left. No emotional baggage. No ties. Reminds me of a lot of men in my life.” She wiped off the water droplets on her side of the table with her bare hand. “I know this job is not what you really want. I know as soon as whatever you’re going through is over you’re going to go back to the hospital. It takes a lot of guts to stand by your convictions. I admire that.”

Again, he remained silent as though he didn’t know whether to thank her or refute her statement. Luckily their food came and it prevented either of them from saying anything.

After slathering maple syrup on his pancakes, Gray cut off a huge chunk and shoveled it into his mouth like a man given a reprieve from his own bad cooking. Tommie twirled her spoon in her ice cream and along with a piece of pie, scooped it into her mouth and savored the familiar sweet taste. Still the same after twenty years.

“So what’s the deal with that?” He pointed to her pie then drank his tea.

“What do you mean? It’s just pie.”

“No special story behind it? I mean, you know why I enjoy this particular meal. Just thought you might have a special story behind that. People usually don’t eat pie at three o’clock in the morning.”

“Some people do. Fathers and daughters sometimes do.” She couldn’t believe she was opening up this much but there was something so approachable and safe with him.

“Ah. So you do have parents. You didn’t fall from the sky.”

“Do you work at trying to start arguments with me or is it a natural ability?”

“Natural I guess. So tell me about your dad.”

If he only knew. As much as she wanted to share with him, she wasn’t about to tell him the full truth. “He’s a great guy. When I was a kid, we had a tight relationship

but he traveled all the time for his job so I rarely saw him. Then he and my mother split. Maybe once or twice a year for my birthday and certain holidays I would see him. When he was home, no matter what time of day it was, he would take me to the Denny's near our house and let me have whatever I wanted off of the menu. I would always choose the cherry pie and vanilla ice cream. It still reminds me of him even today." Now she wished she hadn't fought with him earlier in the evening. She should be sharing this moment with him.

"Sounds like a nice guy. Are you two still close?" He popped a piece of bacon into his mouth and wiped his fingers on his napkin.

"Yes. More so now than when I was younger. I love him so much. I would do anything for him."

"I'm sure he knows that. What parent wouldn't?"

She often wondered if Junior did know. Did he know she created UEW so that she could be by his side every day of her life?

"So what about you, Gray? What's the story with your parents?"

"Lieutenant General and Mrs. Kennebeck live comfortably in their Miami condo right by the ocean."

"Lieutenant General and Mrs.? Doesn't sound like you're close." She finished off her pie and wiped her mouth.

He sighed. "My father was a Marine. Semper Fi." He pumped his fist into the air. "My mother was the type who hung on to every word the man said. So when he said he wanted me to go into the Marines and be a good soldier and I didn't, he told my mom that they should be disappointed in me."

"What? But you're a doctor. You would think they would be proud of that."

"Not enough. At least not for him. He wanted me to be a brain surgeon."

"I thought I put a lot of demands on myself. No wonder you jump out of airplanes."

He broke his gaze from his plate and looked at her. A smile hitched at the corner of his mouth and he laughed. It was the heartiest laugh she had heard in a long time.

"Thanks. I needed that."

She watched him finish off his food. It was a wonder that he had such a great body with all of the fattening foods he'd engulfed. But it was apparent that this must have been a treat.

"So what about siblings?" she asked.

"One older brother. He lives up in Pennsylvania. Has a wife and two kids. I see him as much as I can. What about you?"

"Nope. Only child. But Bix was like a sister to me growing up. She still is."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, so you two or more like sisters than anything else?"

She realized what he must have been thinking about, the incident at her house with her, Bix and Junior. So that mystery for him was solved. No romantic affair with Bix. "Yes, she's my best friend. I don't know what I would do without her."

"And what is Junior to you?"

That mystery she would leave unsolved--for now. "He's very special to me, too."

His expression looked like he had been defeated. "But not so special that you couldn't kiss other guys now and then, right?"

"Let's get the check and get back to the hotel. I need to get some sleep." She signaled for the waitress.

"I'll pick this up." Gray reached in his back pocket.

"No. I invited you. I'll get it."

He put his hand on top of hers on the table. She stared at him. "Trust me. I wanted to go. You weren't twisting my arm."

She slipped her hands from under his and scooted across the bench. "I'll meet you outside."

The heat from Gray's hand ignited Tommie's need. Everything in her body pulsed and throbbed. If she didn't get away from Gray, she would jump him.

"That was fun." He walked toward her in the parking lot. "We should do that again sometime. You seem to be more relaxed when we're talking over food."

She got into her car and powered then powered the window down. "Do you know how to get back to the hotel or do you need to follow me?"

He waited a beat then answered. "I think I can find my way back."

Without a word she backed out of her space and sped off. The next company doctor she would hire would have to be someone she couldn't remotely be attracted to. An older woman or a married man. The affairs of the heart were worse than running UEW. At least the people at work listened to what she had to say. Her pesky emotions were bad for business.

* * * *

Gray could barely keep up with her when she drove back to the hotel. It was clear she didn't want to talk about the kiss and how she truly felt about him.

When they'd gotten to the hotel, she'd barely looked at him going inside. The silence inside of the elevator car was not only uncomfortable, it was thick. He stood behind her admiring her soft shoulders, tiny waist showed off by her clingy t-shirt and her tight jeans that proved that there was indeed a God. He wanted so much to let her hair come down but she kept it up in that tight bun.

Once the car stopped on the sixth floor, his floor, he was surprised that she'd gotten out with him. They'd even walked down the hallway together until she stopped at a door across the hall and two doors down from his room. He'd wished her a good night before she darted into her room.

Women. No matter how much he knew of their many and wondrous anatomical parts, he would never understand their minds. Maybe it was better that way.

Gray sat on the end of his bed. The room wasn't too bad. Green-pink-and-white flowered bedspread on his full sized bed. Big enough for two, he thought. A TV bolted down to a thigh high dresser. A small TV remote sat on the nightstand next to his bed with six buttons on it: channel up, channel down, volume up, volume down, mute and the red power button.

He specifically asked for a non-smoking room but a stale cigarette smell hung in the air. In the middle of the textured ceiling was a smoke detector that had a blinking red light. He would probably be staring at that the whole night as he thought about Tommie.

He had to stop thinking about her, especially in a romantic way. Despite the kiss, she made it clear that she wanted no parts of him except as an employee. If her words didn't convey it, then the way she ran from him at the restaurant said volumes.

As he began taking off his shirt and sneakers, a knock on his door stopped him. He looked at his watch to make sure he didn't imagine it was four thirty in the morning. He squinted his eye at the fisheye lens of the peephole. He saw Tommie fidgeting back and forth. What was she doing at his hotel room?

He unlocked and unchained his door and opened it, which looked to have surprised her the way she jumped.

"Are you okay?" He got concerned that maybe it had something to do with her heart. From what he had seen she looked like she was taking her medication regularly and trying to take it easy.

"No, I'm not okay." She stopped moving but kept staring into his eyes.

"Is it your heart? Do you need to sit down?"

Her mouth moved but nothing came out.

"Come on in." He attempted to take her hand but she crossed her arms over her chest and stepped inside of his room. He closed the door. Only when he passed his reflection in the dresser mirror did he realize that he was shirtless. Shirtless in a hotel room with his boss. As he followed her into the room he tried reaching around her to pick up his shirt from the bed. Then she sat down...on the bed...on his shirt.

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the dresser across from her. "What's wrong, Tommie?"

She cleared her throat. "This is hard for me to say. And I don't even know why I'm telling you this. Maybe it's because you're a doctor and you seem so normal."

"Thanks, I think." He peered down and noticed her feet were bare. Her toenails were painted in a sexy fire engine red color that sent his blood flowing to the wrong parts in his body.

Baseball scores. Hockey averages. State capitols. Anything to keep his mind off of her sexy feet and pouty lips.

"I know I acted a little strange after our, um--"

"Kiss?" Gray said, concluding her thoughts.

"Yes. I want to let you know that it had nothing to do with you, my reaction I mean. It's me." She crossed her legs. Thank God she still had her jeans on and didn't change into a pair of shorts or some skimpy pajamas.

Basketball MVP's since 1990. Hit songs by The Beatles. The bones in the human skull.

"I was a little concerned. It was like you went from happy to surly in a matter of minutes. I don't think that mood swings are a side effect of your medication."

"It's not the medication." She bolted from the bed. "I, uh. Well, it's just..." She looked at his bare chest and averted her eyes back up to his. "Never mind. I don't know why I came here." She darted to the door but before she could open it, he got there before her and blocked her.

"You came to me for a reason. You didn't go to Bix or Junior."

"Bix is probably out and Junior is extremely cranky if his sleep is disturbed." She smiled a little and relaxed her hunched shoulders.

"So tell me what's going on. Does it have something to do with those men at the gym when you had your attack? Or that guy at your car after the show?"

She hadn't come clean to him about the men in black who he'd attempted to grill

after she'd passed out. And the man at her car seemed to be more intimate with her than just some friend or business associate.

"No. Nothing like that." She took a deep breath. "I have this thing."

Please let her be talking about something mental and not a physical thing. She was too beautiful to be a man in drag. "A thing?" He put his hands on his hips.

"I'm a bit of a control freak."

"No? The hell you say." Though dripping with sarcasm, he was relieved that it wasn't something physical but surprised at the problem. "You manhandled me the first time we met. That just screams Type A."

"I kissed you because I was trying to fix myself. It sounds crazy but I just think that if I'm able to do something that's so not me, then maybe I would get better."

"As much as it pains me that you used me for your self-medication technique, you aren't way off the mark in your thinking."

"I'm not?" She screwed up her face.

"Many, many years ago, doctors had a strange technique for treating women they diagnosed as being hysterical."

She shook her head. "I'm not crazy. I knew I shouldn't have told you. I feel so stupid telling you this." She reached for the doorknob again and he pressed his back against the door.

"Do you want to hear about this treatment or not? And you're not crazy. A little brazen maybe but not crazy." He had to be reassuring.

Tommie crossed her arms over her chest when he wouldn't allow her to leave. "Fine. What is it?"

"A good old-fashioned orgasm."

Tommie's eyes widened as she stared at Gray. "Are you kidding? How in the world could a doctor administer something like that?"

Gray shook his head. He wasn't going to let Tommie go without getting her more comfortable with him. "Not kidding at all. They would use a makeshift vibrator. Doctors claimed it relaxed women enough so they didn't go into hysterics. The fact of the matter was that the women weren't getting what they needed at home and they were so wound up, as any person would be, that it made them cranky. So there is something to your theory about the kiss." He took a step closer to her. "About sex."

"I never mentioned sex." She cocked her head and took a step back. "I don't think a good screw is going to change my physical makeup."

He took another step toward her. He felt her heat flaming from her body. If he listened hard enough, he might be able to hear her heart beating, which had to have been pounding as hard as his was right now.

"This is crazy. We can't do anything." She took another step back and met up against a waist-high dresser. "You're my employee."

"I thought you were taking a week off." Gray smiled. "I'd say while you're off, you're no longer my boss. Deal?"

The agreement was a long shot. Knowing Tommie, she would tell him he was full of shit and storm back to her room.

Surprisingly, Tommie nodded.

With great care and ease, Gray slipped his hand behind Tommie's neck, brought

her forward and planted the softest kiss on her lips. Her full lips welcomed him a lot more than he had expected. Though stiff at first, she soon yielded to him.

As if she were afraid to touch him, Gray noticed that Tommie never placed her hands on him. With his free hand, he held one of hers. She interlaced her fingers with his and hummed. Every single hair follicle on Gray's body stood on end. He felt as though an electric current surged through him.

The hand that rested behind her neck, he slid down to her breast, lightly brushing over them. The thin bra she that housed them could barely keep her distended nipples hidden. His hand traveled down to the waistband of her jeans.

As soon as Gray's fingers touched her button fly, Tommie gasped and pulled back from him. Gazing down at his nimble fingers, he stopped moving until he felt like it was okay to move again.

"No," she said.

Gray's heart stopped. He really must be off of his game. He thought for sure she would want this, want him.

"Let me do it." She pushed him back and undid her jeans.

If Gray could have gotten away with doing a happy dance, he would have. Instead he stared at her unzipping her jeans and pushing them down to her ankles. Although he wanted to put that old Gray Kennebeck self behind him, he didn't mind reverting to his old ways to get this woman.

"Control freak all the way," Gray joked.

"I can't let you have all of the fun." She kicked off one sneaker without untying the laces. "Besides, it's not sex. It's just a turn-of-the-century treatment." She removed one pant leg from her leg then did the same with her panties, letting the jeans and the panties dangle from her other leg.

Not sexy but Gray would take it to have her.

"So, I'm stressed. I'm wound up tight. I'm going into hysterics. Cure me, Doc. Make me *feel* better."

The way she said *feel* slithered over his entire body like a feather. Gray lightly dragged his middle finger over her pouty bottom lip. He gazed down finally getting a look at her sex. A fine, brown strip of hair covered her.

Taking control again, Tommie held his hand and eased it down her body, between her breasts and to her vagina. He felt the heat coming off of it long before he touched it.

Tommie widened her legs. The sweet aroma wafted up to his nose. Not only did he want to touch her now, he also longed to taste her. One step at a time. He'd gotten her to go this far. Just how far would she be willing to go in the future?

Gray teased her a bit, rubbing the tip of his middle digit around her swollen nub. As soon as he touched her, Tommie sucked air between her teeth and arched her back. She grabbed his bare shoulder. Her clitoris felt soft yet firm to the touch.

Staring into her mesmerizing eyes, Gray slid his finger inside of her.

"Oh God!" Tommie leaned her head back and squeezed her eyes closed.

An adrenaline rush coursed through Gray's body. His pounding heart begged that he bring this woman to climax or he would have kicked his own self in the ass. As slow as he entered her, Gray drew his finger back then held it there.

Not content to be left waiting, Tommie braced her other hand on the dresser and

moved her hips forward, gyrating on his finger.

"As a doctor, I like to explain medical treatments as I do it." He moved his finger back and forth inside of her. "What I'm doing now is causing a bit of friction inside of you, stroking your inner walls to illicit a pleasurable reaction. The natural reaction is that you'll self-lubricate." He stared into her eyes. "Get wet." His thumb brushed over her hardened nub. "Your clitoris is nice and hard. Although your heart should be racing, you shouldn't be worried. Is the treatment working?"

Tommie nodded.

In even thrusts, he moved his finger in and out of her hot, slick pussy. With each plunge, her body writhed, coiled and contracted. Her fingernails dug into the top of the dresser. Her other hand attempted to shred flesh from Gray's back.

If back full of scratches were the tradeoff for bringing this woman to orgasm, Gray would just have to stock up on Neosporin.

"I see you're responding well to treatment." He gave her a quick kiss on her lips. "For this treatment to be effective, I'll have to hit your G-spot." He curved his finger and plunged deeper. The precise motion jolted her off the dresser.

Tommie brought her head down and stared into Gray's eyes. Her legs wrapped around his body. Tremors shook her. Damn, she was close. Gray's erection threatened to burst through his jeans. If she didn't come soon, he would.

He felt her thick walls constricting around his middle finger.

"That's it, Tommie. Let it go." Gray moved faster inside of her.

Tommie kept her hips moving until she finally let out a long scream that had to have woken up the entire hotel, not that Gray cared. He just brought this beautiful woman to orgasm. Now he wanted to do it again the right way.

As Gray eased his finger out of her, Tommie collapsed against the dresser mirror.

"I would have faked being hysterical for a treatment like that," she said.

Gray smothered her lips in a kiss. With his face mere inches from hers, he asked, "You didn't fake it just now, did you?"

Her face covered in sweat, Tommie gave Gray a quick peck before hopping down from the dresser. "It's a long drive tomorrow." She stepped into her panties and her pant leg and lifted the duo. "We both need to get some sleep." She picked up her shoe and headed to the door. When she grabbed the knob, she turned back to him. "Thanks for the treatment."

Trying to keep her in the room any way possible, Gray said, "I'm afraid of heights."

She snickered and looked away. She brought her gaze back to him but had a look of disbelief. "You don't have to lie to me to try to keep me in the room. You jump out of airplanes for fun. How can someone who does that be afraid of heights? Or did you lie about that?"

"Not a lie. I skydive to overcome my fears. If I face it head on I can control it."

"Control it?" She bit her lower lip.

He wished he could have broken her of that habit.

"The thing about fears is not overcoming it, but more like controlling it. If you look fear in the eye, sometimes you can gain an understanding of it to work through it. It's mind over matter."

“It’s pyschobabble and I’m tired.” She flung open the door.

“I can help you.” He continued standing by the dresser. Gray ignored the niggling voice in his head begging him to reconsider his actions. It’s a week. Maybe more. Judging by Tommie’s reaction, she wanted this hot relationship as much as him.

She turned to him before retreating from his room. It was almost as though she was trying to figure out if he was lying or being sincere.

“If you want it, I can help you with your control issues.” He smiled to reassure her. “You know how to find me.”

Without a word, she walked out. He didn’t know if she would take him up on his offer of help but he sure as hell hoped she did.

Chapter Eight

Gray filled his lungs with the familiar clean scent of his home. Staying in different hotels each night held no glamour. At least for a week he would be home and for a week he wouldn't be seeing Tommie.

That was the downside. Tour relentlessly and see her every day. Or stay at home and not see her at all. After a few hours of walking around in his empty condo, he found that he missed the sound of her voice and her strength. He also missed how she sounded when fully aroused, and how she called his name out in ecstasy.

The phone rang, snapping him out of his thoughts. He reached for the cordless phone in the kitchen.

"Gray, my man. Back home I see," Danny Boy said.

He swept his hand over his head. "Just got in this afternoon. I'm beat."

"This might perk you up. You go up against the hospital in two weeks. How's that for you?"

He balled his hand into a fist and pumped it in the air. "Great! I might have a chance of getting my life back to normal."

"Yep. No more living out of a suitcase. No more sweaty wrestlers. No more Tommie 'The Ballbuster' Balford."

Not a great selling point. Or maybe it was. If she didn't date her employees, then maybe he would have a shot at asking her out. What excuse could she come up with once he didn't work for her? After their early morning session, he wanted more of her.

Danny Boy continued. "A lot of doctors and nurses you used to work with are vouching for you so that helps you out a lot. But we still need to sit down and go over some possible cross-examination questions before we go. How's tomorrow night sound? I can order pizza or Chinese. I'll beat you in foosball again."

"Sounds like a plan, except for beating me at my own game. How about eight?"

A knock on his door made him groan. Probably kids in the neighborhood knocking on doors and running again.

"Eight is fine," Danny Boy said as Gray opened his door.

Tommie stood other side wearing short pink shorts, a white t-shirt and little Keds sneakers. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She was gorgeous.

"By the way, you can bring a date if you want. I would love to meet that Tommie chick." Danny Boy cackled and Gray, without saying goodbye, hung up on his friend.

"What are you doing here?" Gray stood in the doorway. He didn't want to come off as eager even though Little Gray literally twitched with joy at seeing her.

"You said you could help me. Here I am." She walked inside without an invitation.

Let the games begin.

* * * *

Not only did it shock Tommie that Gray's place actually rested on the beach, she was pleasantly surprised that his condo was spotless. It even smelled like lemons like he

had just finished scrubbing the place down with lemonade and bleach.

Gray closed the door and followed her. "You don't waste much time, do you?"

"Not my style." She scanned his condo. "Nice place." She glanced over to her left and found a pretty nice sized kitchen considering it was in a condominium. All of the appliances and the sink were stainless steel.

"Thanks. It's not much but it suits me just fine. I would show you around but you're probably a little tired."

She butted in. "Not tired. I can keep up with you." She bit her bottom lip to keep from smiling at her offhanded statement. She certainly didn't mean it the way it came out. To see the look on Gray's face after she had said it, the way his eyes widened and he licked his lips, it was worth it.

She wanted another round with him, something more substantial than their early morning bout, which did not disappoint her.

"Show me around. Just take it slow." She meandered into the living room with Gray following close behind her.

"Nice living room. Very, um, neutral." She would have said sterile but it wasn't pure white. Everything was an eggshell color. Defining the color reminded her of what she had been called growing up as a biracial child. Oreo, zebra, mutt, gray. She shook her head trying to get rid of the negative thoughts.

"When I bought the place a few years ago, I left the walls all the original color. And I'm really bad on color coordination so I bought cream-colored furniture to match. I know. Not very exciting."

She nodded. "This coming from a man who jumps out of airplanes. You've earned the right to have a calm home environment."

As she gazed at the very nice specimen of a man before her, her heart drummed. What made her come to his place? If she truly wanted help she could have gone to another doctor. She didn't want another doctor. Actually, she didn't want the help either. She wanted the man who had given her the best orgasm she'd had in a long, long time. She put her hand to her chest.

Gray rushed to her and held her shoulders. "Do you need to lie down?"

Tommie had a feeling that even if he wasn't a doctor, he would be this compassionate. When she gazed into his eyes, goose pimples formed over her arms. It didn't take him long to notice. Gray glided his hand up and down her arm.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"In the middle of the hottest month in the summer? Not likely." She couldn't take her eyes off of his.

Tommie shrugged from his grip and strolled around his spacious place. She noticed a pile of mail on the table. Being the curious type, she looked down at the envelopes to see if there was anything else the good doctor was hiding.

"So what are you doing here?" Gray asked.

Tommie kept her eyes fixated on the mail. "You know. Help."

"What kind of help?" He let the salacious question hover in the air between them.

"Real help. If I need to calm down, I can't keep calling you to give me the 'hysteria treatment.'" She snickered.

"Why not?" Gray could write out that prescription. Take two doses daily. No

alcohol. May cause drowsiness and if precautions aren't made, a little nausea nine months down the road.

Tommie smirked. "What we did last night was nice."

Nice? Gray's heartbeat slowed as she continued speaking.

"We were both at a weak moment." Tommie folded her arms over her chest.

"Speak for yourself."

Her denial that they had great chemistry frustrated Gray.

Thanks, Tommie.

"I just need some relaxation techniques that I can do in front of my mother." She chewed her lower lip again.

Frustrated or lying? Gray couldn't decide which emotion she was trying to hide.

"I could show you some ways to calm yourself, relieve your stress." He walked over to the vertical blinds and pulled them open allowing the mid-morning sun to stream through. "Although I thought we were both enjoying the other technique."

"Will that help me be less of a freak?"

Gray flashed her a big smile.

"A control freak that is," she said to clarify.

The sunlight bounced off the table but highlighted one piece of open mail. It was a cream colored envelope in the shape of an invitation. A piece of paper sat open next to it. Tommie casually ran her hand over it to open it up to read the contents.

Gray continued. "It couldn't hurt."

She didn't respond to him. She saw Constance Wiley's name and Friday's date on it. Con Wiley was having a party.

Gray pulled the invitation away. "Just because you've invited yourself in does not give you the right to read my mail."

"So Con Wiley's having a party, huh?" She felt no need to apologize especially since she couldn't even explain why she was feeling jealous all of the sudden. She had never even seen this woman face to face. All she knew was that Gray considered her a friend--and she was involved somehow with his claim. Something was not right with that woman, their relationship. Tommie wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"Con? That's an interesting nickname for her." Gray stuffed the invitation back into its envelope and held it in his hand, probably to hide from her later.

"I don't like her. I don't trust her."

"You don't know her." He took deliberate steps into the kitchen as though she had struck a nerve with her statement. Could he be in love with this woman?

"So who is she to you?" she asked, following him as he opened the refrigerator and poked his head inside.

"What is Junior to you?" He pulled out a filtered pitcher of water.

"Are you curious or jealous?" She was hoping he was more curious than jealous. A jealous man is a possessive man. She couldn't have that.

"Depends. Why do you care so much about Constance Wiley?" He set the envelope down long enough to retrieve two glasses from a cabinet above the stove. As he reached up Tommie grabbed the invitation and pulled it out again. She turned her back on Gray to give her the few milliseconds needed to read all of the important information: what, where, why and how come Gray?

The 'who' of it she knew. Con Wiley. Now she knew the what, a birthday party for the one and only Con Wiley. The where looked to be in a neighborhood in the beach known for its million dollar homes. The why must be because Con loved Con. And as she thought about why she invited Gray, he snatched the paper from her hand.

"You're worse than some of the kids I treat." He handed her a frosty glass.

"So?" She took a sip of the refreshingly cold liquid.

"So what?" Gray drank his in three gulps.

"Are you going and why did she invite you?" Tommie wasn't the beat-around-the-bush type. Gray seemed to be the same way.

"Didn't you read it? It's her birthday. We're friends. That's all." He set the glass on the counter and made work of stuffing the invite back into its fancy envelope, but this time he opened the cabinet door under the sink and threw it in the trashcan.

Not a reaction Tommie thought he should have made considering he called the woman his friend. The motion relieved her. Maybe Con Wiley wasn't as important to him as she thought. "If you're friends then why aren't you going?"

"Do you always ask a lot of questions?" He smiled and walked past her to retrieve his other mail on the table.

"Do you always answer a question with another question?" Tommie wanted to sit down but the furniture barely looked worn. She eased herself down on the couch and waited for Gray to shriek in case she shouldn't have done that.

"Sorry. It's a habit from dealing with kids at the hospital." He rubbed his forehead. "It's a complicated situation with Connie."

Oh, now it's Connie? She had to hear this.

He shuffled the envelopes and set them back on the table. "Yes, we are friends. But with what's going on with me lately, it might be better if I steered clear of her. Besides, it's not a fun party where you can wear shorts and you play volleyball in the backyard. It's actually a dressy affair with catering and a wait staff. I think she's going to have a pianist this year. Last year it was a string quartet."

"But she invited you and a date. You should go. Support your friend. You can't expect to stay at home and only go to work."

Gray exhaled and put his hands to his hips. "Why do I have a feeling that you want something out of this?"

"Because I want to go with you." She dropped enough hints that she was interested. He should have picked them up by now.

"Why? You said you hate Con Wiley, as you call her."

"I do. But I still want to meet her. I think it would be interesting."

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Why not? Do you have something going on with her and you don't want to bring a date with you? Or maybe you're ashamed of what I do for a living." She folded her arms. "Or maybe you don't think I can pull off dressing up for this little party."

Gray sat on the couch next to her.

"Boy, you really know how to push a man's buttons, don't you?" He smirked and nodded. "Okay. We'll go. You'll have a lousy time and I'm going to tell you I told you so. And if you didn't like Connie over the phone, what makes you think you'll like her in person?"

"I probably won't. But then again, if we really hate each other we can start wrestling in a pool of Jell-O or mud in our bikinis while you guys watch us."

Gray rolled his eyes. "Why did I let you come into my house?"

"I don't know, buddy. I don't know." She stood up. "So what is it that you plan on doing to help me relax?"

He held his hand out to her. "Come with me."

Tommie reached for his hand then stopped. Something in her knew that touching him now would be different. He had given her such exquisite pleasure. From the look in his eyes, he wanted a second round. So did she.

She stood on her own accord. "What did you want to do?"

He sighed and let his arm fall to his side. "Baby steps."

He walked to a sliding door between the dining room and the living room. Easing the doors open, he padded inside with Tommie close behind him. He strolled over to his entertainment center. She heard music in the dim room. Soothing sounds of the piano and harps filled the room as Gray moved a coffee table in front of a fireplace. He smiled as soon as he turned to her. Somehow, she had to figure a way to stop her heart from fluttering every time she saw him, but she knew that was going to be nearly impossible.

Gray took off his t-shirt exposing his bare, muscled chest, the chest she remembered from last night. His rock hard abs tapered down to the waistband of some white draw-string pants he wore. It was then she noticed his feet were bare.

He pointed to her feet. "It might be helpful to take off your shoes."

Without question or hesitation, she knelt down and undid her laces. Scanning the room, she noticed it was large and as plainly decorated as the living room. A couch sat in front of a bay window that was shrouded behind a heavy curtain. A large screen TV encompassed a corner of the room with a recliner flanked to the side.

Once her shoes were off, she planted herself in her spot. Gray sauntered to her, a slight smile on his face. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity but must have only been a minute or less.

"Yeah. That's what we'll do," he said as though they had discussed whatever was going on in his head.

"What?"

He turned and went toward an entertainment center. After opening a front glass panel, he turned the music up. With easy, deliberate steps, he approached her again. Tommie's stomach knotted in anticipation. Damn, this man was patient.

"Are you going to tell me what you have planned or are you just going to drive me crazy waiting?" She tapped her foot on the tan carpet.

"See, that's your problem. You're too impatient. You need to learn to relax. Let things happen naturally." He motioned for her to come into the room further. She obliged then stopped when he held up his hand like a traffic cop.

"I thought about doing Tai Chi with you but that might be a little much." He faced her. "But I think yoga is right up your alley."

She shook her head. "You do yoga?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

She shook her head. "Why not. You would think that being in the business I'm in I wouldn't get shocked so much."

He chuckled. After he composed himself, and then cleared his throat. With the intensity of a detective staring at a guilty victim, Gray stared at Tommie. She was in his spell. He could have asked her to strip down naked and she would have done it.

"You're going to find your breath."

It was an odd statement for him to make. She furrowed her eyebrows at him.

"Okay, Doc, I give. What does that mean?"

"It means that you have to become more aware of your body. You have to let go of the notion that you control everything including something as natural as your breathing."

"But I do control my breathing. If I don't, I'll die. Kind of need oxygen to live, you know."

Gray leaned his head back and shook it. "You are a control freak." He whisked by her to the couch. After removing a black pillow, the only thing she'd seen in his house that wasn't a cream color or steel, he strolled back to her. He plopped the pillow onto the floor.

He pointed to it. "Lie on the floor with the pillow under your head."

She wasn't too keen on his commanding tone. As much as her natural inclination was to argue she succumbed to his command and dropped down to the floor, her head sinking down into the pillow and her legs and arms flat on the floor.

"Nope, bring your knees up."

She did so without a word.

"Now put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach."

She lifted her head off of the pillow, propping her upper body on her elbows.

"What is this? You want to watch me touch myself?"

Gray covered his mouth and tried very, very hard not to laugh evident by the way his body trembled.

"Okay, for your sanity and mine, no more talking from you. I want to be the only one talking. I know that's going to be hard for you because you're so used to arguing *all* of the time." He knelt down next to her.

"You're on a roll today, aren't you?"

He put his finger over her lips, careful not to touch her. She gasped at the proximity but kept perfectly still.

"Hands. One on your chest. The other on your stomach." He sat with his legs crossed. She eased one hand onto her bare stomach. She could feel it trembling and hoped her hand would calm it. Then she put her hand on her chest. She gazed at Gray who looked to be studying her.

"Close your eyes." He swept his hand over her face. She was powerless to do anything but. Now she was going to concentrate on his voice. "What this exercise is supposed to do is help you get acquainted with your breathing. Most people when they are conscious of their own breathing try to control it. They can't just let it be. Allow your breath to be like a welcomed guest."

She tried. She really tried. As soon as she was aware that she was breathing she did exactly what he said most people did. Her breathing came out ragged and staggered. The more she tried controlling it the worse it got until she was swallowing and almost gasping for air. Panic waved over her not because she was worried about her breathing

but because she was doing this exercise wrong. She was letting Gray down.

"I think I should stop. I'm not doing this right." She brought her hands down and snapped open her eyes. Gray's stare met hers head on. His face hovered over hers.

"Did you think you were going to do it right on your first try? Of course not. This whole exercise is to get you to relax. The first step of relaxing is realizing that there are certain things you can't control and understanding that that shouldn't scare you. It's okay to let some things be. When you are comfortable with your self and your body, then maybe you'll learn to let others touch you in a loving, non-threatening way."

That idea frightened her. It would mean that she would have to trust people and so far people have let her down. She removed her hands from her body and rolled away from him. "I think I can practice this at home." She crawled over to her shoes.

"That's it? You're giving up?"

She could hear the disappointment in his voice. "No. Of course not. I have some things to do today that I just remembered."

"Wait. Don't go. Give me one more chance."

"I really should go."

"Please."

When Gray asked like that, with his low voice rolling like distant thunder, and he looked the way he did, how could she refuse him? Tommie assumed her position again.

"Close your eyes."

She obliged. As light as a feather, she felt something on her forehead. Tommie gasped.

"Don't open your eyes," Gray demanded. "Just enjoy the feeling."

The light touch coasted over her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks. At her lips, Gray lined them with the tip of his finger. Every nerve and cell in her body sparked to life, bubbling at her skin's surface and making her body primed to snap at just the right touch.

With only the music playing, Tommie transferred herself to a different world. All at once she felt open and free, naked. Naked. That's what she wanted to be.

When Gray's fingertips slid down between her breasts she stopped him by grabbing his wrist. She let him go long enough to pull her top over her head. After finding her breath long enough to release a ragged exhalation, she unsnapped her front-close bra and opened it to expose her breasts. The freedom relieved her aching nipples. She couldn't wait to feel Gray's touch. However that's exactly what she did, waited.

Peeking one eye open, she found Gray staring at her chest. It was then that she noticed his breathing had increased. Using the delicate touch of a surgeon, Gray dusted his fingertips over one breast, barely touching it except for the occasional brush here and there. Each touch sent a wave of sparks through her body.

His fingers circled her nipple making it distend even more. Tommie arched her back to get the full feel of Gray's incredible fingers.

"Let me drive, will you," he said with a growl.

"Just make me feel good." Tommie squirmed under his handling.

To her surprise, as Gray's hand tickled over her sensitive flesh, he licked her other nipple.

"Oh yes!" Tommie clamped her hand behind Gray's head to encourage him.

His mouth eagerly covered her whole breast as his hand massaged her other

breast. Tommie never thought in a million years she would climax from simply touching her breasts. Gray had her body peaking just from his light touch that after that she was ready for anything and everything.

Gray covered her body with his. His mouth and hand switched places. Feeling like she was on the brink of losing her mind, she fisted his hair.

"I want you so much," Gray said between licks.

Tommie felt his need through his thin pants pressing against her thigh.

"If you want to keep this secret, I swear I won't tell a soul."

With that promise, Tommie opened her eyes. She remembered a line like that being said to her not too long ago. A frat boy. Damn it. Here she was again doing the same thing.

"I have to go." She struggled to get free from under his weight.

A look of confusion masked Gray's face as he rolled off of her. "Was it something I did?"

"I just can't stay." Tommie fastened her bra and slipped into her t-shirt. Instead of putting on her sneakers, she grabbed them and sprang to her feet.

"Thanks for the yoga stuff." She raced to his front door.

"Whatever I did, I'm sorry." He reached the door before she could touch it and he opened it for her. Junior would love a gentlemanly thing like that. What was she talking about? *She* liked that he did that. No one had ever treated her like a lady, which was her own fault. Ballbuster Balford wasn't known to be a softie needing doors held open for her and treated delicately. Gray saw her differently.

"It depends on how my schedule is looking. I have your number. I'll let you know." She didn't want to blow him off. Too many ghosts from her past haunted her. She didn't need another let down.

He nodded. As she made her way out of the door, he called after her.

"Hey, I have this thing to do tomorrow night at a friend's house. Actually, he's my attorney. You've talked to him. He's one of my references. Daniel."

She nodded. "Oh, yeah. Him. Very nice guy."

"He can be. We're going to be shooting some pool, playing a little foosball and talking about my case." He took a deep breath. "He said I could, uh, bring someone. Would you like to go?"

Not only was he allowing her closer access to his life but he was trusting her with what was going on with his case. With her curiosity getting the best of her, this opportunity was too much for her to let go.

"Sure. What time do you want me to come over?"

"No. I'll come pick you up. What kind of man would I be if I didn't offer to pick you up for our...evening out?"

He was really careful with his wording. Thank goodness he was. The wrong word or phrase and she wouldn't know how she would have reacted.

"Thanks for the breathing lessons." She smiled and hurried to her car.

She'd open up more to a stranger than she had with anyone before. The more she hung out with him the more she felt herself lose control.

"This isn't over," Gray called from the doorway just as Tommie was getting in her car. "This is the first of your lessons."

First of many she was sure.

Chapter Nine

Tommie never imagined a car ride with Gray would be fun. He talked the entire way, made jokes that actually made her laugh, and sang. The man sang like he should be in tight leather pants and a t-shirt with women flocked to his feet. A singing, yoga and Tai Chi practicing doctor with abs like cobblestone and an ass that deserved worship.

She had to cross her legs a few times whenever that hot stirring between them flared up. Then again, if he was so wonderful why wasn't he married or at least have a girlfriend?

Gray parked in the driveway of a large brick home with a perfectly manicured plush green lawn. Tommie reached for her door and almost jumped out of her tank top and denim skirt when Gray shrieked.

"I'll get that for you." He hopped out of his side and scrambled over to hers.

After opening the door, she carefully stepped out of the car, tugging down her skirt the whole time. Why did she let Bix convince her to wear this...this...date outfit? Bix even made sure Tommie carried a condom...just in case.

"You didn't have to open the door for me." Tommie stood and pulled her skirt down. "My hands aren't broken and it's not the turn of the century."

He followed her to the front door. Even though she'd said that, what she really wanted to say is "Thank God chivalry is not dead."

Gray pushed in the illuminated doorbell. "Doesn't matter what year it is. A man should always open a door for a woman. It's not chauvinistic. It's the right thing to do. Any man you're with who won't do that is no man that you should be with."

She crossed her arms. "Oh so now you're giving me advice on my love life, too." Her knees knocked together as she waited at the door with him.

"I do have an interest in your heart." He smiled. "Because of the angina attack. That's what I meant."

She lowered her head to mask her disappointment. "Of course. Duty first. I keep forgetting what we did the other day were just treatments." It would have been nice to hear a man tell her that she was special in some way.

He tapped her on her shoulder. "You were the one who ran from me when--"

The door flung open and Tommie was surprised at what she saw. Daniel looked like a college student working on his fifth year as a senior. He was nothing like she imagined an attorney would look like.

From his shockingly red hair to the fact that she towered over the man, he was the opposite of her whole perception. It didn't help that he had on slides, denim shorts and a 'bikini inspector' t-shirt. She even saw Gray shake his head at his friend and imagined that he must have been thinking the same thing.

"I thought you were the delivery boy." Daniel eased his gaze over to Tommie. "But I see you did bring me someone special." He held his hand out to her. "You must be a new friend of Gray's. I've never seen you around him before. Not that my man here has any problem with women."

"Danny Boy," Gray said between gritted teeth.

"That's right. I'm Daniel Riley, but my friends call me Danny Boy, you know, just like that old Irish song." Danny Boy warbled a few bars. He was no Gray where his pipes were concerned.

She accepted his hand and shook it firmly. "Nice to meet you, Danny Boy. I'm Tommie Balford."

Danny Boy's jaw dropped and he swung his gaze from Gray to her and back again. Made her wonder what the two of them talked about concerning her.

"Whoa. Gray said that you were--"

Gray cut in. "Punctual. Yep, that's what I told Danny Boy."

She smiled and pulled her hand back. The way Danny Boy's jaw dropped and the way Gray tried to cover himself, the conversations they had about her must not have been all that bad.

"Are you going to let us in or are we going to talk out here?" Gray asked.

"Oh yeah. Please, come on in." Danny Boy stepped aside and Tommie sauntered in first. The house was nothing like the man. As she stood on the porch observing Danny Boy, she'd imagined that his house would be like him, a throwback to the old college days with movie posters plastered over the walls and a wooden spool used as a coffee table in the living room. Instead she found a tastefully decorated home with artwork, a crystal chandelier, and a huge fish tank with multicolored fish swimming around. Unlike Gray, this man was not afraid of color. A red couch, white carpeting, black coffee and end tables.

"Would you like something to drink?" Gray asked.

Danny Boy shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm being a bad host, aren't I?" The way he stared at her wasn't subtle. What in the world had Gray said to this man about her? How had he described her?

"Water is fine," she said.

"You can have some wine. It would be okay," Gray said.

He must have picked up on her apprehension to drink. He probably thought it because of her heart. Really it was because with these two guys she didn't want to lose herself.

She smiled. "I know. Water is fine for me."

"I'll get it." Danny Boy pointed over his shoulder to the kitchen. "Gray, why don't you take our lovely guest down to 'Danny Boy's Pleasure Palace.'"

She shot Gray a look that he picked up on immediately.

He held his hand up before she could speak. "It's just a game room. He calls it that because he thinks he's funny."

"And what do you think I'm thinking right now?" She followed him to a doorway with a horseshoe nailed above it. She hoped Danny Boy hadn't gotten lucky in the room she was about to enter.

"I think you're thinking that you would have rather stayed at home than be here with me," he said.

"Gee, and I thought you were smart." She descended a couple of steps to what must have been a teenage boy's wet dream. A pool table, foosball table, pinball machine, entertainment center and a poster of a nude busty model asking people not to wear fur

were all in the room.

"If at any time you don't feel comfortable we can leave." Gray offered her a seat on a barstool.

"Did you forget that I hang around with pro-wrestlers all day? There's nothing you guys can do that would turn me off." She stared into his eyes until she had to look away. "Besides, I'm curious to hear about big, bad, naughty Gray."

"Glad I can provide you with some entertainment." He flung some balls around the green felt top of the pool table.

"You've been more than entertaining these last few weeks." Actually she could have said hours and been more accurate.

The doorbell chimed and interrupted her thoughts.

"Guess dinner is here." Gray leaned on the bar next to her.

The heat that permeated off of his body seared her skin. Looking at him proved to be a formidable task.

"So how did you and Danny Boy become friends?" She had to get her mind off of him. "You two don't seem like--"

He butted in. "We would be friends?"

She nodded.

"We met our first year in college. He was sloppy and loud and rude and immature. What am I saying? He still is. But when the chips are down, he has my back every time. He's been a great friend. I'm sure Bix is the same way."

Tommie opened her mouth to refute his assumption but he was right. Bix was all those things and more. Yet when problems came up, she was there for her.

"Are you ever wrong?" she asked.

Danny Boy jumped in the doorway with a plastic bag in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. "Let's eat and talk about that case of yours, buddy."

Gray peered down at her. "Yes, I've been wrong. At least one time."

She'd almost forgotten about the case. It was easy to do that the more she talked to Gray. What could he have done to get in such trouble? Whatever it was, she was going to do her best to help him. It was the least she could do after all he'd done for her.

* * *

Gray couldn't choke down his steamed Chinese vegetables whenever Danny Boy talked about the amount of drugs taken from the hospital. Words like 'thief' and 'reckless disregard' made his stomach churn. The more he talked, the worse the expressions on Tommie's face were. That bothered him as much as the incident itself. Every time Danny Boy talked, Gray had an urge to turn to Tommie and tell her, "It's not what you think." However he'd made a promise to a friend. That hadn't changed.

"So here's what we have going for us, Gray," Danny Boy began. "Your co-workers love you. A lot of respected doctors and the head of the E.R. are willing to testify on your behalf. I'm sure restitution will have to be made."

Gray turned to Danny Boy. "So what do you think will happen to me?"

Danny Boy shook his head. "I hope the hospital will settle and take the payment. Put you on probation for a while. Constant monitoring. I could argue your good intentions but something still doesn't add up. I know you. You're not this rogue doctor who thinks he's Mother Theresa. But the angle's good."

He hoped that that argument would be enough to get him off. He'd seen Danny Boy argue with much less and get his client off.

After a brief silence, Tommie asked, "Have you done this before?"

The room went silent and the two men turned their gazes to her. Gray wasn't sure why she'd asked that question. What was she trying to prove?

Danny Boy scratched his head. "What?"

"Is Gray a repeat offender or was this the first time he's done this?" She pushed her plate away.

"What kind of person do you think I am?" Gray's voice dropped down.

"Doesn't matter what I think. All that matters is my business."

He felt strangely nervous at her statements. Something in her piercing blue eyes told him that trying to snow this woman would be out of the question.

"What are *you* trying to prove now?" He leaned back also.

"I'm trying to prove that you're hiding something. Your attorney seems to have things on the ball."

"Uh, thanks," Danny Boy said.

She barreled through. "I'm sure he's questioned you about your story."

"That's his right." Gray cocked his head.

"And what? I don't have the right to ask because I'm just your boss?" She threw in her boss trump card again. She went back to her old standby, tough girl attitude.

"Did you two want me to go while you fight this out?" Danny Boy panned his gaze from her to Gray.

When Tommie said, "No," Gray said, "Yes."

Danny Boy snickered. "I'm going to go up and get some egg rolls." He stood. "When I come back, I want you two to kiss and make up."

* * * *

Clever. And Tommie thought the overgrown boys she worked with were immature. Gray and Danny Boy must have a comedy routine worked out. Danny Boy's the funny guy and Gray was the straight man. All she wanted was a straight answer.

Tommie eyed the folder. She snatched it off the bar before Gray could even reach for it. Holding the folder close to her chest, she slithered to the other side of the bar.

"Give that to me. It's not for you." Gray held his hand out to her.

She wasn't going to give in until she had her answer. Her eyes scanned the information like the way she had when she looked at Con Wiley's invitation.

Gray stood and eased around the bar, a move not lost on Tommie. She moved away from him. She found a piece of information in the report that caught her eye.

"Hand that over to me," Gray said, still with his hand outstretched.

"No." She turned to him and hid the folder behind her back.

"No?"

"Not until you tell me one thing." She prayed that his answer would prove she was right.

"No more games. No more tests." He reached around her, pressing her back against the bar, his legs on either side of hers. His hard stomach steeled against hers. Too close. Her bottom lip quivered like she was freezing. She locked her knees together when his stare caused them to buckle.

Gray got quiet and gazed into her eyes. Time wasn't supposed to stand still for a look. A kiss maybe, but not a look, and certainly not from a touch. He sighed as he reached his other hand around her, surrounding her.

Tommie needed to break the tension. "We can either dance or--"

"What's the question?" Gray followed.

"Oh." Her voice dribbled with disappointment. "What drug did you steal?"

He shook his head. "From the hospital?"

Smart or smarmy. Either way it was working for him.

"Was there more than one place you hit?" She gazed into his eyes to find the truth. If nothing else, she was always able to tell when someone was lying. What a gift.

He swallowed hard and licked his lips. "Why do you--"

"Tell me now or I'll tell Danny Boy to ask you at the deposition."

"Insulin." He whispered. "A patient needed it."

She took a deep breath and in the exhalation a smile eased across her face. A warm feeling filled her chest. She could kiss him for lying to her.

"Why are you smiling like that? Am I entertaining you again?" He braced his hands against her hips and pushed himself up.

"Hey, am I missing something here?" Danny Boy bounded down the steps.

Tommie cleared her throat. "Yes, your client is a liar and a bad one at that." She escaped from behind the bar, folder still in hand. She headed to Danny Boy and shoved the folder in his face. "I'm sure you've read all of the documents in here."

Danny Boy snatched folder from her. "Of course."

"Then ask your client one crucial question. What drug did he boost?"

Danny Boy looked at Gray. "We've talked about this, right?"

Gray shrugged his shoulders. "Sure. Insulin."

Danny Boy's eyes widened so much that Tommie thought they were going to pop out of his head and roll on the floor.

"Precose?" Gray stammered.

"Damn it." Danny Boy looked at Tommie. "I knew he was lying but I couldn't pin him on it."

"Lying?" He put his hands on his hips in an indignant manner. "What do you--"

"Vicodin and Ritalin." Tommie spoke softly. "Why would you think the meds taken had anything to do with diabetes?"

Gray turned his back on them and shook his head. Who was he protecting? Was it actually worth his career? Did he ever consider what would happen if he lost?

"I need some air." Whisking by the two of them, he hopped up the steps. Tommie heard a door slam.

She let out her breath she'd been holding since she mentioned the drugs. Then she turned to Danny Boy. "Has he always been this--"

"Stubborn? Pig-headed?" Danny Boy pulled two Heinekens from his rec room fridge.

"Righteous?"

Gray reminded her of Junior. He also thought he could carry the whole world's problems on his shoulders.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who knows the man is innocent. But he's

determined for some reason to carry on like he did this thing.” He offered a beer to her but she held up her hand and shook her head. “His best quality is going to be his downfall.”

His loyalty was a nice feature but not his best. He was kind, generous, compassionate. But he was also a fool.

Danny Boy sat on the loveseat and took a swig of his beer. “He likes you.”

She almost fell off the bar stool she was aiming for. Her heart drummed faster than she could think. She kept herself calm, cool, collected.

“He does? Really?” She sounded like a schoolgirl. She had to recover. “I think I’m a fair boss.”

“That may be true but that’s not what he talks about with you. He says you’re strong and smart. Says you don’t take any crap.”

So he was attracted to her strength. That was admirable. At least he didn’t talk about her looks.

After suppressing a belch, Danny Boy continued. “He said you were a looker, too. He was right.”

She should have been insulted. The Gloria Steinham in her should have told Gray off and lectured Danny Boy on maturity but the woman in her was feeling too sexy.

“If he said that then it’s very unprofessional. And as his friend *and* his attorney, you shouldn’t be telling me this. In this day and age of sexual harassment and political--”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved his hand in the air. “So did you get that problem fixed?”

Her heart stopped and she wrapped her arms around her body. Gray couldn’t have told him everything about her. He wouldn’t have shared something as personal as helping her work out her relaxation issues.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Gray said he was helping you through some problem. So how’s that going?” He took another drink of beer.

She jumped off the stool and stormed up the steps. She could overlook the sexist remarks. She had even put up Danny Boy all evening. She would not have her life open to ridicule or as a topic of conversation.

Tommie found Gray leaning against a large oak tree and staring off into a pond behind the house. She stomped up to him and came around to the front with her arms crossed over her chest.

“What? Did you miss making a fool out of me in there? Decided to come out here and finish?” The night masked Gray’s face but somehow the moonlight illuminated his striking eyes.

“Me make a fool of you? What did you tell your friend in there about me?” She tried to keep her voice controlled even though she wanted to scream.

He pushed himself off of the tree and put his hands on his hips. “What are you talking about?”

“You told him that you’ve been helping me to relax with your special technique?” Her gut wrenched inside of her. Her hands balled into fists and she wanted nothing more than to walk home.

He growled like a rabid dog. “Great. Twice in one night you’re questioning my

integrity.”

“You lied to me earlier. Did you forget about that?” She wished she could have seen his eyes. What was he thinking?

“I lied to spare you. You shouldn’t be involved in what I’m going through.” His gaze shot down and he shook his head. “I shouldn’t have brought you here with me.”

“But you did. So what was he talking about? What help did you tell him I needed?” She wasn’t going to let him off the hook yet.

He walked cautiously toward her. He put his finger on her chest. “I told him about your attack and that I was helping you through the recovery.” He took another step closer to her. “I was telling a friend about another friend. Why would you think I would talk about you like some conquest?”

Her heart returned to its normal rhythm until he took another step closer. It started on its wild ride again and it wasn’t going to stop.

“I want to kiss you.”

Before she could answer, she felt the warmest, firmest, sweetest set of lips on hers. She closed her eyes and fell into the sensual kiss easily. His hands cupped her face. His fingers stroked her cheeks. His scent swirled around her and the chirping crickets and hooting owls stopped their symphony once Gray decided to kiss her.

The sensual kiss clouded her mind. His gentle lips caressed hers. At that moment she forgot that he worked for her. No longer were they boss and employee but instead man and woman. She pressed her back against the hard tree.

He pulled back from her, smoothed a tendril from her face and smiled.

She smiled back and took a deep breath.

Tommie said, “I wasn’t in need of a treatment.”

Now she knew after tonight that she needed to readjust their relationship.

Chapter Ten

Tommie didn't even believe the words that had poured from her mouth. Gray made her melt. He didn't give her an inch on any of her tough-girl attitude. He fit in her world without question, and he was easy on the eyes. What was wrong with her? From Gray's blank expression, it looked like he thought the same thing.

"I think I'm done here." Gray backed away from her. "I'll take you home."

"Fine." Tommie returned to Danny Boy's house.

She walked into his den as he was cleaning up.

"I must have said something wrong," Danny Boy said as he held the Chinese take-out cartons.

"I'm afraid you're going to die with foot-in-mouth disease," Gray patted his friend on his shoulder. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, later, man." Danny Boy leaned in closer and lowered his voice but it was still loud enough for Tommie to hear. "And good luck."

Gray nodded his head.

"Hey, nice meeting you, Tommie," Danny Boy said. He took Tommie's hand and kissed the back of it.

"If you ever want to work as a wrestler, come talk to me." She slithered her hand away from his grip. "You would make a great heel."

"Me as a bad guy?" He nodded. "Cool."

* * * *

The car ride home was different than the one to Danny Boy's house. Gray remained quiet, pensive, withdrawn. Tommie had to deal with tension at work on a daily basis. She wouldn't have it in her personal life.

Gray slowed the rocketing Volvo to a normal speed. He exhaled and scrubbed his fingers in his hair. "What do you want, Tommie?" His tone held more than just concern. "Are you afraid that I'm going to sue you for sexual harassment or something?"

"Sue *me*? You came on to me with that sex treatment back at the hotel and those breathing lessons." She put her hand on his thigh. "I want you to take me home."

He peered down at her hand. His leg twitched. Then he glanced at her. "Is this another signal that I might be misunderstanding?"

Her heart jumped in response. All she could think about was how good it would feel to have his steely thighs against hers. The thought of kissing him didn't scare her. Since she hadn't been intimate with a man in over three years, she was scared that she might disappoint him if she had a chance.

"Tell me something, Gray."

"What?"

"I need to hear something positive and I've never wanted anything like that before." She cleared her slowly tightening throat. "It used to be that I didn't care what people thought but for some reason, what you think about me matters."

Gray shook his head. "I don't know what you want me to say."

Her heart slowed its wild beat. "Your bedside manner needs some work."

"Are you hurt where I need to use my bedside manner?"

She removed her hand. The wounds she had were internal. She wasn't ready to expose all of her raw nerves yet. "Take this exit." Tommie pointed to a green and white sign. "It'll get us quicker to my house."

Maybe Gray wasn't the perfect man for her. Her Mr. Perfect, if she were actually looking for this anomaly, would have known what to say to her.

Gray screeched in front of Tommie's house and jumped out of the car without turning off the engine. He ran to the other side of the car to get Tommie's door.

Stepping out, she said, "Thank you." She looked at her house then back at him.

"Did you still want to go to Constance's birthday party?" he asked.

Still wanting to hear the right answer, she asked, "Would you like me to go?" She wasn't even sure if she should go.

He placed his hand at the small of her back and guided her to her front door. This was it. He was giving her the personal brush off.

She swallowed hard and reached in her pocket for her keys.

Once she opened her front door, he spoke. "I want you to go to the party but not like this."

"Like what? Of course I'll wear a better outfit." Tommie tugged on her denim skirt. She stood in her doorway, not going inside and not allowing Gray to go in either.

"I'm not talking about that." He stood closer to her. "If you're going as my date then I can't have you angry with me."

She scanned his face to see if she can get a clue of what he may be leading up to. Was he talking about sex? His heavy-lidded eyes couldn't hide his smoky expression. She drew in her lower lip to start her chewing ritual.

"Don't worry." He smiled. "It's nothing too earth-shattering."

She put her hand on Gray's chest to stop him. His heart pounded as hard as hers.

"I don't date people I work with." She saw the pained look on his face.

"I know." Gray lowered his head. "All I'm talking about is therapy. That's it."

Tommie took a deep breath. "A breathing lesson?" She cleared her throat and lowered her hand.

Gray nodded. "An intimacy lesson."

She looked away.

"If you aren't up for it now or don't want to then--"

"I haven't backed down from a challenge yet." She set in her jaw.

He stepped closer to her and it made her retreat into her house. "I'm not a challenge. Some people even describe me as easy." He scanned her from head to toe.

Tommie nodded. "Unless this lesson is going to last ten seconds then you had better go turn off your car."

"Oh. Right." He ran back as she went into her cool, quiet house. Scanning the room, Tommie wanted to make sure her house appeared presentable. She was tidy but Bix was a pig. Tommie half expected to see undies strewn about the living room and nail polish bottles on her coffee table.

As it was, the room was picture perfect. Still didn't mean that she wanted the intimacy lesson to be in the middle of her living room and it couldn't be in her formal

dining room. The den/office was out of the question. Only one logical place to go.

She turned to the door just as Gray bolted through it. "The bedroom."

"Excuse me?" Gray closed the door behind him and locked it.

"We should do this lesson in my bedroom." She cleared her throat. "That way we can have some privacy if Bix comes home."

A sly smile hitched up at the corner of his mouth. "Sounds like a fine idea to me." He held his hand up. "Please lead the way."

Now she was having second thoughts. What was she doing? She was breaking all of her own rules. She had an employee in her house. She was thinking about dating him. And she was taking him to her bedroom. Usually her internal alarms would be going off but her instincts weren't telling her to abandon the whole thing.

When she reached the bedroom, she flicked on the light. Oh no! She'd forgotten about her bedroom and the whirlwind she and Bix had created when she was getting ready for her non-date.

Her peach colored sanctuary now had different colored shirts littered over her bed, shoes scattered over her floor, her jewelry box with bracelets and necklaces spilling over the sides.

"What happened in here?" Gray gazed from one side of the room to the other. "Were you robbed?"

Yes, she was not officially embarrassed. "It doesn't look like this all of the time." She gathered her clothes and shoes in her arms and threw them in her closet. She slammed the door to contain the mess.

"You don't have to clean up for me. You should do it for the Environmental Protection Agency. But definitely not for me." Gray tried hard to suppress a smile but it peeked through.

"I was almost missing your smartass remarks. Can't say I'm glad he's back." She did laugh and it made him laugh.

Tommie walked toward him. "Should I lie on the floor or on the bed or--"

She was stopped short when Gray put up his hand to silence her. Surprisingly, it worked. She froze in her tracks, her mouth hanging open.

Gray sauntered to her. "We'll start with you standing since that's the way we'll be for the majority of the evening."

"And for the rest of the evening, where will we be? What position should I get comfortable in?" She didn't take her eyes off of his smoldering gaze.

He planted himself in front of her. "Why don't we get through one position at a time before we get too ahead of ourselves."

Good answer. At least Gray wasn't assuming something was going to happen between the two of them. Or if he did, he was being very casual about it.

"First thing I want you to do is take off your shoes. You should be comfortable."

Tommie slipped off her sandals and kicked them off to the side. She wondered if he would be removing any clothing. She wouldn't object. Not too much.

"Close your eyes." He swept his hand over face and as though he commanded it, she closed her eyes. The feeling of having this man in her room, her eyes closed and being so trusting scared her. She felt her heart drumming. What made her jump was feeling Gray's hands holding hers. She almost opened her eyes until he pleaded with her

not to.

"Trust me." He placed one of her hands on her chest and the other on her stomach. "Feel your breathing again. Think about yourself."

Thinking about herself was the furthest thing from her mind. Her thoughts had wondered over how great Gray looked tonight in his khaki shorts and white golf shirt.

This couldn't be happening to her. In her world, it would be more likely that she would have strong feelings for one of her wrestlers than this neatly dressed, Volvo-driving doctor.

"You're doing well, Tommie."

She could tell he was moving around her. He wasn't a shark circling its prey.

"You look calm. Do you feel calm?" he asked.

No, he was more like a guardian angel.

"Yes," she answered in a breathy sigh.

"I'm sorry I didn't say something to you in the car when you wanted me to." He was now standing behind her. "I think I didn't because I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. No, I know I didn't say anything for that reason."

"Why?" She kept her eyes closed but wanted so much to see the expression, see if he was telling the truth.

"I feel like I've already ruined my impression on you when you heard about the case." He was next to her now.

"And the lie," she said. "Why did you lie?"

He sighed. Now he was in front of her. "You don't need to be involved. The less you know the better it will be for you."

"Why don't you want me involved? I could help you." She meant that. Something in the way he'd helped her father and when he stayed by her side in the hospital made her feel his good heart.

"Because you have enough on your plate with the business, your boys, Bix." He touched her hand that pressed against her chest. "Your heart."

"But--"

He cut her off. "I like you. I like you more than I should. I don't want to see you worried about me." He stood in front of her. She could tell he was close to her. His warm breath feathered over her cheek.

Tommie opened her eyes and was struck by Gray's intense stare. She lowered her hands.

"Being this close, does it bother you?" he asked.

She shook her head. His proximity didn't bother her. His techniques were either working or he had finally done what no man had been able to do in all of her life, lower the fort around her heart.

"I'm sorry I lied to you." Sincerity sparked in his eyes.

"Don't do it again," she said.

He smiled. His smile widened when she took a step closer to him.

"I'll try to remember that."

Tommie felt a stirring in her stomach that didn't come from nerves. It was want, desire, lust. She hadn't felt a feeling like this in years.

"Maybe I should go," Gray said. Only he wasn't moving.

"Maybe we should finish the lesson." Tommie took his large hands in hers. "I'm assuming that there will be dancing at the party." She placed one hand on her hip and the other in her hand. "You do dance, don't you?"

He nodded. "But we need music."

"Don't move." She let him go and padded over to her entertainment center at the corner of her room. She flicked through her CD selection. If she was going to dance then she needed the right song. She found it.

Tommie popped the disc into the player and hurried back to her waiting man. A low bass thrummed through the speakers with a piano accompanying the powerful instrument.

"Ah, Roberta Flack." Gray put his hand on his chest over his heart. "'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face.'" He put his hand on her waist and took her hand in his other. He stared into her eyes. "Beautiful."

He swayed with the music bringing her with him. Tommie was all too eager to follow.

"Do you think your friend, Con Wiley, will have this song?" Tommie was falling in love with the idea that this could be their song, their special song.

"I doubt it. Constance knows nothing about jazz or R & B." Gray dipped Tommie back, slowly and ever so gently.

She yelped but fell easily into the dip, holding her hand around the back of his strong neck and clutching his hand. Even angled backwards she never felt so safe.

"You're progressing well." Gray eased her back up. "Soon you won't need me."

Tommie understood the double meaning behind his statement. It didn't help that he looked so torn.

"No worries. Danny Boy will argue my case and I'll be able to go back to the hospital and go on with my life." He must have noticed her disappointed expression because he continued. "And you can go on with your life."

She wasn't prepared to lose him. Not when she had gotten so close. "There's something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you a while back."

"What?"

"That day at the gym when I had my--"

"Stable angina?"

"Yes. Those men in the suits, they belong to the Sports Entertainment Commission."

Gray furrowed his eyebrows. "I didn't know one existed."

"It was started a few years back after a big steroid scandal. A commission was started when some wrestlers dropped like flies. Not my wrestlers of course. A requirement by these hounds is that I have a doctor on staff at all times. That's why I needed you."

"You need me?" Gray smiled and it melted her.

"For my business." The answer was cool but her voice cracked and it gave away her composed demeanor.

"So what you're saying is--"

She butted in. "What I'm saying is that if you decide to go," she looked into his eyes, "I mean, if you want to leave, please give me the courtesy of a two-week notice so I

can find a suitable replacement for you.” No one could replace him.

“Of course I’ll tell you. It’s the least I can do considering you gave me a job when no one else would.” He twirled her around.

“Yeah, well when I offered you the job the first time you turned me down.”

“And when I came back to ask for the job you and Bix gave me a hard time.” He smiled and showed off all of his sparkling white teeth.

“Oh and I liked the way you pretended like you left your keys so that you could come back.” She felt him draw her in closer to him. His hand now rested at the small of her back. Her legs trembled.

“I did forget. It wasn’t a ploy.” He smoothed a curl from her face. She liked the feeling of his fingers brushing against her skin. “Besides, you acted like you thought I was a wrestler just to get my pants off of me. Not that I was complaining.”

Tommie could feel the heat rushing from the bottoms of her feet through her legs and stomach and chest until the rage of embarrassment reached her face. It was the second time Gray had made her blush.

“I did think you were a wrestler. I was serious when I asked you to take off your pants.” She stepped back from him. “I didn’t ask you to do it for some cheap thrill.”

The song ended and Tommie was ready for the night to end. She turned to the CD player and was halted by Gray’s grip on her hand.

“I was just teasing you.” He pulled her back to him. “You’re a smart businesswoman. You wouldn’t have asked me to do anything unprofessional.”

She started out professional. By the time his pants were off, her mind had forgotten all about the business and more on how good he looked with no pants on.

“Do you want to keep dancing?” he asked.

She pulled her hand from his and retreated to the entertainment center to stop the music.

“I did like it,” she said as her back was to him. She had to be honest. It was in her nature. Bad for business but good for her morale. She turned to him. “I initially asked you to take off your pants because I did think you were a wrestler. But once they were down, I, uh. Oh God, this is so hard.”

“Then take your time.” Did he have to be cool about everything?

“I like the way you looked, okay? So now if you want to sue me for sexual harassment and take away my business, go right ahead.”

He crossed his arms like he was actually considering her threat. “Tell you what. Tit for tat.”

“Excuse me?”

Gray made his face become serious.

“Take off your skirt,” he said, his face straight.

After thinking that if this man asked her to strip down she would do it, now she wasn’t so sure. Her body screamed for her to do it. Her mind told her that if she did things would change between them. Their relationship had already started to morph before her eyes. So what was the problem?

Tommie decided to play his game. “And why do I need to take off my skirt?” she asked just as he had when she’d posed the same demand.

“I have to see what your body looks like.” He circled around her. She wanted to

show him.

"Why do I have to take off my skirt for the job?" She turned to meet his gaze. Every nerve in her body sizzled.

He snickered. "Don't get sensitive about this. I do it to all the women I use." He stepped closer to her. "Unless you have some other costume you want to wear. You know, French maid, flight attendant, nurse."

Tommie laughed. She never thought of laughter as being a type of foreplay but there she was, amused and aroused.

Gray planted himself in front of her, his hands on his hips. "Do I have to pull it down myself?"

He was sounding so much like her on that day. If he grabbed her skirt and undid it, her legs would have been nothing but jelly.

"There's something I need to tell you." She stared into his eyes.

He reached his hands up and rested them on her waist. "Let's see what excuses I've heard." His hands slid over to the clasp on her skirt. "You're shy about your body." He undid the clasp.

Tommie swallowed hard. She could feel the sweat forming on her forehead and the back of her neck.

"You haven't waxed your legs." He spread the top of her skirt open and waited. "You're a born again Christian."

She laughed. Had she actually said that to him? She put her hands on top of his strong forearms.

He stopped. "Am I going too fast? Is this too much?"

Gray must have interpreted her touch as a way to stop him. She wanted to touch him.

"You're fine." She flashed him a reassuring smile.

He smiled back and grabbed her zipper. "Or maybe you're--"

The trill of the phone stopped him. Tommie recognized that the ring was to her business line.

"It's work," she said. "It can wait." She put her hands on top of his. "You were saying?"

"I was saying maybe you're--"

The phone rang again. This time it was to her house. Worried that it might be Bix in trouble, Tommie reluctantly removed Gray's hands from her skirt and grabbed the cordless phone next to her bed.

"This had better be important." No hello. No hi. She needed to get whoever it was off the phone quick.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Junior asked.

Usually Tommie loved hearing from her father. Today was not that time though. She had to get her longwinded father off the phone and get back to Gray.

"Actually, yes." She kept her back to Gray and her voice low.

"Oh." Junior sounded rejected. His tone reminded her of when she would call him when she was a child and he never had time for her.

"I'm sort of in the middle of something here." She glanced back and found Gray scanning the framed pictures on her dresser. She had to get back to him before he started

asking questions about why she had so many pictures of Junior Vickers in her house.

"I understand, baby girl. It's just that I had some news I thought you would like to hear from me."

"Can it wait until tomorrow? I promise I'll call you first thing."

She heard him sigh then cough.

"Sure. Not much you could have done about it tonight anyway."

She was curious about Junior's news. She was more curious about what Gray had in mind for her once her skirt came down.

"Great. I'll talk to you later, Da--uh, Junior."

"Sure." He disconnected the call. She felt like such a bad daughter. Just because Junior chose to treat her like she didn't matter as a child didn't mean she had the right to do the same to him now. He was her father. He did care for her. She needed to be there for him. She picked up the phone to call him back.

"Why do you have so many pictures of Junior Vickers? And who is this woman here?" Gray asked as he pointed to the pictures.

Tommie set the phone down and walked back over to Gray. She looked at the pictures with him. "This is my mother and her new husband. They've been married for a couple of years and live down in Jamaica where he's from." She was hoping he would ask her more questions about her mother than Junior.

"Wow. Sounds cool. Are you close to her too?"

Good. He did ask about her mother. She had to keep him on that track.

"Yes. She calls me when she can and I do the same for her. She's so happy."

"And what about Junior?" He stared at her. "Are you two involved?"

She wanted to laugh out loud but she held it in. "Not like you think. Junior's very close to me but there's no relationship. Not a sexual one to be more specific."

"Oh, so he's like a father figure?"

If he only knew. Now was the perfect opportunity to tell him. However, Gray was still considered an employee of her company and she vowed that no one outside of Bix would know of her relationship with Junior.

"Something like that," she said as she looked away. "Now where were we?"

Gray strolled toward her. "I believe I was asking if you were married and you think me pulling down your skirt is against your vows." He eased down the zipper.

Tommie heard each zipper tooth clicking as he descended. Each click matched her heartbeat until he got down to the bottom. He let her skirt go but before it could drop to the floor she grabbed it.

"Wait." She didn't want to change her mind. She had come too far to do that.

"I knew it. I went too fast for you. I'm sorry."

"Stop thinking you know what I'm going to say." She released her grip and let the skirt fall to the floor. "I just didn't want you looking at my ass." She folded her arms over her chest even though every fiber in her being screamed to have her cover her turquoise lace thong panties with her hands.

Gray leaned over and whispered, "Too late for that."

She shook her head, wondering what he meant until he motioned behind her with the tilt of his head. Tommie turned and found that she was standing in front of her full-length mirror that showed off her backside.

“Cute heart-shaped birthmark on your left--”

“Don’t you say it!” She twisted her backside from the view and managed to get her feet entangled in her skirt. She stumbled and almost fell to the floor when she was caught in Gray’s arms.

Here she was. No skirt on. In the arms of a beautifully, sexy man who smelled like heady mixture of sex and the outdoors. She wanted so much to kiss him.

Gray carefully placed her on the floor and hovered over her. “Now what?”

Tommie placed one hand behind his head and the other on his bicep. She brought his face down to hers to get that kiss she’d been dreaming about since the first time she’d met him. Her eyes closed and her breathing increased. She was about to be sent to Heaven. That was until the devil stepped through her door.

Tommie’s front door opened with a bang. It could have only been Bix from her night of partying but it was only eleven o’clock at night. An early night for Bix usually meant coming home at four o’clock in the morning.

“What the hell is that?” Gray looked up to her bedroom door.

Just then Tommie realized that she was on the floor, her door opened and her skirt around her ankles.

“Quick! Close the door so I can--”

Before she could finish her sentence, Bix and her flavor-of-the-moment, Angel, were standing at the doorway of her bedroom. From the floor, Tommie saw Bix with her arm around Angel’s shoulders, a pained expression on her face, and one foot craned up.

“Bix twisted her ankle,” Angel said. “I think it’s broken or something.”

Chapter Eleven

Tommie didn't want to come off as insensitive but she had been blocked from getting this man too many times.

"If you truly thought Bix's ankle was broken, Angel, why didn't you take her to the hospital?" Why was it that every time she got close to Gray, Bix ruined it somehow?

"You know I don't like hospitals," Bix said. She looked at Gray then Tommie, back and forth. "Why are you on the floor? Oh my God! Did you have another heart attack?"

"No." Tommie wriggled from underneath Gray, removed the skirt from around her ankles and stood.

Bix raised her eyebrows. "Oh, I see." She panned over to Gray. "And I'm sorry. Tommie's always saying I have rotten timing."

"Don't forget your incredibly huge mouth." Tommie snatched her thick, green terrycloth robe from her bed and wrapped it around her body. She could be partially dressed in front of Bix without hesitation. And she had just proven that she could be down to her Vicky's in front of Gray without a major problem. The two of them in the room with a stranger being an onlooker was a different story.

Gray stood up. "Why don't I take a look at that ankle? I'm sure it's nothing major."

"You're a regular Dr. E.R." Bix tapped her girlfriend on the shoulder, signaling to her take her to her bedroom.

Before leaving the bedroom, Gray turned back to Tommie. "I'll make sure Bix is okay and I'll be back."

Tommie nodded. "Sure. Just meet me in the den."

"Oh. Sure." He sounded disappointed but what did he expect? She wasn't about to do anything with Bix in the next room. He closed the door behind him.

"Damn," she said out loud. Maybe it was time for Bix stay at her place from now on. She was putting a serious cramp in Tommie's style.

* * * *

Gray, as he touched Bix's ankle and looked at it closely, only thought about one thing at the moment: that heart-shaped birthmark and the perfectly rounded cheek it sat on top of. He didn't know where it came from for him to ask Tommie to take off her skirt.

He knew that Tommie wouldn't have backed down from a challenge...or him. She was the one who had held a baseball bat to his head. He snickered thinking about it now.

"You're laughing so I guess my ankle is not that bad," Bix said, breaking his concentration.

"No, it's not." He sat erect on the chair next to Bix's bed. "You can wiggle your toes and move your foot around right?"

Her short toes moved back and forth. Slow, deliberate motions but the sign was

good. And she turned her ankle from left to right but not without wincing and uttering some curse words in between.

"It's not broken. Just badly sprained." He tapped her leg. "Do you have any Ace bandages in the house?"

"I don't know. Tommie!" she shrieked. "Do we have any bandages?"

Her shrill voice could have broken glass in China. Bix was nothing like Tommie. In Tommie's room, so sweet and innocent with its pale peach walls and light carpeting, he felt like he was in the garden of Eden and he was willing to bite the apple.

In Bix's room, which looked like the waiting room to Hell, it was the complete opposite. The walls in Bix's bedroom were a dark blood red color. She had a black leather chair and couch on either side of her bed. The furniture was a deep, dark mahogany wood. The art work on her walls looked like a serial killer painted them. Garish portraits of volcanoes and women bound to beds and stakes. Even her room smelled sinister. Her room stank of incense and musky perfume. Bix wasn't a woman. She was a force of nature. A missing link.

Tommie sauntered into Bix's bedroom with a roll of bandages in her hand. Even in the ill-fitting robe, she looked like a goddess. Gray was kind of glad Bix interrupted their moment. Tommie was the type of woman who deserved to have great, memorable moments. Not just some mixed up occurrence.

"Here." She handed the tightly bound roll to Gray who was sure to touch her hand as he took it from her.

"Thanks." He smiled and stared at her.

"Hello! I'm the patient here. You two can make googly eyes at each other later." Bix snapped her fingers to get their attention.

"Can you wrap that around her mouth?" Tommie asked.

"I don't think I have enough. But I could just shove the wad in her mouth." He held the roll up to her mouth as though he was measuring it to see if it was possible.

"Hey, don't talk to her that way." Angel crawled in bed with Bix and stroked her hair. "She's in pain."

"Of course." Gray undid the roll. He elevated Bix's foot onto a pillow.

"Don't try to look up my skirt either." Bix wagged her finger at him.

"Wouldn't think of it." After removing her toe ring and her anklet, Gray wrapped the tan colored strip around her ankle slowly.

"Why? I think she has pretty legs." Angel kissed Bix on her lips and cuddled next to the petite spitfire.

"I've seen better." He glanced at Tommie.

With her hair down around her face, she looked like the epitome of all that was right in the world. Goodness, generosity, compassion. And she had the cutest ass he had ever seen in a--

"So now what, Doc?" Bix asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Gray finished wrapping her ankle and secured it with a metal clasp. "Now you need ice on it to ease down the swelling." He peered over to Tommie. "Any ibuprofen in the house?"

"Are you kidding me? We rival any pharmacy."

"Okay. If you can get her a couple of pills for now, I'll get the ice pack." He

followed Tommie to the bathroom. True to her word, there were every type of pill and medicine in the world in her cabinet. He even thought he saw an eye of newt and wing of bat on the bottom shelf.

"Which one should she have? The Advil tablet or Tylenol or--"

Gray cut her off. "Whatever one she likes that will dull the pain."

"Right." Tommie pulled a bottle from the middle shelf and closed it. She turned to leave but Gray blocked the doorway. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her soft, full lips.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Um, the icepack. I still need it for her ankle."

She smacked her forehead. "That's right." She opened a drawer and pulled out the deflated blue baggie. Then she pointed down the hallway. "The kitchen is that way."

"Thanks." He backed from the doorway and allowed her to go back to the bedroom. He heard Bix screaming about not having something to wash the pills down with, to which he answered, "I'll bring you a glass of water," as he continued down the hall.

He managed to find the light. The organized kitchen epitomized the public portions of the home, with two phones on the counter and counter appliances all clean and in their proper places.

He grabbed the door handle to the freezer and caught Tommie's calendar on the door held up by a pizza delivery magnet and a magnet for a plumbing business. 'Ed's Plumbing. Keeping your pipes clear since 1948.'

On the Friday of Constance's party was written 'Con Wiley's b-day party with Gray.' It was circled in red ink and underlined. If that was an indication of anything, it appeared that Tommie was excited about the prospect of going to the party.

Gray filled the pack with ice and managed to find the glasses to get Bix some water. Hearing raised voices as he strolled down the hallway, he slowed when he caught his name in the argument.

"There was that time you slammed the door behind me at the show in Charlotte. Then tonight. I can't believe you busted in on us like that," Tommie said.

The tension in Tommie's voice could crush coal into a diamond.

"I'm sorry. Had I known you were going to come back here to get some, I would have gone to Angel's," Bix shot back.

"No you wouldn't have. You're hurt. And you want to be taken care of and you want me to do it. You always do."

"I can take care of her," Angel said, her voice lost in the sea of screams.

"So now you're saying that I can't even rely on you anymore?"

"No. That is not what I'm saying. I'm saying that if you're going to approve of me getting a life, then let me be."

"If you can't snag this man, don't blame it on me. You've had plenty of opportunities to get this guy and you've blown it. If he's not chomping at the bit to get you, don't look at me."

Gray had to stop this argument before he heard too much. "I'm on my way back. Is everybody decent?"

"As good as it's going to get," Bix answered.

Gray walked into the room, glass of water in one hand and the icepack in the other. He eased the pack onto her ankle then he handed her the glass of water.

"You're pretty cool," Bix said. She took the glass and popped the pills into her mouth. With a healthy gulp, she swallowed them. "If this doctoring thing doesn't work out, do you want to be a waiter?"

"What an offer. Let me think about it and I'll get back to you." He glanced at his watch. It wasn't too late but with the way things were he felt it was best that he left.

"Bix, if the pain gets any worse, then go to the hospital. No excuses. Just keep the pack on your ankle and take some ibuprofen when the pain is too much."

"Take two and call you in the morning type deal?" Bix said and winked.

"It's going to hurt when you finally walk on it because there's going to be a rush of blood to your ankle that first time. Take your time with it."

Bix nodded. From her silence, she seemed to be taking him seriously. It was the first time he'd seen her this quiet before.

"Is there anything I can get you to make you more comfortable? A snack? A magazine? Pop in a DVD for you?" He was reverting back to his old bedside manner ways. It felt good getting to help people again.

"That's what Tommie is for." Bix pointed to her friend.

"She's recovering herself." Gray thought he caught Tommie blushing again but in the red room, everything had a rosy hue to it.

"Then I have Angel." Bix possessively put her hand on Angel's hips and patted it. "She'll get me whatever I need."

"Good. Don't be afraid to call me if you have any questions. But I'm sure you'll be fine." He turned to the door. He hated leaving Tommie right now but he didn't exactly feel right staying. He was so close to losing control with her that separating would have been the best thing.

"You want something to eat?" Tommie asked. She followed him out to the living room. "I can make you some--"

He butted in. "No. I think I'd better be going. You have your hands full here. But if you need me for anything, just call."

"Anything?" She grinned seductively.

Damn, she was making this hard for him. The night of the party he'd have her all to himself. No interruptions. No distractions. And no Bix!

Gray said, "I'll see you Friday. Pick you up around five?" If he'd stayed any longer he wouldn't leave.

She nodded. "Thanks for a...fun evening."

"If you think this is fun, wait until the party." Gray walked to his car wanting to kick himself for making a statement like that. There was no way she was going to have a good time at that party but he certainly was going to try to make sure she had the best time possible.

* * * *

Tommie shopped for a dress, got her nails and hair done, and bought new shoes without Bix. It wasn't because Bix was still nursing her ankle injury. Tommie was pissed that her best friend hadn't talked to her at all about what was going on between her and Gray. Didn't Bix understand how Tommie was feeling about Gray? What was she

thinking?

An hour before Gray was supposed to pick her up, Tommie sat on her bed, rubbing scented lotion on her body.

"Andre did a really good job on your hair," Bix said. "I like it when he blow dries it straight and feathers it around your face."

Tommie turned to her friend who was bracing herself against the doorframe as she elevated her foot.

"Thanks." She stood from her bed and stomped to her bathroom to replace the lotion on the counter. Bix hopped into the room and sat on Tommie's bed.

"Gray was right," Bix began. "Ankle hurt like a mother as soon as I stood. You know what a wimp about pain I am. I almost started crying."

Tommie still didn't answer her even as she slid deodorant under her arms. Bix was like a spoiled child. She always wanted attention focused on her and God forbid if someone else needed attending.

Bix continued. "I had to finally send Angel home because she kept crying every time I winced a little. Isn't that funny?" She chuckled.

Tommie didn't break.

"Come on, Toms. Aren't you going to talk to me? Are you that mad?"

Tommie wasn't really mad at Bix. She wanted Bix to be a little more sensitive to her and her needs.

"No, I'm not mad at you." Tommie sighed. "I was cranky that you interrupted me and Gray. But I thought about what you said and you're right. I don't take advantage of opportunities. Tonight, I'm going to change all of that."

"That's my girl! That's the Tommie I remember." Bix stood and hopped to her best friend. She embraced her around her neck and hugged her so tightly that Tommie thought she would have to wear Bix as a necklace.

"Okay, now that we have that all straightened out, help me get ready for the party."

Bix let Tommie go. Tommie went to her closet and pulled out a dress still inside of its white protective bag.

"Let me see the dress." Bix clapped her hands like an eager child.

Tommie revealed the garment and held it under her chin.

"Well, what do you think?" Tommie asked.

Bix shook her head. "I think you had better take the whole box of condoms with you and call me in the morning."

Tommie smiled so hard that her face hurt. "You think?"

"Yeah, and don't bring your ass back home. Go to his place. His nice, private condo on the beach. Give him a new definition of 'sex on the beach'."

* * * *

Gray rang the doorbell a second time then cursed under his breath thinking that he may have appeared too eager. He straightened out his tie as he clutched the bouquet of white roses in his other hand.

The door opened with Bix on the other side. She looked like a teenage daughter letting in her mother's date.

"Dr. E.R. looks like Dr. Smooth." Bix nodded in approval.

Gray pointed to Bix's bare, unbandaged foot. "How's your foot?"

"Better. I couldn't take the bandage so I took it off."

"It's better for your ankle anyway."

"Yeah, well those stilettos weren't good for my ankle." She stepped aside and allowed him to come into the house.

The house smelled like a fresh shower and sweet, flowery perfume. It reminded him of Tommie without even seeing her.

"You want to sit? Need something to drink?"

Gray didn't answer. He couldn't. When Tommie appeared, everything around him stopped. Not went into slow motion. Not blurred. Everything stopped.

From head to toe, Tommie could put Miss America to shame. Her radiant hair framed her face. He had never seen it styled that way. It had always been curly and nested on top of her head. Her stunning black halter dress hit right at her knees and draped down further in the back. Her skin glistened. Actually glittered. And her face, which didn't need any makeup, was made even more beautiful by sheer pink lipstick and rose-colored eye shadow. Her shoes alone were enough to bring down airplanes. High, strappy, black, fuck-me pumps.

"Am I overly dressed?" Tommie put her hand on her chest.

Gray stared at her, his mouth hung open.

"She's talking to you." Bix nudged him in his side.

"You're fine. Fine." Gray smiled.

She sauntered to him. She even walked like someone who owned the universe.

"Are those for me?" She pointed to his hand. Gray had almost forgotten the roses stemming from his hand. He handed them to her.

"I thought you would like these. I know it's not really a date but--"

"They're lovely. No man has ever given me flowers." She took them from his hand and smelled the buds.

"I refuse to believe that."

Bix took the flowers from Tommie's hand. "Trust her. She's not kidding." She patted her friend on her shoulder. "You two kids go out and have a good time. I'll put these in water." She held up the bouquet.

Tommie kissed Bix on her cheek. "I'll call you if something changes."

"Be sure to check your purse. I think I put what you need in there." Bix winked at her.

Tommie gave her a suspicious look before Bix ushered her and Gray out of the door. Gray couldn't take his eyes off of the amazing transformation.

"Are you ready?" Gray asked.

"Of course."

Gray was determined to give this woman the time of her life and it looked like she wanted the same thing.

* * * *

Tommie couldn't wait to get to the party so that she could immediately go to the bathroom and check the contents of her purse. Once inside the spacious gold-colored bathroom, Tommie opened her tiny purse.

Tommie pulled out her house key, a small billfold with money and her I.D., a tube

of lipstick, a small comb. So far nothing strange. Then Tommie hit something plastic, something that crinkled. She lifted out a row of packaged condoms. Bix wasn't kidding. Tommie stuffed everything back into her purse. If she thought about sex with Gray she would have to pull him in the bathroom and use one of those condoms.

She hurried out of the bathroom and scanned the large house, crammed full of guests, for her incredibly handsome date. Gray looked delicious. He had on a black suit with a cream-colored shirt and matching tie. He also wore great Italian shoes she knew he would look good in.

"Excuse me." A hand touched her arm. "Have we met?"

Tommie turned and saw an older blonde woman in a smart and expensive dress. Jewels dripped from her neck, ears, fingers and wrist. Her smooth face looked like she had a little Botox injection sometime that week. This had to be Con Wiley.

"Not face to face but I'm sure we've spoken." Tommie held out her hand to the confused looking woman. "My name is Tommie Balford."

The woman's face flashed over with recognition. "Oh. So that's what a professional wrestling company owner looks like." She took her fingertips and barely touched Tommie's to shake her hand. "I had imagined you would look much tougher, bigger."

Tommie pulled her hand away. "You know what? You look exactly like what I thought you would. Frosty. I mean frosted."

"You know, dear, because we had one conversation about a mutual acquaintance does not mean that I want you here in my house. How did you know about my party anyway?"

Before Tommie could shoot back a smart remark, Gray saved her. He swooped in and took Tommie by her arm.

"I see you've met Dr. Constance Wiley." He turned to Tommie. "Tommie, this my former mentor." Gray put his arm around Tommie's shoulders. "Constance, this is my new boss and friend, Tommie Balford. I hope you don't mind that I brought her."

"It's interesting company you've chosen to keep." She glanced at Tommie and sneered. "Enjoy yourselves. I have other guests to greet."

Tommie didn't even wait until Constance was out of ear shot when she told Gray, "I don't like her."

"She means well. Most of her posturing is just that." Gray leaned over. "By the way, have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

His look when he first saw her was enough but hearing it was even better.

"You do too," she said.

"Would you like something to drink or eat?"

Tommie listened to the classical music from the pianist. In the open living room with its cathedral ceiling and marble floor, Tommie felt like doing one thing.

"Dance with me," Tommie said and took Gray's hand.

"Sounds wonderful."

In the middle of the floor where no one was dancing, Gray and Tommie had the area all to themselves. It was the way she wanted it considering she felt like they were the only two people in the room anyway.

Gray put one hand on her waist and held her other hand as he swayed her back

and forth.

"You dance beautifully," Tommie said.

"Fred Astaire Studios for years. My mother's idea. I learned the foxtrot, the box step, jazz, a little tap, even the tango and salsa."

"No way." Tommie couldn't imagine this man as an adolescent learning traditional dance steps. The song ended and Gray pulled away from Tommie and ran to the band. She didn't know what he had planned but she wasn't worried.

He rushed back to her.

"What are you doing?" Tommie asked.

"Just follow the master." He winked.

He placed one of her hands on his shoulder and held her other hand. He put his hand on her waist. When the music started Gray led Tommie through a slow tango. When he would get to a complex move he whispered his directives in her ear.

"Keep your eyes on mine." Gray stepped forward making her move back. "The tango is a sensual dance. You know in some countries it's taught in elementary schools. Educators think it helps with communication."

Gray pulled her body close. She could feel his heart beating through his chest. Tommie slid her hand up and cupped the back of Gray's head. She let her fingers get lost in his thick hair.

"Feel the rhythm," he whispered. Luckily the rhythm matched his heartbeat because it was the only thing she could feel at the moment.

"Sweep your leg behind mine."

Tommie did and even twirled around so that her back pressed against his chest.

He spun her around. "No, in my tango you face me the entire time."

His hand rested on the small of her bare back. "You're doing so well. I'm glad we practiced last night."

"This is so good," Tommie whispered.

Her heart throbbed until she couldn't discern what beats came from the band or if it was her pounding pulse. Her breath quickened as Gray's face hovered dangerously close to hers. She wanted so much to wipe her hand, now covered in a thin layer of sweat along with her forehead and cleavage. She wanted nothing separating her from this gorgeous dancing god.

Gray held her tighter. He gave her one last twirl then stopped at the end of the song. Tommie, unaware of what her body was doing, ended the dance with her leg wrapped around one of Gray's. She stared into his eyes as his hand stroked her bare back. It took them a while to realize that the party guests clapped at their display.

No question. She had to have this man. If he *danced* like this, no telling what he was like in the bedroom.

"How long do we have to be here before we can leave gracefully?" Tommie asked as the partygoers continued clapping.

"Give me ten minutes," Gray growled.

Chapter Twelve

Tommie had experienced the best physical contact she'd ever had without it being sex. With the way her body connected with Gray's, moving together in slow and easy rhythm, the dance resembled making love.

Now she was waiting out the longest ten minutes of her life. As Gray took her around to some associates he knew from the hospital, she chewed on ice cubes to calm her rattled nerves.

Most of the party took place outside in Con Wiley's huge backyard. Off to the right in the yard was a kidney-shaped swimming pool.

At the end of one of his stories, she grabbed Gray's hand and pulled him to a deserted spot behind a tree.

"You're really that anxious to leave?"

Tommie grabbed Gray's lapel. "Tell me what you think." She pulled him down for a kiss. It was soft at first. Each of them trying to feel each other out. Then he leaned into the kiss. Possessing her mouth hungrily, moaning as he slid his eager tongue into her mouth. She let her tongue play with his and pressed her body against his.

When he pulled back from her, he looked awestruck. He swallowed hard then looked down at his watch. "I'll say goodbye to Constance now. Then we can go anywhere we want."

"You still haven't given me a full tour of your condo."

Gray gave Tommie a quick kiss. "Meet me at the front door."

Gray hurried back into the house. Tommie straightened out her dress and smoothed down her hair. She followed several steps behind Gray as he went on the search for Con Wiley.

Heading to the bathroom she heard some two people arguing, one sounded like Gray. The other had to have been Con Wiley. Tommie hid around the wall and listened to the exchange.

"I shouldn't have come here," Gray said.

"Not with that woman."

That woman? Tommie should have invited all of her wrestlers to shake up the party.

"Don't you ever talk about her like that again. She's special to me."

Tommie couldn't stop her heart from drumming after hearing Gray talk about her so glowingly.

"I shouldn't have come here because it's not good for us to be seen together. The hospital will be calling me in soon and--"

"You'll be fine. You have some great people testifying on your behalf."

"What about you?"

Con Wiley cleared her throat. "If I'm called to testify, I will."

Some friend. Tommie knew there was a reason not to like this woman.

"Fine, Constance. If I can make a suggestion to you. Get your addictions under

control. They're going to ruin you."

Gray went around the corner so fast he almost ran into Tommie.

"Whoa! There you are." He held onto Tommie's shoulders. "I'm ready to get out of here. What about you?"

"I was ready right after I met Con Wiley." Actually, she was ready to go straight to his house when he came to pick her up. Instead she played it cool.

Gray held her arm until they rushed through the doors. Then his hand slid down to hers and like a natural fit, enveloped her hand into his. The feeling was so natural that she didn't flinch.

Gray gave the valet his ticket and pressed an extra ten bucks in the boy's hand to get the car to him quickly. Tommie decided to use the opportunity to get more information about his relationship with Con Wiley. She had a feeling about her and the case. If what she overheard was true, Con had a lot more involvement in what happened than what Gray had revealed.

"Does Con Wiley have anything to do with your case?" Tommie asked.

"Let's not talk about her right now." He squeezed Tommie's hand. "My mind is on other things."

Then, as though he willed it himself, his Volvo screeched in front of them. Gray opened the door for Tommie then hurried around to his side where he pressed another hefty tip into the young man's hand.

After he got into the car he asked, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

All Tommie had to do was to place her hand on his knee. The gesture cued Gray to head to his house, which wasn't too far from Con Wiley's. Tommie relaxed back into the seat. The feeling of sex saturated the inside of the car. The current was so thick she could almost see it, touch it.

"I have to tell you something." She turned to him.

Gray pulled up to his condo.

He parked in his driveway and turned off the vehicle. Then he faced her. "What do you have to tell me?"

"I haven't done this in a long time," she began, her voice trembling. "I don't know if I'm going to be any good with--"

"Hey." Gray put his finger to her lips. "We're just here to talk. That's it. No pressure, no expectations. Okay?"

She listened to his voice to hear any sign of disappointment. She didn't hear it. He was being sincere and that comforted her.

"Want to come inside now? I still owe you that tour." His reassuring smile with deep dimples warmed her.

She nodded her head in response. As usual, he opened her door for her. No matter how many times he performed the gentlemanly gesture, she would always be appreciative.

When he opened the front door for her, Tommie hesitated before stepping into the darkened house.

"Sorry." Gray flipped a switch on the wall next to the door to illuminate the overhead light in his foyer. "I forget to leave the light on sometimes."

"I guess working long hours at the hospital will do that to you." Tommie set her

purse on the kitchen bar. "You never know when you're coming home or sometimes what day it is."

"You talk like you've been there before." Gray led her into the living room.

Tommie sat on the couch. "I know I've taken some time off but I do still run a company."

Gray nodded. "I tend to forget that when you look like--" He motioned to her but trailed off.

"Like what?" she asked, baiting him.

"Nope. Not going there." He shook his head. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Ice water. Lots of ice." She needed to go on her chewing fest again if she was going to be alone with Gray.

He made her drink without a word. When he handed her the glass, he said, "You need more ice to chew on?"

She smirked at him before snatching the glass. "It's a nervous habit."

"I'm sure it is." He snickered.

Tommie stood. "I need your bathroom." She'd gotten distracted on her way to the one at Con Wiley's house.

He pointed over her shoulder. "Down the hall. First door on the right."

She placed the glass on the coffee table and glided by Gray. When she brought her gaze up to meet his, he hitched up a contagious smile. His deep dimples gave his face a boyish charm that appealed to her. More than a gentleman, he embodied a gentle man.

"Down the hall to your right," he said again.

"I caught it the first time." She made it past him and strolled down the hallway. On her way, photographs hung on the wall grabbed her attention.

"Gray, come here," Tommie called to him. She heard him rustling in the living room. She broke her gaze from one of the family photographs to watch Gray coming down the hallway, with his manly swagger.

She pointed to a picture. "Who are these people?"

Gray didn't even have to look at the photo to answer. "My brother and his family." He pointed out each member. "This is my brother, Ian. That's his wife, Evelyn. And these are their boys, C.J. and William."

Tommie studied the picture. "Your brother looks a lot like you, except his hair is so dark. And he doesn't have your dimples."

Gray rubbed his cheek as though he could erase the deep impressions. "You can blame my mom for those." He pointed to another picture next to the one of his brother's family. It was one of a stern looking man in his military uniform and a small, delicate woman with mousy brown hair flipped up at the ends. And, yes, she had those same dimples.

"The Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Kennebeck." She nodded.

Gray had his mother's dimples and sympathetic eyes. However the height, intimidating demeanor, square jaw line and thick head of hair all came from his father.

"I would love to see pictures of your family."

She walked back to the living room. "You have seen them. In my bedroom."

"I saw your mother and her new husband. And pictures of Bix and Junior. But

what about your dad? You don't have pictures of him?"

She needed to tell him. She should tell him. He had been open with her as far as his family was concerned. Why couldn't she do the same for him? Why couldn't she tell him the truth?

Tommie forced a smile. As much as this man stimulated her body, he still hid something from her regarding his case. Until he could be open with that, she would open up about Junior.

"Maybe some day," she replied.

She returned to the living room and plopped herself on his off-white couch. She lifted her glass of water and took a sip. Gray sat across from her. He wiped his hand across his forehead. It was then that she noticed that he was still in his suit, jacket unbuttoned and tie in place.

She set the glass down and peered at him. "We're in your place. Why don't you get comfortable? You're still all dressed up."

"For you," he answered. "I didn't want to get too comfortable if you weren't able to do the same."

Sweet but not a convincing story. She unlaced her sandals and let them fall to the floor. Then she padded over to Gray. She bent over and grabbed his tie.

"Let's take some of this off." She undid the silk fabric from its knot while Gray watched her.

"You get into undressing me, don't you?" Gray stretched his arms across the back of his couch. She pulled the tie through his collar.

"You don't seem to know when to take off your clothes." She let the tie fall into a heap next to him. Then she started on his jacket. She unbuttoned it and flapped it open.

"You know, you still have a control issue." He brought his arms down and shrugged out of his jacket.

"Or maybe I know what's better for you." Her voice dropped down to an octave even unknown to her. She opened the top button of his shirt. After looking into his eyes, she opened another one...and another.

"Do I look that uncomfortable?" he asked. His chest looked delicious through the open collar.

"Oh no. Just the opposite." She sat next to him, curling her leg underneath her. "You're as cool as cool can be."

Gray smoothed a strand of her hair from her face, causing a current of goose bumps to sprout on her arms, down her back and to her legs.

"So let's talk," Gray said.

"Nope." Tommie stood and took his hand. "Show me your place."

Gray stood and kept a tight hold on her hand. "I thought you would never ask." He put his hand to her waist and turned her to the hallway. "You've already seen the kitchen, living room and dining room. Let me show you the rest of the downstairs." He took her to a room across from the bathroom and turned on the light. "This is my spare bedroom."

The color scheme of the room was the same as the rest of the house. White walls, a cream colored bedspread on the bed, a dresser, tan carpet, and white blinds. This man needed to get in touch with a color wheel.

"This would have been your room if you had decided to stay with me," he said. He had already made plans for her. Very thoughtful.

"And where do you lay your head?"

With a smile, Gray took her hand and led her to a set of stairs by the front door. With each step she felt the anticipation building. The closer she got to the second floor, the more she smelled the scent of raw, musky sex. She couldn't wait to see his room.

He turned to her. "My room is a mess but unlike you I'm not going to try to cover it up."

"With an attitude like that, I'm surprised you don't have women falling all over you." She missed their playful banter.

He turned on the light and Tommie was shocked to see color. Still in a sea of beige, the carpet, the walls, the curtains, he had a bright blue bedspread.

Gray must have known what Tommie was thinking, because he immediately said, "The blue reminds me of the skies when I dive."

His room was as big as all out doors...and so was his bed. It was the only thing in his room that she captured her focus.

"There's another spare bedroom across the hall but I use it as an office," Gray said. "And speaking of office. I know this is not the right time to talk about this but I've been looking over Junior these past few days. He's not doing so well."

Tommie had almost forgotten that Junior had called her. She was supposed to call him back but with the party and getting ready she'd forgotten. Was what he had to tell her have anything to do with his health? Junior wasn't the type to talk about his problems. Maybe he was changing.

"What do you mean?" she asked, feeling guilty and concerned all at once.

"I have to literally cram his blood pressure meds down his throat. He looks a little sluggish lately. He claims it's because you're not around. I can understand that." He squeezed her hand. "I'm recommending that you pull him for the next couple of weeks."

Tommie let his hand go. "You can't. I can't. Junior is one of the leads in the pay-per-view. If he doesn't wrestle, the fans will freak." She knew her father. He wouldn't have given up the opportunity to wrestle in a big show for one last time for anything. Junior, her father, deserved a fitting goodbye.

"So your show is more important than your employee's health?" Gray pulled his hand back. Then he planted his fists on his hips.

"Of course not. I care about my employees. You just don't understand. Junior is...well, Junior is sort of--"

"What? What are you going to tell me about the Emperor of Pain?"

Tommie blinked hard. "How did you know that that was what he was called in his early career?"

Gray smiled. "Danny Boy and I used to watch a lot of pro-wrestling back in college." He smiled even wider. "Now that I think about it, Junior was like the father I wanted. Tough but always with a message. He would look right in the camera and say never take crap from anyone and be true to yourself and your loved ones."

She remembered that mantra. Too bad Junior couldn't stick to his own words.

"If you understand that how could you think I could pull Junior?"

The smile dropped from Gray's face. "Because if you don't then it will kill him."

Gray's serious message scared her. She balled her hands into fists to keep him from seeing her hands shake.

He continued. "You said that you would take my advice. You said that you would do whatever I suggested where your guys are concerned."

"I said I would take it under advisement." She didn't want to seem like a pushover just because she was standing barefoot in his bedroom. "I want to talk to Junior first."

"Fine. Just be sure to go with your heart and not your head."

She took a step closer to him. "And what is your heart saying?"

He smirked. "It's saying I should finish this tour and get back downstairs." He strolled by her to a door by a large picturesque window.

"If you're scared, say you're scared."

"I'm still here." He opened the door and turned on the light. Inside was his personal bathroom. It was gorgeous. A large white Jacuzzi tub with a panoramic window over the tub and sink. With the colored mosaic floor tiles and pedestal sink, the bathroom had a definite Mediterranean feel to it.

Tommie couldn't resist. She stepped into the empty, cold tub and peered out of the window that overlooked the ocean. The cool fiberglass chilled the soles of her feet.

"Make yourself comfortable," Gray joked.

She turned to him. "Do you ever just sit in the bathtub with the windows open and listen to the ocean?"

Gray cocked his head as though he wanted to say 'Oh please.'

"I guess that's a little girly, huh?"

He ran his fingers back through his hair. "No, it's fine. It's good to see a woman, running a tough business like professional wrestling, who still acts like a woman."

Gray was definitely a man's man. She stepped out of the tub and moved around the airy bathroom. When she stole quick glances at Gray, he stared at her walking around in his bathroom, looking at her like she was a trapped mystical fairy trapped. She reached his sink, took one more look at him, then made an obvious search through his cabinet above his sink.

"What are you doing?" He ran to Tommie as her eyes scanned over the contents. Deodorant, Q-Tips, three types of cologne, some she recognized some she didn't, then a large, unopened box of...

Gray slammed the door. "I swear you're like a kid."

"A lot can be revealed about a man through his medicine cabinet." She attempted to open the cabinet again to get a glimpse of that box.

"I can tell you more than you can deduce by inspecting my aftershave."

"And condoms. Was that an unopened box of Trojans?" She smiled and tried hard to suppress her laughter. That was a lost cause.

"You know what? It's time for us to--"

She puffed up her chest and poked it into his. "What are you going to do?"

Gray moved closer to her. When he was close enough, he reached out for her. His hands rested on her waist. "Damn, woman. What are you doing to me?" he growled. "You're more dangerous than jumping out of an airplane."

Tommie could barely stand on her quaking legs. “Me? What are *you* doing to *me*, Dr. Kennebeck? I can go from arguing with you to...” She stared into his eyes as she snaked her hand behind his head. Heat rising from his shirt collar warmed her hand. Gray slipped his hand to her bare back. His other hand he used to stroke her cheek.

“Soft skin,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Tommie felt his interest rising. His hardness pressed against her stomach as he leaned down to kiss her. A kiss from Gray made the world stop.

He squeezed her back and leaned into her. His shallow breathing whisked by her ear. His heart beat pounded against his chest.

When Tommie’s back had arched as far back as she could go, she knew she had to go somewhere more comfortable. She pulled back from him. His jaw dropped as he reached for her again.

“Bed,” was all Tommie could say to him.

She took his hand and pulled him into his bedroom. Hard, pounding sex. That was what the doctor required. And she needed it from this doctor. She had to take control again.

“Tommie, I should--”

“What?” She looked over his shoulder. “Oh, yeah. You need that unopened box. You get that and I’ll be waiting.”

“That. Or you could get your purse.” He winked at her.

Tommie laughed. “One day you’re going to be wrong about something.”

“Yeah, and you’ll be there to revel in it.”

She pushed him back as she rushed to the lamp on his dresser. She turned it off but with the moonlight streaming into the room, there was still plenty of light. With a running start, she hopped on his pleasure platform with the sky blue comforter. By the time she got her head on the pillows and fell into a comfortable position, she noticed that Gray was still standing in original spot where she’d left him. His hands were empty.

Gray strolled to her and sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

“Giving me some of that bedside manner, Dr. Kennebeck?”

When he didn’t answer, she drew in her bottom lip and chewed it. Gray smoothed his fingers over her face and dragged his thumb over her exposed bottom lip to pull it back out.

He shook his head. “As much as I want to, and believe me, I do.” He stared at her as though he was about to tell her she was going to die. “I can’t do this.”

Chapter Thirteen

Gray wanted to kick his own self in the head for turning this beautiful woman down. Lately whenever he looked at Tommie, all he thought about was how wonderful it would be to make love to her, be with her, hold her. Then tonight, seeing her in her dress with her stunning makeup and those long, long legs, it was all he could think about.

"Now *I* must have misread your signals," Tommie said. She crossed her legs at the ankles and folded her arms over her chest.

She wouldn't even look him in the eyes. He deserved her cold response. There she was, on his bed, ready, willing and waiting for him, and he didn't want to make love to her?

Want had nothing to do with it. It was trying to get over his old ways that kept him from taking this last crucial step.

"You're going to think I'm a cheesy cornball but I respect the fact that you have a stance on not having a relationship with the people you work with," Gray said.

"You're right. You are a cornball." She laughed but nervousness laced the jovial reaction. She kept her gaze away from him.

He wanted so much to look her in the eyes, assure her he had only the best intentions. He never wanted to go this far.

"What are we doing here?"

She huffed. "We were doing okay in the bathroom then you got all weird on me."

His eyes widened. "*I* got weird? You're trying to control this situation like you had it all planned out. If that's the case, I don't work that way. Don't mess with my head or any other part of my anatomy."

Looking into her eyes, dancing with her, she was too special to have her heart broken. Work was a convenient excuse to not have a relationship but here Tommie was. Beautiful. Smart. Sexy. Strong. Accessible.

Tommie took no time in pouncing on him. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He blinked but she cut in before he could respond.

"I am hot," she proclaimed.

"And modest."

She uncrossed her legs and held her arms open. "I have on this kick-ass dress. I nearly broke my ankle on those shoes. And I haven't worn makeup like this since I stopped being a stockbroker a couple of years ago."

Gray gasped, a reaction not lost on Tommie. "I didn't know you were a stockbroker."

She smiled, almost like a smirk. "What? Did you think I just fell into pro-wrestling?"

"Actually I thought you were born for something else." He couldn't resist flirting.

No, it was more than flirting. Flirting seemed like a tease. He couldn't hide the fact that he wanted her.

"I wasn't born to be a ball buster either if that's what you're thinking."

Gray, although he tried to fight the urge, laughed. Tommie followed suit with a cute giggle. He longed to hear what she sounded like at the point of ecstasy. She'd already teased him back in the hotel room in North Carolina, and at his house a few days ago. Seeing her in his bed, he wanted nothing more than to ravage her.

Back in the day, when he used to use the 'Hey, I'm a doctor' line on women to get them in bed, a quick romp would have been fine. Now, it was different. He didn't want to use her, and since he hadn't planned on coming back after the case, win or lose, he didn't want to start something that could be great.

Tommie exhaled and chewed on her lower lip. What was she thinking about now?

"I'm not going to beg." She drew her legs in and like a cat, landed on her hands and knees and crawled toward him. He wasn't going to run away.

"I'm thinking about you." He meant that in more ways than one. But he had to clarify. "I know you're worried about your heart."

Her medical condition was part of the reason he was reluctant to enter that next level. Not that he thought he was such a great lover that he would put stress on her heart. Stress caused her last stable angina attack. If what happened between them didn't turn out the way Tommie wanted, would that add more stress to her and cause another attack?

Tommie sat with her butt on her feet when she got close to him. Taking his hand, she placed it on her chest. "My doctor says I can resume all physical activity." She was sure to emphasize the word 'physical'. Her heart pounded so hard it made his hand vibrate.

He couldn't control the swelling in his pants. Gray shifted as he tried keeping the sight from Tommie's gaze.

You can't do this, man. She's too vulnerable.

He held her hands in his. "You don't date your talent."

She gave him a sly smile. "You're right." She slithered toward him, her lips mere inches from his ear. "But according to you, this is not a date. And I want to see just how talented you are."

Gray closed his eyes and breathed out heavily as she kissed the shell of his ear. She placed her hands on the sides of his face and curled her body closer to his. He slid his hands around her tiny waist and hugged her.

Damn, this felt too good. Why was he fighting this so much? Because he didn't want to be that same ol' Gray.

He swept his arm under her legs and lifted her. "I'll do what I do best." He placed her carefully on the center of the bed, her head on the pillows.

"What are you--"

"Shh." He held his hand up. "Don't move."

* * * *

As sexy as he was trying to make the scene, Tommie had to put this man straight. "I'm not a virgin. I know what it's like to be touched by a man."

"But do you know what it's like to be made love to?" Gray placed his hand on her stomach.

Tommie's teeth chattered and her legs twitched. She could barely catch her breath. Thoughts jumbled. Dry throat. Cold sweat beading on her forehead. Her moist

sex throbbed as she writhed on Gray's soft bed.

"Show me," she growled. "Make love to me." She bolted up and clawed Gray's shirt, yanking it from his pants and fidgeting with his buttons. Gray held her wrists and pulled them back. She peered into his eyes and found quiet passion, smoldering eyes.

After opening her heart, her soul, crossing over that level of trust she hadn't crossed in years, Tommie was more than ready to stay with Gray.

She leaned in to kiss him but stopped. It wasn't because of fear again. Gray halted her when he tilted his head back.

"If we're doing this, we're doing it right." He put his hands to the sides of her face and drew her in slowly. As delicately as he had kissed her earlier, his lips brushed over hers.

Tommie closed her eyes and accepted this passionate gesture. Her body melted. She wanted nothing more than to feel this man touch her, feel her, make her know the beauty of trusting someone and letting go.

His tongue slipped into her mouth. She felt his hardness under her thigh. Oh she was more than ready.

Tommie clawed at his shirt, undoing buttons in a ravenous fashion.

Gray held her hands. She pulled back from the kiss and this time she furrowed her brows. Was he going to turn her down again?

"Patience," was all he said as he smiled like a saint. After sliding off the bed, he methodically undid each button on his shirt to Tommie's dismay. How could he be this calm and cool about this? Then again, there was something so incredibly sexy about a man who was this patient, this controlled.

Once he got the shirt off, he hung it on the back of a chair. He reached for his belt then stopped.

"Are you sure you don't want to do this?" he asked with a smirk. "You did it so well the first time."

She sat on the edge of the bed, her feet dangling above the floor. "At this point I would be willing to rip them down with my teeth."

He laughed and undid his pants. He stepped out of them and draped them on the chair with the shirt. In his white jockey boxers, his hardness even more apparent, he was the equivalent of a carved granite statue. A sexier 'David.' Forget 'The Thinker.' She had The Doctor.

"You're beautiful," she said.

A strange compliment to a man. It seemed to be the most appropriate praise to make at the time. He strolled to her. A mistake if he expected her to keep her hands off of him. She reached for the band of his boxers. It didn't even faze him.

"So are you." Gray smoothed her hair from her face and slid his hand under her chin. He bent over and kissed her so tenderly that it distracted her from her quest of pulling down his boxers. His tongue probed her mouth and played with her equally eager tongue. His mouth tasted sweet.

When Gray pulled back from her it took her a few seconds to realize that the top of her halter dress was down around her waist. Her naked breasts with their hard, protruding nipples displayed prominently.

"You aren't a boy scout," she said as she wriggled out of the dress.

He spied her black lace thong panties and shook his head. "If you thought that about me then I'll be losing some merit badges tonight."

Gray straightened and put his hands to his waistband.

"Oh no!" Tommie sprang to her feet and snatched the boxers. "I want to do this." After pulling the front of the boxers forward to make room for his hard cock, she yanked them down.

His penis was long, full with a beautiful curve. She should have taken him the first day they'd met.

Gray enveloped her in his massive arms.

"If you don't take me now I'm going to scream." Tommie squeezed him, digging her newly manicured fingernails into his back. Easing her backward, Gray sat Tommie on his bed again.

"Stay right there." He darted to his bathroom.

"I'm not a dog," she called after him. "You can't keep telling me to sit and stay."

He returned to the bedroom, the box of condoms in his hand and a smile on his face. He sat the box on an end table and got on his knees on top of the bed. He crawled toward her, which made her laugh.

"I'll beg. I'll rollover. I'll do what you want." His dimples in his cheeks deepened. "Scratch my tummy and I'm all yours."

Tommie slid back on the bed and rested her head on his sea of pillows. She lifted her hand and motioned him to come to her. "Come here, boy."

He positioned himself between her legs. As he shook his head, she could have sworn she heard him say, "My God."

Hooking his fingers into the sides of her panties, he pulled them down as though he had done it a million times before. She was glad that she actually took Bix's advice about getting the Brazilian wax. From Gray's expression, he looked pleased with the job.

He laid his body on hers and kissed her as his hand feathered over her flesh. His fingertips danced over her swollen nipple. He kissed down her neck until he reached her other breast. With careful precision, he licked her nipple. Feeling his hot tongue against her already tingling skin made her lose her mind.

His mouth covered her breast and he sucked on it as his other hand massaged her other breast. She stroked his arm and squeezed her eyes shut. He moved over to her other breast and gave it the same attention as the first. She ran her fingers through his thick hair. Too many feelings rushed over her until she felt unable to do anything else.

"Gray," she moaned. She reached for the condoms on the end table next to her head.

He grabbed her hand and brought it back down. "Oh no. I told you. Patience. For once, let me be in control." He kissed his way down her body, over her stomach to her wet sex. Like a man enjoying a good meal, he made one long lick. Tommie arched her back and clutched handfuls of the comforter. God, he was exceptional.

As Gray allowed his tongue to take the plunge inside of her finally, her mind bounced from thoughts of how he was driving her absolutely crazy to what he'd said about possibly dropping out of her life. It was possible. Win or lose, he would be gone and she would probably never see him again.

Gray slid a finger inside of her as his mouth covered her throbbing clit. That was

it! She was his. Tommie arched her back and cried out in ecstasy as he continued probing and sucking, loving her like she needed to be loved for a long time. She called out his name until she was finally screaming his name as she came.

Thankfully he didn't stop. He continued licking and sucking her until Tommie felt like a quivering, satisfied mess. Gray kissed down her inner thighs, allowing his tongue to trail her now scorching flesh. What a wonderful way to come down. Even with her heart pounding a mile a minute, she wasn't ready to stop.

As though reading her mind, Gray asked, "How are you feeling?" He crawled up to her and positioned his body next to hers. He put his hand to her chest, covering her thrumming heart.

Placing her hand on top of his, she answered, "I'm fine." She smiled so wide she thought she must have looked goofy. "I'm better than fine."

"I want you." When he raised his head so that his face hovered over hers, she said again as she stared into his eyes, "I want you, Gray."

He smiled and reached across her to the box of Trojans on the nightstand. Good answer. With her take-charge attitude, Tommie picked up the box of condoms. A flick of her wrist, she had on condom package ripped from the rest of the chain.

"Bet you want to put it on me too, huh?" He sat up on his knees between her legs.

"Bet you want me to put it on you, don't you?"

His silence answered her inquiry as she rolled the thin membrane over his protruding, thick cock. Getting it down to the base signaled Gray to move into action. Moving like a seasoned couple, as Tommie placed one leg on his shoulder, Gray, holding his penis, slid the tip up and down between her nether lips.

"Good. Looks like you're nice and wet."

So much so that she could hear it with each delectable pass he made with his mushroom tip. Without warning but so needed, Gray took a quick, hard plunge inside of her. Reaching back, she held onto the headboard as he clamped down onto her thighs.

The man moved like a well-oiled machine, thrusting his hips back and forth, plunging deeper and deeper inside of her until nothing could cool down her body.

The low growl Gray emitted made her hardened nipples strain to an uncomfortable level. She arched her back, making him grab her other thigh and move even faster.

"Shit, this is wonderful!" She hooked her feet behind his neck as he worked his magic on her, and what he did was magic.

The inner walls of her cunt constricted around his shaft, something he must have felt immediately.

"Easy, babe. Not yet." He tried slowing his pace but when she moaned again coupled with her grabbing her breast to tweak her nipple, Gray hit his breaking point. "Oh God!"

He slammed into her so hard the bed rattled and shook. Sweat poured from his face, dripping onto her chest and offering a cool shower. His eyes flared with a wild expression.

"Yes! Yes! Gray!" The orgasm that hit her sent a blast of fireworks to her eyes and tremors down her body.

"Oh, baby!" He pushed himself deep inside of her and held her there.

In his leaned over position, she managed to run her fingers through his damp hair. The next time they have sex, she would have to grab a handful of that hair and hold on for dear life.

While still inside of her, Gray said, "I knew it would be--"

"Yeah," Tommie said, interrupting him.

"But it was so much--"

"I know."

"Wonderful."

"You really know how to drive a woman crazy." Just to calm her frizzy mane, Tommie ran her fingers back through her hair.

"Ready for round two?" Gray sprang from the bed to deposit the used condom.

"Can you?" She didn't mean for the question to come out like a dare.

From his smarmy expression, she knew he took it that way. "Hope you had your Wheaties this morning." As he fumbled to open the box, his phone rang.

"The machine will get it." He tore open a flap and pulled out a strip.

At the third ring, the answering machine in his room clicked.

"Hey, Dr. Lovejoy, it's me, Bix."

Tommie covered her eyes with her hand. Did the woman have radar and just knew when Tommie was about to do something exciting? Maybe Bix was in cahoots with Junior. Although Junior would have probably objected to the condom. He wanted grandbabies and he wanted them now.

"If you're there, pick up," Bix said.

Tommie heard a popping sound and knew Bix had to have been chewing gum and clicking it in that way that annoyed Tommie. Now Tommie understood why her father hated to see and hear her or anyone chew gum.

Tommie stared at Gray as he cut his eyes over to the phone. She sat up. "Don't answer her. I can call her back." She moved closer to him. "Trust me. Nothing's more important than this right now."

He tore off a package and opened it.

"Okay, I guess you're either not there or you two are hitting the skins like rabbits," Bix said.

Tommie flopped her head back onto the pillow and groaned. Why did she feel like a parent with her child on her date's answering machine asking her to come back home because the babysitter's mean and she needed her goodnight kiss?

Bix continued. "When you get home or get off and you get this message, have Tommie give me a call at the house."

Gray rolled the condom down his long shaft. Tommie was almost breathless thinking about having him inside of her again. He positioned himself in between her legs and she wrapped her legs around him.

"I hope she hangs up soon," Gray said, his lips inches from Tommie's. "I don't think I can do this with her talking in the background."

Tommie held onto Gray's wide shoulders. "Do like I do. Ignore her. She'll shut up soon." She gave Gray a quick kiss. "Then when we're done here, I'm going to call her back and chew her a new one."

In a stroke of perfect timing, Gray slid the mushroom tip of his cock between her

slick pussy lips then plunged inside just as Bix said, “Just want to let Tommie know that Mo quit tonight. He’s signed a contract with Slamtastics and will be gone before *Home Invasion*.”

Chapter Fourteen

Tommie bolted up so fast the top of her head hit Gray's chin. He pulled out of her before she could damage other parts of his anatomy.

"Ouch!" Gray grabbed his chin and put his other hand on her head to either check it or keep her from ramming him again. "I like rough sex like the next guy, but geez, you're dangerous."

Even after feeling his perfect shaft inside of her, filling her up, sex was the last thing on Tommie's mind now unfortunately. With Bix's message, she was yanked back into the business world where she was still the boss and even as she looked at Gray she knew that he was still her employee.

How the hell could Mo leave her? She was good to him. Gave him his start. Put him in the same league with Junior. Now he was leaving her? Ungrateful bastard.

"I hate to do this." She released Gray from the grip of her legs and hopped out of bed.

She heard him cursing under his breath as she looked for her clothes. She didn't blame him for being pissed. Tommie wanted nothing more than to stay the night and come home with a hell of a story to tell. Life never stopped, especially not for her. Just like for everything else, she had to be there to make things right.

After scanning the floor, Tommie retrieved her black thong and slipped them back on. Then she slid her dress up her legs.

"For someone who doesn't want to leave, you sure are getting dressed in a hurry." He sat on the edge of the bed, frustrated but still sexy.

"You don't think this bothers me too?"

He shook his head. "If it bothers you so much, don't go."

"You don't understand. One of my star wrestlers just left my company weeks before our first big pay-per-view. Where do you think my mind is right now?"

Gray's face softened. "Wow. I didn't know I was just a distraction until your work came along. My mistake. I actually thought you were into me."

Tommie didn't want to do this. She didn't want to argue with Gray about the importance of her company. These people were her life. They were her family. One person leaves and she couldn't just stand back and not do anything. Honestly, it would be the same reaction she would have had if, no when, Gray finally departed her company.

He looked over at her. "Maybe this is a sign."

She did everything she could not to look him in the eyes. As soon as she made contact with his gaze, she felt his disappointment.

"I don't believe in that crap. I do believe in my business and as much as this hurts, I have to get home." She tied her halter top around her neck.

"Tell me. What do you expect to do when you get there? Are you going to call this guy at his house and plead with him to stay? He's signed the contract. He sounds like he wanted to go." Gray grabbed a handful of his comforter. "Besides, you're supposed to be taking it easy. Why don't you let Bix and Junior take care of this and have them get back to you?"

Through gritted teeth Tommie answered, "Because this is my business. I sign

every check. I hire every employee. I'm there for every show. And if you can't understand that, then I'll just call myself a cab."

Gray hopped out of bed, his displeasure apparent on another significant area of his body. "No, wait. I'll take you home." He walked past her without even looking at her. "Just let me take a quick, cold shower."

Gray disappeared in his bathroom and shut the door behind himself.

Damn. This was not how Tommie saw this night playing out. First, she was angry at herself for not calling Junior back the night before. This was probably the news he wanted to share with her but instead she'd brushed him off. Then she channeled her anger to Bix.

As much as Bix had promised not to ruin her night with Gray, she'd done it again. Was Tommie supposed to go where there were no phones or outside connection so that she could be alone with Gray?

The shower started just as the air conditioning kicked on, cooling off the steamy room. After closing the window, Tommie strolled to the massive bed. She sat on the edge of it, unmotivated in going downstairs to get her shoes and purse and wait for Gray. Just as she thought of him, Gray popped out of the bathroom completely drenched with a towel around his waist. Water dripped from his hair into mini pools around his feet.

"I don't want you to go home," he began. "I want you to stay with me tonight. You don't know how long I have wanted you."

Tommie opened her mouth to respond but he ducked back into the bathroom, slamming the door behind himself.

Maybe she was using Mo's departure as an excuse to keep from being too intimate with Gray. Her body tingled when he said he'd wanted her for a long time. She wanted the same thing too. So why was she running now?

Gray was right. What did Bix expect for Tommie to do now? Tommie would call Mo in the morning and find out what was going on. Although she hoped that Junior had already done that since he did run the talent portion of the UEW business.

The bathroom door flung open again with steam billowing from behind Gray. So much for a cold shower.

"And another thing, if the sex was bad, just tell me. I can take a hint. You don't have to have your friends call my house with phony emergencies."

Now Gray was getting comical. If the man didn't look so serious, she would have laughed. No matter how strange, he was trying to make a point. So she would sit and allow him to make his argument even though he looked so cute with his hair wet and drippy, his body slick with soap and water, and his eyes full of fire and passion.

Again, before she could speak, he darted back into the bathroom. She had to stop Gray's tirades. Having Bix call her about problems wherever she went had to end too. Tommie had been assertive when she'd decided to take some time off work. She knew what she wanted now. And she was going to get it.

Tommie stood from the bed. Enough with putting her life on hold. The time was now and she was ready. She reached behind her head and undid her halter. She slipped out of her thong and hung it from the chair. To be sure there would be no more interruptions, Tommie unplugged Gray's phone.

Take that, Trixie McBaxter!

If Tommie's instincts were right, Gray should be popping out of the shower again any minute.

The shower turned off this time so her assumption was dead on. Tommie planted herself right at the bathroom door, completely naked, and ready to greet Gray.

The door flew open but this time Gray was toweled dry and his hair was mussed and damp. He jumped a little when he came face to face with Tommie right at the door. His eyes scanned her from her head to her feet with his gaze lingering at certain areas of her body more than at others.

"Is this how you prepare to leave?" Gray tightened the towel around his waist. His gaze remained on her body though.

"I'm not going anywhere." Tommie took his hand and pulled him toward the bed.

Gray followed but his demeanor changed. "So what are we doing?" He squeezed her hand.

Tommie pulled the comforter back along with the sheets. She sat on the bed and slid her body underneath the covers. Fresh sheets. The clean, cotton scent drifted to her nose, reminding her of home.

"Compromising." She patted the empty space next to her in the bed.

Gray allowed his towel to drop. Instead of slipping into bed, Tommie surprised him by taking his hand and leading him to the side. She sat then peered up at him. Touching his shoulders first, she smoothed her hands down his body, over his taut arms and his heaving chest. She hoped he panted now out of lust rather than anger.

Maintaining eye contact, she continued sliding her hands down over his rock hard abs and around his body to his firm ass.

"Whatever you do, don't tease me." Gray kept his hands on his waist until he allowed himself to smooth his hand back over her hair.

"I won't tease you. I'll be very serious."

Holding onto the base of his shaft, Tommie licked around his bulbous tip. Like the hiss of a snake, he sucked air between his teeth then brought her head closer, encouraging her more.

Although Tommie needed little encouragement to satisfy him, she devoured his delicious shaft, pressing her tongue against the tip to extract his salty juices. When she moaned, Gray moaned along with her.

She cradled his balls in her other hand, massaging them until she felt his legs shaking.

"So close, baby." He gyrated his hips, moving in and out of her mouth.

In an unexpected move, she removed her mouth from him.

"What are you doing?" Gray stared at her.

As she returned the gaze, she opened another condom package and slipped the gold-colored rubber over him. Preparing to lower himself to his knees, Tommie shocked him by getting on her hands and knees on the bed, her head facing the headboard.

Without a word, Gray crawled into bed. Securing a hand on her waist, she immediately felt him sliding the tip up and down between her sweet spots at the apex of her thighs. He first teased her ass hole, rubbing the tip around the outside. Then on his trek back down, he slid it back and forth over her hardened nub.

The teasing worked. By the time Grant pushed himself inside of her, Tommie's

body tensed, not expecting to feel him so soon. With a steady, controlled rhythm, he masterfully commandeered her body. If he stopped right now, Tommie would truly go into hysterics. As it was, she enjoyed the ride.

To encourage him, she pushed back into him to make him go deeper. He obliged by meeting her stroke-by-stroke. It didn't take him long for his body to start shaking again. He hadn't been kidding about being close to exploding.

To help her along, Gray slipped his hand down between her legs and played with her clit. The touch sent her into a frenzy. Again, she clawed the headboard until an intense climax gave her needed relief. As her body settled, Gray pounded into her harder and faster. He moaned as he, too, came fast.

"Incredible," Tommie heard him whisper.

Gray kissed Tommie's shoulder then slowly pulled out of her. Once he disposed of the used product, he returned to the bedroom to find Tommie in bed.

"Join me," she summoned.

Gray slipped in bed beside her. She covered them and snuggled next to Gray, placing her head on his chest.

As though he wasn't sure as to how to respond, Gray eased his arm around Tommie's shoulders, his hand resting on her arm. She picked up his other hand and interlaced her fingers with his.

"I don't think I'll ever understand you," Gray said. He kissed the top of her head and feathered his fingers over her arm.

"Yeah, well just when I think you're Mr., oops, I mean Dr. Calm-Cool-And-Collected, I see you have a little temper on you." She craned her gaze up to meet his. "I kinda like that."

"What can I say? I skipped my yoga today and I haven't skydived in a long time." He held her tighter. "So was that the compromise?"

Tommie climbed on top of Gray's body, straddling him between her legs. "We both shut up and have sex. Deal?"

She placed her head on his chest, her fingers stroked his arm. Like a race horse that just finished the Kentucky Derby, Gray still panted. Good to see, and feel, that he wanted her, was still turned on by her.

Gray grabbed her hips. A smile graced his face as though he'd won the lottery. "Give me a few minutes."

"Did I wear you out already?" She kissed his lower lip then licked his upper.

"I'm not the man I used to be."

Gray made the statement in a way that hid layers upon layers of meaning. He could have been talking about age, although for whatever age he was, he looked, felt and acted amazing. Or maybe he was simply alluding to a former lifestyle.

Men. She would never understand them.

"Fine, old man. For now we rest. Then I'm attacking you." To punctuate her statement, she nibbled his pebbled nipple.

With a jerk, he winced and sucked air between his teeth but didn't ask her to stop. A man who could take whatever she could dish out. She could fall very hard for a guy like that. Yes, if she wasn't careful she could definitely fall hard.

Chapter Fifteen

The fresh ocean breeze that blew through Gray's bedroom wasn't enough to cool Tommie down. She and Gray held each other in silence as though waiting for another shoe to drop, listening for the symbolic thud that should follow. Instead of waiting, as patience was not one of Tommie's virtues, she asked Gray some tough questions.

"What do you have to tell me?" she asked.

She fought hard to keep her bottom lip from becoming a chew toy for herself. Since using ice cubes on certain parts of Gray's anatomy, Tommie longed for just one more cube to chew to calm her jangled nerves.

Without hesitation, Gray spat out the words. "Constance Wiley took the drugs."

A weight lifted from Tommie's shoulders as though *she* had been the one holding in the awful secret this whole time.

She had a feeling Constance had done the deed but couldn't figure out why Gray protected her. Maybe there was more to the story than she wanted to hear.

"I had a feeling. Especially at her birthday party. I heard the two of you arguing." She held his hand, now ice cold.

"I haven't even told Danny Boy or my family this." He shook his head. "Only you."

"With the questions I raised the other night, it won't take Danny Boy long to figure out that you're covering for someone else. He already knows you're innocent." In her heart, she knew it too. "But why tell me? Why now?" Her stomach flipped in anticipation of his answer.

"Because I thought as my boss," he kissed the back of her hand, "and as my friend, you deserved to hear the truth."

"But Danny Boy is your--"

"Judgmental little monkey who wouldn't understand why I did what I did."

"What happened?" Unable to resist, Tommie chewed on her lower lip.

"It was a busy night in the ER when it happened. I was working on my twenty-eighth hour straight without a break but the adrenaline kept me going."

Tommie knew all too well what Gray meant. She'd worked many a day, both in wrestling and as a stockbroker, on nothing but coffee and moxie. She couldn't imagine the pressures of being a doctor put on someone. Especially on someone like Gray who felt he had to save the whole world.

He continued. "Connie, I mean Constance, was my mentor. Ever since I was a struggling intern, she took me under her wing and helped me through. A large part of my career is owed to that woman."

As much as she didn't want to ask, Tommie had to know one thing. Even if their relationship only went so far as just being a friendship, she had to know.

"Did you and Con--"

Gray cut her off before she could finish. "No. We're just friends. She's married to some newspaper publisher. Constance doesn't share many details of her home life."

"Hmph, some friend." Tommie still didn't get why Gray was so bent on protecting this woman.

"That night, Constance came to me about a patient. A little girl with diabetes. We're a community hospital so a lot of our patients are poor and use us for their regular doctor visit." He leaned back against the smooth headboard but never let go of Tommie's hand. "I had seen this little girl and her mother before. I treated her several times." He stared into her eyes. "She needed medicine. So, yes, I took insulin and gave it to them. But I always replenished what I took. This is not like the liquor store when I was in college. This time, I did it for the right reasons."

Tommie moved closer to Gray. As he recounted the story, his face softened, his voice lowered. He acted as though he was living the whole incident over again. She never imagined how much it bothered her to see him in such pain.

"When I went back to the storage room, I found Constance pocketing some drugs. I asked her what she was doing. Yeah, like I had the right to judge, right? She said that she was taking some other experimental drug out to the mother to administer to her daughter as long as she signed a waiver that she understands the drug is still in the experimental stage and in exchange she wouldn't be charged for it. We do that often at the hospital but usually not on children." He said it as though he had been asked that question in court. "But I thought, why would Constance lie? She's the head of pediatrics. It wasn't until I was brought up to the board about some stolen drugs that I realized that Constance may have had a hand in it. She was a tough teacher. This was her way of teaching me a lesson."

"And now? What do you think now that you know the types of drugs that were stolen?" Tommie asked. She put her hand to his cheek and stroked it with her thumb.

"I think Constance needs help, not judgment."

She smoothed his hair back. "You can't keep taking on other people's burdens. You did it in college. You're doing it now with Con Wiley."

He continued as though she hadn't said a word. "She kept saying that she was sorry. She didn't mean for it to happen." He shook.

"But--"

"If I had done a quick inventory or just searched her pockets, I would have known then."

She couldn't convince Gray otherwise. He took on this load for some reason. If he didn't want to admit the truth, then she would have to do it for him. Maybe if she cleared his name, he would consider staying with her company. It was a stretch but it was worth a try. She wanted this man to be around her for longer than just a couple of months. He would at least stay her friend if nothing else.

Now that he had laid his whole life out to her, she wanted him even more. A strange reaction after hearing a story of betrayal.

Something about Gray seemed different. His face was clear. His shoulders didn't seem as hunched over as before. His eyes sparkled even after recounting that sad story. The truth truly set him free. He needed to do that in court. Clear his name.

She said, "You have to tell the truth."

"I have. It was my fault I let Constance take those drugs. And let's face it. I did take the insulin."

His passion flooded her senses. Gray's touch electrified her skin. This man was no thief or liar just like she was no ball breaker.

"I know I can't save the world," he began, "but I should be able to save my friends. I can't lose this one. Not again."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Never mind." Gray cleared his throat. "Boy, we sure know how to cap off a romantic evening, huh?" Gray kissed her forehead.

Tommie moved closer to him until she was finally sitting in his lap. "Do you mind if I get into your space?"

He smiled. He wrapped his arms around her waist again.

"Most women wouldn't be turned on by career failure," he said.

"No woman is turned on by that. But you didn't fail. You're standing up for your friends. That's always sexy." She ran her fingertips down the side of his face. "Just don't play the fool for them. I would hate to see you go down in flames."

As they stared at each other for what seemed like eternity, Tommie didn't notice her heart racing until Gray put his hand on her chest.

"Your heart's beating like a rabbit," he said. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. More than okay. She saw Gray in a different light. He embodied goodness and light with an eye-catching smile.

"I guess you want to go home now," Gray said.

Dramatically, she covered her mouth with her hand. "I finally got to be here when it happened."

He furrowed his eyebrows. "When what happened?"

"I finally got to be here when you made an assumption that wasn't right."

Gray laughed. It was refreshing to hear him lighten up. She hoped she helped him with his attitude in some small part.

"Don't hold it against me." He smoothed his hand down her back.

She felt liquid heat forming between her legs. If he kept touching her, she wouldn't be able to stop the eruption. Ever so slowly, she rolled off of his body and stretched out like a cat next to him.

His gaze lingered over her body, to her breasts, down to her stomach, to her legs, then made it back up again to her breasts.

He slid his hands up her body and let them cover her breasts. He pulled her forward and captured one in his mouth. His eager tongue flicked on her hard nipple as she kissed his forehead.

He smelled like an ocean breeze, crisp and clean. She wanted him to wash over her. Imprint a memory on her mind and body that she could take forever.

Resting his body on top of hers, he moved his mouth over to her other breast, kissing along the way.

Tommie let her fingers run through his damp, thick hair. The sex-in-the-rain look suited him to a T. Not that she had to imagine different fantasies for Gray. He was tantalizing all on his own.

He stopped sucking her breast, which surprised Tommie. With a smile he jumped from the bed.

"Where are you going? We have what we need right here." Tommie pointed to

the opened box of Trojans.

"But we're missing ambiance." He opened the window again. The ocean waves soothed her immediately like a drug. Gray headed back to the bed but stopped in his tracks. He peered over at his phone on the dresser.

"Don't worry," Tommie began. "I took care of it."

"You called Bix and told her not to call?" Gray sauntered back to bed.

"Oh please. Do you think she listens to me?" She shook her head. "No, I unplugged it."

He laughed as he got back into bed with her. He resumed his same position as though he'd never stopped. Her hands gravitated to his hair again.

A wave crashed on the beach and the sound echoed in the expansive bedroom. Gray lifted his head. He hovered his face above hers and smiled so sweetly it was as though they had just finished making love. How could she not have included a sexual fantasy of having sex on the beach? Oh yeah. That was Bix's idea.

"Your hair is still wet," she whispered as she continued playing in it.

"Are you?" His hand slid down past her stomach to physically inspect her Brazilian job. All she did was nod as his fingers slid between her legs and parted her. He caressed her, moaning in the process but not going inside. Not yet.

"Yes, you are," he said.

Turn about was fair play. She reached down and held his hardness. Gray didn't jump or seemed surprised by her action. He moved closer to her to give her better access. She stroked him slowly, enjoying every long inch of him. Now she wondered if he felt her throbbing.

"Please say you're all rested." She peered over at the nightstand where a strip of condoms lay on top of the shredded box. She thought for sure Gray would have begged her to be patient again. If he had, she would have bopped him in the head.

Instead, he reached over and grabbed the strip. He tore off a package and ripped it open with his white teeth.

"Put it on me," he demanded as he handed her the ringed, membranous plastic.

"Have I mentioned that I like a man who's prepared?" She took the rubber with her free hand.

"Your other hand is where it needs to be. Figured since you were already down there--"

She kissed his smart mouth quickly to shut him up. "Cute." She rolled the condom down the full length of him and prepared to get on top of him, her favorite position, when he moved on top of her, sliding himself between her legs.

"I come much harder when I'm on top," she said, holding his shoulders.

"Good to know since I already know how you are when I'm on top and from behind." He winked. With a quick roll, he positioned himself on his back. "Right now I want to see every expression you make. I want to hear every word you utter."

Tommie got on top of him, straddling his body. As she held the base of his shaft, she never dropped her stare, connecting with his return gaze. In one slow, easy plunge, she dropped her body, sheathing him in her soaked vagina.

She gasped as she bore down on his shoulder. She held him inside of her, not going down completely, for what seemed like an eternity but was likely only a few

seconds. Then she inched him farther inside of her and held it. Tommie arched her back. Her breathing quickened and she wondered how much more of this beautiful torture she could endure.

She slowly descended until he was finally at the hilt. What control! Gray growled as she lowered her face by her ear.

“So good,” he said. “Have I told you how amazing you are?”

“Say it.” She undulated her hips as she hovered her face over his.

“You’re damn amazing.”

No way was this man going to escape. From the way he gyrated his hips, moving himself in and out of her ever so slowly, he didn’t look like he wanted to be freed either. He lifted his head. His eyes looked intently into hers.

As though nature forced them, they kissed hungrily. His tongue probed her mouth and she accepted it willingly. He wrapped her up in his arms, one hand cupped her behind as the other moved to the back of her head. She was all his. She wanted him to be all for her too.

Tommie fisted his hair. Their bodies moved together like a machine, like one harmonious unit.

She felt the heat building inside, gathering in a swirling storm until she let out a long scream.

“Yes, baby!” Gray screamed. He kissed her but didn’t stop his gyrating hips in concert with her movements.

Tommie couldn’t even come down off of the orgasmic high he’d just brought her to because he kept her at a ready state. Like a snake, she coiled her legs around his as he wrapped his arms around her back. As the climax hit her, her body tensed. Soon after, Gray’s arms tightened around her. He cursed, squeezed her fleshy backside then settled down onto the bed again, sated and drenched in sweat.

Her heart pounded uncontrollably but it was no different than any other time she’d had sex. She certainly didn’t want to worry Gray. Something in her face must have tipped him off on what she was thinking.

He placed his hand on top of her chest. “Are you okay? Do you want me to stop?”

That was the last thing she wanted. Tommie hadn’t felt this good in years. Even when she did have sex, it was never this intense. What made it that way was not only what Gray was doing, but also what he didn’t do. He didn’t just try to get his without thinking about her. He didn’t avoid looking at her. He didn’t treat her like an object. He was making love to her and he wanted her to know it.

“I’m fine.” She kissed his upper lip then lower lip then fully on both. This time she allowed her tongue to explore his hot mouth. When she stopped kissing him, his eyes were still closed.

“Just give me a chance to breathe,” she said as she crept off of his body.

He opened his eyes slowly. “Okay. We’ll try Tantric sex another time.”

She wiped the sweat from her forehead. “And what’s that?”

Gray didn’t tell her. After making a needed deposit in a trashcan next to the bed, he took steps to protect them both. Then he proceeded to show her, sitting in the middle of the bed, facing her, his legs outstretched. He held his hand up to her, inviting her in.

She crawled toward him with a renewed flame in her body.

"Sex that lasts for hours," he said with a smile as he motioned for her to lower herself onto him.

"You can't." She said it like a dare.

He only smiled in response.

She straddled him, her knees on either side. He felt so incredible inside of her, like he belonged there.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she rocked her hips back and forth until he hit her spot. His large hands rested on her hips. The ocean waves crashed again and it was as though the natural cycles of life matched her feelings.

Gray never stopped looking at her, loving her. Whenever her hair would get into her face, covering her expression, he would move it away.

"Oh Gray." Her moans came out in a whisper like she either wanted to keep her feelings a secret or she'd run out of breath to fully vocalize her pleasure. When Tommie tilted her head back as she rode him harder and faster, he licked her neck up to her chin. His hot tongue left a trail of fire that eventually cooled into an icy path. His hand moved up her back, caressing her flesh. The other moved down to cup her ass and squeeze it in intervals.

"Tommie. God, Tommie," he moaned.

Her body quivered. Her hands reached up and grabbed handfuls of his hair. She squeezed her legs around Gray's waist. No doubt about it. She could fall in love with him easily, especially if he made love like this on a regular basis. So open, so trusting, so loving and so often.

True to his word, Gray continued loving her for what seemed like hours but had to have only been at the most twenty or thirty minutes, not like she counted the time. She was too busy loving this treatment.

"Lay back, babe." She gently pushed him back onto the bed. He juttied his hips up as she moved up and down his long shaft. He palmed her breasts. Her nipples rubbed against his soft hands and even that turned her on.

"Now, Gray, now. Don't hold back." She stared into his hazel eyes. "I need you with me." Tommie braced her hands on his chest. It felt so good to be in control.

"Jesus, Tommie!" Gray screamed. He grabbed her arm and squeezed his eyes shut.

Tommie wailed as the rush of adrenaline and pure lust and passion burst.

With no strength left in her body, she collapsed on top of Gray. She tried catching her breath as Gray smoothed her sweat-soaked hair from her face.

"That, my dear, wasn't Tantric sex but it was damn good."

As much as she didn't want to, she eased him out of her but continued lying on his body.

"Whatever it was, it was fantastic."

He held her so close she felt his heart beating through her chest. Whether it was from the sex, the way he looked at her or the way he held her now, she never felt this close to anyone.

"I hope you know, boss, that after this I'll be looking for a raise." Gray laughed and kissed her forehead.

She turned her head and peered at her new Tantric lover. "I'll give you a raise." She crawled over his body and kissed him. She never wanted this experience to end.

* * * *

Gray loved holding Tommie in his Jacuzzi tub after the most amazing love making sessions he'd ever had. He held her as she laid her back against his chest. He left the jets off so that he could listen to her, from her silent breathing to her sweet laughter.

"Aren't you supposed to be sleeping now?" Tommie asked as she lifted her hand out of the water allowing the sudsy water to dribble down her honey-colored arm. It was the most sensual thing he'd seen in a long time.

"Are you making generalizations again?" He wiped his hand slowly up her body, from her flat stomach, between her round, firm breasts to her chin. He turned her face to his to plant a sweet kiss on her succulent lips.

"I just know how you men are. You sleep after sex." She smoothed her hand over his thigh. He thought he would jump out of his skin from the touch.

"And what did I tell you before?" He held her closer. "I'm not like other men. Besides, it's impolite to sleep after sex. Afterplay should involve something we both enjoy."

"Oh, so another rousing session of sex?" She laughed. What a wonderful sound. He planted a kiss on the side of her face. "Only if you want. I haven't turned down a challenge yet."

"So I'm a challenge?"

"Just under the buzzer. I knew it wouldn't take you long to pick a fight."

She playfully slapped his leg and leaned into him more. When he'd seen her naked for the first time, the world stopped. Everything stopped. Everything about her enraptured him. Her creamy tan skin. Her mesmerizing blue eyes. Her full lips. Those perfect breasts with their dark nipples. And what a bikini wax job! All of that wrapped up in a sensual wildflower scent.

Gray didn't want to let her go. Ever. What had he done? How did he expect to continue a relationship with this woman with what he had on his plate? If *Home Invasion* took off, Tommie's schedule would be as out of control as his. He had her for now. He would make the most of that time.

"Stay with me," he said like a continuation of his thought.

Tommie jerked up. She whipped her head around.

"Tonight," he concluded. "Spend the night with me."

Her expression confused him. It was like relief mixed with disappointment and amusement. If only he knew what she was thinking and feeling right now. He wouldn't admit his feelings again to her and make a fool of himself. He'd done that once when he first met her, although in hindsight, he was right. She was attracted to him.

"Why?" She rinsed the bubbles from her curvy body.

"I think you're a beautiful, talented, smart, generous, savvy business woman. Any man you chose would be lucky to have you." He lowered his gaze briefly then brought it back up to hers.

"You're pretty damn hot yourself." She gave him a quick kiss. Avoiding the topic, she quickly followed with, "Now let's get out of this tub."

"Yeah, our skin is starting to get that prune feel to it." She held up her hands and wiggled her wrinkled fingers. When she attempted to stand, he held her down.

"Wait."

He hugged her. Squeezing his eyes shut, he imagined a life with her in it. He couldn't. Tommie wasn't exactly the sit-at-home-and-play-doctor's-wife kind of woman. Gray didn't want her to be that anyway. He liked her strength. Her strength came in part from her running her business, although he suspected something in her past made her this tough as well.

In order for her to have a successful business she had to travel...a lot. In Gray's business, if he was allowed to remain in it after the trial, kept him inside of a hospital sometimes twenty-four hours or more at a time. He would miss her but he'd worked way too hard to give up his life. So had she.

After a long pause, Tommie said as though hearing his thoughts, "We have sex. We don't get involved. And we stay friends."

"You make it all seem simple."

She cleared her throat. "It can be if we stick to the rules."

Gray let Tommie go. "Get me a towel, woman," he said jokingly.

Tommie stood. Bubbles slithered down her body like whipped cream on a side of a curvy sundae glass.

Tommie put her hands to her hips. "I'm the guest in your house. You're supposed to be at my beck and call."

He released the water in the tub then stood. He watched her gaze go down to the lower portion of his body. As though she triggered the reaction, blood surged to his throbbing penis. She stepped out of the tub cautiously. He watched her heart-shaped birthmark on her firm backside move away from him.

After retrieving two towels from his linen closet, she threw one to him once he got out of the tub. She patted her skin dry, watching him with each pat. She turned her back to him and swept the towel over her back then down her ample behind. It wasn't until she bent over with her feet apart to dry her legs from the ankle up to her hip that he lost it. She gave him his own burlesque show.

"Why don't you just put a sign on your back that says 'Come and get it'?" Gray wiped the towel over his body so fast that he missed some spots. He didn't care. It was two in the morning and he had the most beautiful woman in the world in his home. Life couldn't get any better.

"Why don't you stop talking and take what you want?" She dropped the towel on the floor and sauntered from the bathroom.

By the time he made it out of the bathroom to get her, Tommie stood by his bed with an unwrapped condom in her hand and a mischievous smile on her face.

"Nothing tantric. I want primal." She motioned for him to come closer but his feet were already moving.

"I aim to please." He winked at her. He remembered her saying that same line the first time he'd come over to her house. Now he wanted nothing more than to prove that to her.

Tommie rolled the condom on him, making sure it made it down to the base. If she wanted primal, he was going to give it to her. He brought his hand up to her chin and

tilted her face up to kiss her. Her lips still tasted like the berries she'd eaten at the party so he took a little nip, nibbling her bottom lip before pulling back.

Tommie possessed a wild look in her eyes like she was ready for blood. He lifted her in his arms and took her to his waist-high dresser. With a sweep of his arm, Gray knocked his phone, keys, watch and lamp onto the floor.

"Gray!" Tommie shrieked as he set her on the dresser, her legs wrapped around him.

"You said primal."

As he kissed her, he made a plunge inside of her that made her gasp. He was going to ask if she was all right but she stopped him with a hand to his lips. She squeezed her eyes shut. He hoped he hadn't hurt her.

When she opened her eyes, she said between clenched teeth, "If you stop now, I'll kill you."

He smiled. "I like a woman who knows what she wants."

From the way she grabbed a handful of his hair and clawed his arm, Tommie desired him. She wrapped her long legs around him and pulled him in as he thrust in and out of her. Her sex surrounded him so tightly that he thought he would lose his mind. Her hard, dark nipples rubbed against his chest.

When she stared into his eyes, boring down into his soul, he forgot about his tantric training. Tommie broke his resistance. He thrust into her, holding the position until they both released with a low, guttural growl that capped their primal session.

Gray had given Tommie exactly what she wanted. And what a gift to him.

"This is what I wanted." Tommie breathless voice overflowed with satisfaction.

He was right. She had softened and changed. She wanted him. All of him.

She continued. "A great physical relationship. It's all I need."

Chapter Sixteen

The last place Tommie wanted to be standing right now was on her porch. But there she was, still barefoot, still beaming, still looking at Gray like he was the greatest thing since pay-per-view. He'd made her night incredible.

Yet, he'd pulled away from her after she'd told him that she only wanted a sexual relationship. To expect more would have been foolish. Absurd. Dangerous. Her physical heart remained in question. She didn't need to top it off with an emotional heartache.

As Gray's hands rested on her hips, her hands on his shoulders, he finally broke the silence.

"Are you sure you don't want to just pack a bag or two and come stay with me?" His thumbs caressed her sides. "Your heart sounded a little funny last night."

She smiled. "If it did, then you're the one to blame." She moved her hands to the back of his neck and played in his hair. What was this man doing to her? She could actually see herself with him, happy, content, making breakfast and googly eyes at him.

The thought made her withdraw her hands. She turned her gaze. If she truly wanted a sex only relationship, then she needed show that to him. She fished through her shallow purse for her house key.

"Can you do me a favor?" he asked as he took a step onto her porch.

He looked amazing in his gray sweat shorts and white t-shirt. She thought that she looked pretty horrendous in his old UVA t-shirt and drawstring shorts that were pulled tight around her waist. However he still looked at her like he'd done last night, like she was the best thing walking on the face of the earth.

Tommie opened her screen door but waited to slide her key into the knob. "What can I do for you?"

The question was so loaded, she thought she would have to duck when he shot out his request.

Instead he asked, "Can you call work and tell them I'll be a little late? Thought you might have some clout with the people at UEW." He smiled.

Her heart fluttered looking at his deep dimples.

She held up her hand and made a gesture with her thumb and index finger inches apart from each other. "Just a little bit of pull there at work. I'll see what I can do."

He stood directly in front of her, his eyes twinkling in the morning sun. Birds chirped along with the chattering locusts. He smelled like summer. Warm grass, honeysuckle, mixed with a hearty, woody scent that captured her senses.

Gray lowered his head. In anticipation of the kiss Tommie knew she was about to receive, she closed her eyes. She felt his warm breath on her lips. When her heart stuttered and her head felt as light as a helium-filled balloon, she couldn't deny that she wanted his kiss to start her day. Before their lips could connect, the front door flew open and a horrible screeching sound followed.

"Where have you been?" Bix bellowed.

Gray yanked his head up and forced a pleasant grin. Tommie balled her hands into fists as she counted to ten in her head. Once she got to ten, she still had a feeling of wanting to deck Bix so she kept counting until the feeling went away.

"What have you two been doing?" Bix picked at Tommie's shirt. "And what do you have on?" Her hand slammed over her mouth. "Oh snap! Did y'all get robbed?"

Tommie exhaled and said, "One hundred and two." She didn't want to lose her place in her count.

"What's that?"

"Never mind." Tommie turned her attention back to Gray. "I'll let the coaches know you're on your way to the gym. And I'll talk to you later."

Tommie held out her hand to Gray. Even as she stood barefooted on her porch wearing Gray's clothes, she still wanted to act like his boss, especially around Bix. Bix's mouth was big enough on its own. Didn't need to have it filled with childish remarks about Tommie finally getting some last night.

Gray wrapped his fingers around her hand slowly. Instead of shaking it as Tommie wanted, he pulled her forward. She stood her ground until her resolve gave way.

With his head next to hers he whispered, "We have a lot to talk about so keep your night free."

When he pulled back, Tommie thought she was safe. His husky voice had shaken her so much that she feared Bix would see her tremble. Gray planted a kiss on her before turning to go. Tommie tried pulling back from him at first but she eventually eased into the sweet morning kiss until she forgot that she was standing in front of her house in plain view of all of her neighbors. Let them watch. It wasn't often that she had a man at her house...aside from her father.

"Come on. Give the woman some air," Bix said, her whiny tone grating Tommie's nerves.

Gray pulled back then let go of Tommie's hand. He peered over her shoulder. "Good morning, Bix. My, don't you look lovely today."

Tommie laughed. She clutched the blue Wal-Mart bag that contained her shoes and dress.

"Yeah, yeah. Take that Eddie Haskell crap to someone else." Bix waved her hand in the air like she was shooing away a pesky gnat.

Tommie wished he could have stayed around longer. An unusual response from her considering she'd never felt that way about any man who wasn't a blood relative.

She shook her head. She couldn't allow him to change her ways now. Her no nonsense attitude worked for her. It kept her heart protected.

As soon as Gray pulled out of her driveway and sped off, Tommie turned to Bix and tried desperately to harness her anger. From Bix's frightened expression, Tommie must not have reeled in her disappointment very well.

Tommie stepped into the house almost running over Bix in the process. She slammed the door behind herself.

"I just want to thank you for calling Gray's house last night. That was really classy." Tommie pushed her way past Bix to head to her bedroom. "No, the classy part was when you accused us of hitting the skins. Is that the expression you used?"

"So you were there." Bix leaned against the doorframe. "And by the looks of

your wardrobe now, I guess you two were hitting the skins like rabbits.”

The fact that Bix had that thought in her head made Tommie's cheeks hot with embarrassment.

“That's none of your business.” Tommie slammed her bag onto her bed. She plopped down next to it, her legs crossed in a modified lotus position. Gray had influenced her in more ways than she thought.

When Tommie's gaze met Bix's, she saw an expression she hadn't seen in her since Bix's mother died when she was in junior high school. The look combined a mixture of pain and disappointment. Tommie's shoulders and face relaxed.

“Not my business?” Bix folded her arms. “Everything you did and everything I did used to be our business. We used to tell each other everything. Now this guy comes along and you're keeping secrets? What's going on with you?”

“Nothing.” Tommie hadn't changed. “I'm still the same person I was before. Don't put this on Gray. Besides, wasn't it you who said that I should go out with him?”

“Go out with him. Not let him run your life.”

“He's not.” Tommie tugged at her t-shirt to change into something else. As soon as she caught Gray's scent on the fabric, she stopped. She took in a big whiff of his musky smell and clung to the garment. Gray's aroma eased her heart back to its regular rate. She closed her eyes and Gray's naked image flashed through her mind. As much as she didn't want to admit it, he had her.

She peered at Bix who furrowed her eyebrows at Tommie's entranced actions.

“Any reason you're not undressing in front of me now?” Bix asked, her voice rising with each word.

Tommie didn't know what she meant. “I don't want to take off the shirt just yet. That's all.”

“Oh, don't tell me. Dr. Strangelove found out that I'm a lesbian and he's warned you against me, right?”

Tommie jumped to her feet. “What is wrong with you? I love you like a sister.” She approached Bix. “Do you think we sit around and talk about you and your sex life? We have better things to discuss.”

Bix snickered. “And I'm sure all of your discussions have nothing to do with business.” She shook her head. “I tell you that one of the best wrestlers in our stable has gone to the Slamastics and you do absolutely nothing. Tell me, Toms, who's idea was it that you would take care of Mo in the morning? You or the guy with the hard-on?”

That was it. Bix was not going to paint her as some trembling wallflower waiting for someone to pay her some attention. She stomped over to her. After grabbing her arm, Tommie shoved her friend out of her bedroom.

“I get sick and tired of people thinking they can run my life. Like they know what it is that I want and need. I do one thing for me, had one night out, and all of the sudden I'm this terrible, irresponsible sex addict. You go out all of the time, and that's fine.”

Bix remained quiet but folded her arms in silent defiance.

Tommie continued. “Why is it that when the world falls apart, you and Junior and everyone else expects me to put it back together and make things right?”

“Do you know why we rely on you so much?” Bix asked. “Because you're so good at it. We fuck up and you know how to fix it. Forgive me and Junior for thinking

you gave a damn about your business.” She stormed down the hallway, snatched her bag from the living room couch and bolted through the front door.

Tommie and Bix had fights in the past, but this one was a doozy. She slumped down to the living room floor. With her hand covering her eyes, she leaned against the coffee table.

“Damn.”

* * * *

Tommie listened to the third ring as she chewed on her lower lip.

“Come on. Come on. Pick up,” she mumbled into the receiver after the fourth ring. A baggie full of frozen grapes and vacuuming her whole house twice built up her strength to finally call Mo. Her stomach knotted. When the phone clicked, she sat up straighter. She cleared her throat.

“Yeah.” Mo’s gruff voice sounded like she’d awaken him from a day-long sleep. If she hadn’t worked with the man and known that that was what he normally sounded like no matter what time of day, then she might have been worried.

“Hey, Mo. It’s me, Tommie.” Professional. She had to keep her head in business.

The silence on the other end allowed too many thoughts to run through her mind. Mo was probably cursing himself for answering the phone. Or maybe he was surprised that she would actually call him. Or maybe he was yawning and didn’t care one bit that his former boss was on the phone. She had to make him care.

“Oh, hey Balford.”

That was it? That was all he had to say? Didn’t this man think that he at least owed her an explanation?

“So what’s new?” Tommie asked, baiting him for an honest answer.

“Well, I got a new tat on my leg. It’s of an eagle with its wings all--”

She cut him off. “No, Mo. Not what I’m fishing for.”

Even though the man was gifted in the ring, he wasn’t the sharpest tack.

“Fish? Nah, I ain’t got no tattoos of fish or nothing. Just the eagle.”

And she was fighting to get him back because...?

She continued. “What’s the deal with you and the Slamtastics?” She heard him curse like he tried keeping his mouth from the phone but it made it through anyway. Did he think he could keep news like that from her?

“What were you thinking, Mo?” she asked. “I thought you were happy at UEW.”

“Yeah, it was cool and all there. But everybody knows about the Slamtastics. Don’t nobody hardly know about UEW, well, unless you’re in Virginia. Or North Carolina. Oh, or Maryland. Or--”

“I get it.” She paced in her kitchen. Thank goodness she took her medicine before this call. The stress of this alone would have killed her.

“I don’t know, Balford. Like Mr. Hamilton said, as a performer, my career is going to be like limited and all. I gotta strike while that thing is hot.”

“Iron,” she said, helping him make his argument.

“Yeah.” He laughed but Tommie was in no mood to join him. “As much as I like you and Junior, I gotta get out there and make a name for myself. Mr. Hamilton said that if you were any kind of boss, you would be happy for me.”

Hayes hit below the belt with that crack. She balled her hand into a fist and pressed it against the countertop.

"Tell me, Mo. What kind of insurance will Slamtastics offer you?"

"Umm, Mr. Hamilton said we can get our own policy ourselves. He said that your insurance took away from my money--kinda like you were stealing from me."

Tommie bit down on her lip so hard it drew blood. The metallic taste hit her tongue. She ripped a paper towel from its spool then dabbed her lower lip, blotting the self-inflicted injury.

"He is so full of it. I would never steal from my wrestlers or anybody. I gave you all that I had. I made sure you stayed happy and healthy. I treated you like family." Strangely, Tommie's throat started to close. Her eyes became itchy. "How could you do this to me? To the business?"

"It wasn't like personal or nothing. It was just my time to go, you know."

She sat on a barstool, the wadded piece of blood-soaked tissue balled in her hand.

"Not personal?" Rage bubbled up from her feet to the top of her head. "This company is my life. I put you on with the greats like Junior Vickers."

"Yeah. That was really tight."

"How could you walk away from me before *Home Invasion* after all I've done for you?"

Before he could answer, her other line beeped signaling she had another call.

"Hold on, Mo." Tommie clicked over to her other line. She gave a terse greeting not expecting it to be Gray.

"Well hello to you too," he said. "I thought I might have gotten a better greeting than that. You know, something like 'Hello, my warrior god' or something like that."

As much as she wanted to talk to him, she still had to deal with Mo.

"Sorry, Gray. I have Mo on the other line." She heard the echoes of slams on hard canvas mats and grunts from her guys. In the way mothers can tell their child's cry in a roomful of balling babies, Tommie could tell her wrestlers' grunts.

"Oh." Gray's tone softened. "Go back to him. I'll hold on. I have a feeling you're going to need someone to talk to about this."

She wanted him there with her, face to face, but she had to fight this battle on her own. Obviously Bix and Junior wouldn't do this task themselves.

Without answering Gray, Tommie clicked over to Mo again and caught him in mid-sentence with whomever was with him.

"Yeah, she's like asking for me to come back and shit," Mo said with a failed attempt at muzzling the phone.

She'd tried the friendly, warm route with Mo. Time to get down to business.

"Mo, you have a contract with UEW."

Mo coughed when she broke his conversation.

"If you're not going to honor it, then expect to be in court to pay for breach of contract and lost revenue and..."

"Whatever. Mr. Hamilton said he would cover all that. He said I'm worth it."

Mo was indeed talented, however, her dignity wasn't worth groveling for someone who didn't want to be with her.

"Did Junior talk to you?" she asked. Maybe the threat of disappointing Junior

would shake this kid up.

"Well, kinda."

Tommie's cell phone chirped a Beethoven symphony ring. She was too accessible to too many people in her life. Her next real vacation would be without any phones or pagers or laptops.

"Hold on, Mo." She held her cordless phone to her shoulder as she picked up her cell phone with the other hand. "Hello."

"Where have you been?" The anger in Junior's voice was unmistakable. His normally low voice boomed through the phone so that even the receiver vibrated.

"Out." She didn't want to back down to Junior. Although he was her father, right now she was in the boss role. "Hold on, Junior." She clicked on her flash button on her cordless phone and caught Gray admonishing a wrestler.

"Yes, it is possible to break your neck with that move," Gray said, his voice even and calm. "If you want to end up in a wheelchair, keep it up."

"Good job." Tommie couldn't help smiling. "That's why I hired you."

"I think some people think you hired me for my good looks," he replied.

She could almost see him smiling in that way that warmed her. "Don't believe what you've heard."

He laughed heartily, another one of his attractive traits.

"So are you done with Mo?" he asked.

"No, and my father's on the other line." She felt strange saying that considering Gray knew Junior but not that he was her father. She had to tell him. Soon.

"Do you need to go?"

She squeezed the cell phone. Three men at her feet and she never felt more stressed out in her life.

"Can you hang on for another minute?" She had a feeling she would need a shoulder to cry on soon.

"Sure. Your guys are trying out chair shots. If we get disconnected, it's because I'm prying a chair from someone's head."

"Very funny. Hold on." She clicked back over to Mo who, this time, remained silent. "Where were we?"

"You asked if Junior talked to me," Mo said. "Yeah, he did."

"And you weren't convinced?"

"Convinced?"

He said it like he was either confused or didn't understand the word. Too many chair shots to *his* head must have scrambled his brains.

"Junior didn't tell you about the beauty of wrestling? The mystique of working for a smaller company? Paying your dues along the way?"

She had certainly heard those arguments and more from Junior as a kid growing up. He talked about pro-wrestling the way her grandmother talked about going to church. The business meant everything to Junior. It was heaven and hell. Good versus evil. Life and death.

"Yeah, he did actually." Mo's voice lifted. "Talk about some match in 1985 when he broke his neck and still kept on wrestling. Now that's a tough s.o.b."

Yeah, Junior was that indeed.

“Hold on, Mo.” She put the cell phone to her ear again. “I have Mo on the phone.”

Junior kept quiet. Too quiet. She almost thought he'd hung up until she heard him exhale heavily.

She continued. “I'm trying to convince him to come back to UEW. I think I have him won over. He's talking about the story you told him about when you broke your neck in that cage match in '85.”

“That's why I called you, baby. I wished you had talked to me the other night when I called you but you seemed too busy.” Junior's voice slowed to his normal drawl. His serious tone made her worry. Had his health gotten worse?

“Okay, I'm here now. Let me get Mo off of the phone.” She put the house phone back to her ear. “Mo, I'm asking you to reconsider Slamtastics' offer. I know that I can't give you the big pay that Hayes Hamilton has but I can give you an environment where you will be appreciated and not lost in the crowd of talent. Besides, I'm expecting a huge windfall with the pay-per-view special.”

“That's nice and all but I've pretty much made up my mind. I'm sorry to do this right before your show but Slamtastics has a pay-per-view too. I have to be ready for that one and I can't chance getting hurt before. You understand, right?”

She didn't. Tommie didn't understand how someone who seemed so excited about being in her company just a month or so ago can now tell her he's leaving her without a second thought. What the hell had Junior said that couldn't convince this man to stay? Junior could charm money from a televangelist but he couldn't get this talented man to stay for another week.

Tommie took in a deep breath. “Fine, Mo. I'm not going to give up on you. You'll see. UEW is going to be big and you'll want to come back. I'm giving you that chance now before it gets to the point where you look desperate coming back to us.”

“No offense, Ms. B., but I don't think the show's going to do that great. That new doctor of yours is set on benching Junior. That's what I like about Slamtastics. The docs here are interested in making us wrestlers happy, you know what I mean?”

Tommie knew all too well what he meant. Drugs to keep them high. Drugs to keep them happy. Drugs so good the wrestlers couldn't feel pain. The practice was dangerous. She wouldn't treat her employees like guinea pigs or trained seals. They were performers. They were human. They were her family.

“I'm sorry you feel that way. I guess I'll see you in court.”

“Dude, that's like uncool.” Mo disconnected the call.

Tommie pressed her cell phone to her ear. “Gray, it's going to take a long, hot bath in that whirlpool tub to--”

“Who the hell is Gray?”

Junior's voice slammed her back into an embarrassing reality. She almost felt like a teenager caught with a boy in the backseat of his car. But she wasn't that kid.

“Just hold on, Junior.” She still had to let Gray go. She had a feeling her conversation with her father was going to be long and involved.

After bringing her cordless phone to her other ear, she said almost breathlessly, “Busted.”

“What are you talking about? Something wrong?” Gray asked.

“Long story. I’ll have to talk to you later.”

“No problem, honey.”

She didn’t know what it was about endearments but hearing one from Gray made her blush and damn near giggle. She disconnected the call and immediately brought her cell phone to her ear, preparing to get an earful. “I’m back.”

She heard her father sigh again. Junior never sighed. He screamed and...he kept screaming.

“What’s wrong?” Tommie asked. She had to call her attorney and start a lawsuit.

“What did Mo say?” Junior’s voice stayed steady.

She stood and leaned on her counter. “Some b.s. about opportunities and limited time.”

“Limited time, huh?”

“Yeah. I tell you, Junior, there’s no loyalty nowadays.” She ran her tongue over her teeth. The sweetness from the frozen grapes she’d eaten earlier still saturated her mouth.

Silence. Junior didn’t respond to anything she’d said.

“So what did you have to tell me?” She had to get Junior talking. As long as she knew his thoughts, she knew how to take him.

“I guess there’s no way to say this but to say it.”

“What?” She drew in her swollen lower lip and gingerly chewed it. Her father, never one to beat around the bush, worried her.

“After talking to Mo, I’ve made an important decision.” He paused before charging through. “I’m going to sign on with Slamtastics.”

Her jaw slammed to the floor along with her heart.

Chapter Seventeen

Tommie choked on the words that caught in her throat. Memories of her seven-year old self, sitting in a booth at Denny's with Junior across from her flashed in her rattled brain. It was then that he told her about the split with her mother. And here he was now, ready to leave her again.

"Tell me this is a joke," she said between gritted teeth.

"I wanted to talk to you but you acted like you didn't have time for me," he said with an accusatory tone.

"Oh, so I have other things going on in my life and suddenly I don't care about you, right? Is that the same argument you gave Mom when you left her? 'I would have been a better husband, honey, if you were more supportive.'"

"You had better take that attitude down a notch, missy. You're not too old that I can't put you over my knee. And who is this Gray fella anyway?" He waited a beat before continuing. "Hey, is that the new doctor you hired? I don't know if I can approve of you dating someone like that."

She laughed and hoped her heard the laughter over the phone. "So now you're going to act like a father. Forget about my personal life for a second. Let's go back to you leaving me again. I can't believe you would do this to me."

He sighed again. "It's not personal, baby. It's business."

She blinked and her reluctant tears rolled down her cheeks. "Business. Even better. You know I just lost Mo and you top it off with your news. Great, Dad. Just great." She wished her voice hadn't cracked at the end of her diatribe but she had less control over it than she had over Mo and her own father.

"Tommie, I'll stay through the pay-per-view. But after that I can't guarantee--"

She cut him off. "Thanks for that favor." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I'll be reviewing your contract until *Home Invasion* to see how much money I can get from you for breaching your deal. Nothing personal, Dad. All business." She disconnected and turned off her cell phone to be sure she wouldn't receive any more annoying calls.

First Mo, then Bix and now Junior. They were all leaving her like rats on a sinking ship. Would Gray do that too? Once he found out she was running a slowly fading business and had lied to him about Junior's relationship with her?

No, she wasn't going to lose him too. And she had a way to keep him and reveal the truth about Junior.

* * * *

Tommie heard the slams from outside of her gym. When she opened the door, the scent of sweat, dirty socks and leather from the mats hurled into her, almost knocking her back out of the door. Ah, this was home.

She planted herself in the back of the gym, observing everything that was going on. Wrestlers flung themselves onto the ring mat for drills. The enormous, industrial sized fans cooled down the steamy gym.

Gray tended to one of her newer wrestlers on a table next to her office. His back was to her but she would have been able to pick him out of a riot.

She remembered his wide back that her fingernails embedded into last night. His firm backside and those muscled legs permanently fixed themselves into her memory bank. What a sight in shorts and a t-shirt.

She billowed her silk button up shirt and it reminded her of the last time she was in the gym when she'd had her angina attack. The thought brought her up short. Tommie released her shirt just as Gray turned to her.

Although she wasn't trying to sneak up on him, she didn't want the whole gym to announce her arrival. The performers in the ring stopped their drills and applauded her. They whistled and waved to their returning queen. Tommie kept her face straight but waved to her employees for their adoration. She'd missed them too.

"Don't worry," Firestarter began, "we won't desert you like that punk Mo did."

So much for keeping his news under wraps. She forced a smile to assure her group that she felt the same way. After such a horrible morning, Tommie's spirits lifted knowing that her other quasi-adopted family still stood behind her. She had to be positive for them. They more than deserved the money from the show. Hopefully, they wouldn't find out about Junior. News of that getting out and she wouldn't have a company let alone a pay-per-view special.

When Gray caught her gaze, he winked. He flashed a quick, knowing smile that almost made her blush. Tommie struggled to keep her face.

"What's going on with Pee Wee?" she asked, trying to sound as official as possible.

"Dehydration," Gray said. "I think he overdid it in the ring and neglected to keep fluids in his little body."

The diminutive man with spiky, blond hair smirked at Gray's statement but kept quiet.

"Ah. I think the real reason was the twenty-beer challenge last night, right? Or has that amount been raised since last year?"

Pee Wee's eyes flared and he split his gaze between Tommie and Gray. "You told!" He pointed to Gray.

Tommie said, "He didn't have to rat you out. It happens every year with the newest," she paused, "and smallest member of the wrestling group. I think it's stupid because one day someone's going to get hurt from doing that crap."

Pee Wee lowered his head. The wrestlers who weren't as bulked up as the others, Tommie kept her eye on like they were her babies. Her sport was dangerous enough. She didn't want their outside antics to kill them. What would she say to their parents?

She put her hand on Pee Wee's shoulder. "The only good part about this whole hazing this is that you're a part of the group now. You survived so that shows strength in character. These guys will look out for you like a brother. Respect that bond and do the same for them."

"Yes, ma'am." His tiny voice barely cut through the chaos in the gym.

Tommie peered at Gray. "Are you done with him? Can he go back and work out with the rest of them?"

Gray scanned the man from head to feet. "What do you say, champ? Feeling up

to working out or is your head still spinning?"

"I'm good. I feel a lot better. I promise." He pumped his small fist into the air.

Tommie bit her lower lip to keep from laughing at the gesture but he did have a big heart. When it came to hard work, this man was the total package. Unfortunately, in the land of giants like the wrestling business was, he easily got lost in the mix.

Gray glanced over toward the ring. He screamed to one of the coaches. "Hey, I think Pee Wee should do some laps first before getting back into the ring!"

The coach nodded. Pee Wee's chest deflated as he scooted down from the table. His head hung low like Gray and Tommie had denied him video game privileges for a week. As she stared at Gray, she smiled at their parental role with these performers. None of the doctors she'd hired in the past cared as much as Gray did.

"If you can run twenty laps inside the gym, then I know you'll be fine," Gray said, further explaining his decision.

"Yeah, don't go outside. The heat will cook your brain." Tommie rustled her fingers through his hair before he took off at a steady but slow pace around the gym.

"Hey, doc!" Firestarter screamed from the ring.

Gray peered over at the behemoth under a mane of red hair. Tommie's chest tightened as soon as she heard him call Gray's name. The last time these two clashed, a fight nearly broke out between them. She didn't want to see that happen again.

Firestarter craned his arm up and waved his forearm back and forth. "It hurts when I do this."

"Then don't do it!" Gray shouted back to him.

An old joke but a good one. She released a long, heavy sigh. Even better seeing Gray get along with Firestarter, Harold to his dedicated mother who came to every match.

The business was a family affair. Wives, husbands, girlfriends, boyfriends, kids, they all came to support their significant other in the ring.

And fans became a part of the UEW family too. They knew the wrestlers' birthdays. They made a big deal if a local boy or gal rolled into town for a show. She wished she had had this type of support growing up and now that she had it, she didn't want it to end.

When she returned her gaze back to Gray, he scanned her until she felt like she was wearing nothing. Her nipples hardened at the intimate thought.

"Can I see you in my office, please?" She strolled by him, feeling the heat radiating from his body.

"Sure." He followed closely behind her.

His warm breath blew over the back of her neck, causing her short hairs to stand. She shivered as he closed the door.

"You weren't able to get Mo to change his mind about coming back?" he asked.

She took a deep breath before answering. "He made some pretty good arguments about leaving. I tried to convince him to stay at least for the big show. But his eyes are filled with dollar signs. I can't compete with that."

She made her way to the other side of her desk. If she wasn't careful she could very easily see herself naked and on top of her desk with him.

"Sorry about that. Maybe you should have called him last night."

Guilt plastered on Gray's face.

"It wouldn't have made a difference. He was going to go no matter if I had talked to him last night or this morning. It was my decision not to call him, not yours."

He nodded.

Gray stood on the other side of her desk. "What else can I do for you?" He held up his hand. "And by all means, say it slowly."

Wetness dripped between her legs as though he'd triggered the response verbally.

"By the way, you're looking really nice. I like it when you wear pants. Makes your butt look--"

"Gray," she began, cutting him off, "we're at work."

"So?"

"You can't talk to me like that here." Even though she didn't want him to stop.

"Where can I talk that way to you then?" He cocked a mischievous smile.

Her mouth opened but nothing came out. He'd rendered her speechless. Bix wouldn't have believed that.

"I want to kiss you right now." He scanned her cramped office with one desk that wobbled when touched, sometimes even looked at, her green vinyl chair on questionable casters, and a plaid couch courtesy of Junior. Windows looking out into the gym surrounded the office. Tommie cursed herself for not getting blinds or curtains but she was a hands-on boss and had to know what was going on at all times.

"So what did you call me in here for?" he asked.

He planted his large hands on her desk, tipping it back and forth. He removed his hands from the waving office furniture and peered at Tommie.

"It was free." She folded her arms, trying hard to look proud of the find. "Forget the desk. I wanted to let you know that I won't be able to make it out tonight."

She expected him to look disappointed. Certainly she hated to turn him down. Her plate mounded over with the tasks she had to do today. To her surprise, he smiled.

"You didn't want to see me either? Were you going to stand me up?" she asked as she stepped around her desk.

"Oh no." He turned to face her, still smiling. "I heard from Danny Boy. They're moving up my hearing up to two days from today. I wanted us to do something special tomorrow night since I have to go over to his place tonight to go over the case again. Danny Boy is such a perfectionist."

"Lucky for you."

Inside she sighed in relief, but her heart quickened when she thought about how little time she had to get the information needed to get him off. She peered over Gray's shoulder and caught Pee Wee jogging around the backside of the office, staring at the two of them. Great plan in getting him to jog inside of the building.

"What if I wasn't available tomorrow night?" She didn't care if she had to break a visit with the Pope to be with this man but he didn't have to know that.

After taking a step closer, he said, "How could you deny a man his last request?"

She wanted to kiss him so much she trembled. Her tongue snaked over her lips. Her office was like a furnace. No wonder she left the door open all of the time. No ventilation. No air. No heat. No escape.

"I'll see what I can do." She smiled.

"While you're thinking of squeezing me into your busy schedule, let me see what

I can do about making love to you right now...while you're in your clothes."

Tommie took a step back, wary of his intentions. "What are you talking about?"

"There are no microphones that broadcast out into the gym, are there?" He took a step closer to her, closing that gap she'd created.

"You've seen my desk. Do you think I'm that high tech?" She buttoned her blouse to the top. No need in giving him any ideas or any impressions that she wanted this type of talk or treatment. That didn't mean she couldn't be intrigued by the offer.

"Good. And don't worry. I'll make gestures like we're talking about work." He strolled away from her, taking deliberate steps as though he was thinking of a plan or a plot. He whipped around to her then pointed toward the ring. "I see us outside under the moonlight on the beach behind my place."

Tommie didn't know if she should take this man seriously or not.

Then Gray said, "In order for this to work, you're going to have to look at where I'm pointing."

She nodded and peered over at the ring. The athletes tumbled in the ring in an organized fashion. She glanced back at Gray.

He shook his head like something disappointed him. "You have on something incredible. Doesn't matter if it's just a bathing suit or a potato sack. You look damn near good in anything."

He punched his fist into his hand then pointed again to a wrestler. "I lay out a blanket on the sand. We're on a part of the beach that's quiet. It's so dark you can barely see me." He rubbed the back of his neck as though illustrating a potential injury. "Makes it more exciting."

Tommie's heart raced. She backed away from him until her heels met the couch. She plopped herself down and kept her gaze squarely on Gray. He stood in front of her. The only gesture that caught her eye now was the bulge in his sweat shorts.

"I kiss you." He shrugged his shoulders. "You have the most incredible lips I've ever seen. Nice size. And they always taste like sweet fruit. Mango or strawberries."

She was in awe of his imagination. She should have stopped him. The sexy story was working and she was still his boss but even she got wrapped up in this beachy tale.

He snatched a clipboard from her desk and scribbled something on the paper. He flipped the clipboard around to her. "I take off whatever you're wearing and kiss you down your perfect body."

The note he'd scribbled on the pad read 'I want to see your birthmark.' She giggled then covered her mouth so as not to give their ruse away.

He sat the clipboard on the desk. "When I get between your legs--"

"Gray."

"That's exactly what you say."

If he went on, she would need to take a long, cold shower. Everything inside of her pumped and throbbed. Her breathing quickened.

"I long to taste you again." He rubbed his shoulder and pointed to the group behind her. Then did the same set of gestures after touching his knee. "Licking you is like drinking a margarita. Sweet with a bit of salt. Addicting. Mood altering. Delicious."

She exhaled. Forget the wrong impression. She needed air. She quickly undid

two buttons on her blouse.

"You're killing me." Tommie laid her body lengthwise on the couch and put her hand to her head.

"Are you okay?" He sat on the couch. He removed her hand from her eyes. "I didn't mean to stir you up like that." He put his stethoscope in his ears and placed the cold disc on her chest. She jumped at the touch.

She placed her hand on top of his. With a gentle nudge, she pushed it further down so that his hand nestled between her breasts.

When she caught his surprised gaze, she said, "Finish the story. Do I like it when you go down on me?"

He nodded. "You tell me you want more." He inched the listening device closer to a breast until his fingers hovered over it. "I dive into you, licking and sucking until you come not once but twice."

"That sure of yourself, huh?" She smiled.

"I just know I wouldn't stop until you were completely satisfied."

She swallowed hard. In a not so subtle manner, she curved his fingers down to make him touch her breast as he held the stethoscope. The tip of his pinky and ring finger circled her hardened nipple through the fabric. Need made her want to claw off her clothes and take this man now.

Gray continued with his story. "You tell me you want me now. You can't wait." He moved closer to her. "So I rip off whatever I have on and we make love on the beach." He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "And you're on top so I can be good and deep inside of you."

"Oh God!" Tommie moaned. Just then the door flung open. She jumped but Gray remained cool.

Sitting up slowly, he pulled the device from his ears.

"What's going on?" Hobby asked. "Did she have another--"

"Just routine check." Gray winked at her before he turned to Hobby. "Her face looked a little flushed so I wanted to make sure her heart was okay." He looked back at her. "Everything sounded just fine, right?"

She nodded but remained reclined.

"No wonder she's all hot. It's like a sweatbox in here. I swear, Tommie, one day you're going to need to break down and get that air conditioning unit for just in here."

"When you're right, you're right, Hobby." She sat up. After brushing her hair from her face, she caught Hobby staring at her strangely.

"Were you creating your own type of a/c or is that a new slut style I'm not aware of?" Hobby pointed to Tommie's chest. When she glanced down she found that her blouse was unbuttoned almost to her stomach.

"Oh jeez." She buttoned herself back up.

"She could really use some water." Gray pointed outside of the office to the kitchen area. "Could you bring her some?"

"Sure. Hey, boss, can you believe it? Just a few more days. We're making history." Hobby, in his usual slow gait, sauntered to the kitchen.

Gray stared at Tommie with a smile. "By the time he gets back, I should be cooled down too." He glanced down to his lap then back up to her gaze. "Did you like?"

"Do that to me over the phone tonight." She swung her legs around him and stood.

"Better yet, why don't you come over when you're done with your errands and I'm finished at Danny Boy's and spend the night?"

He was asking for too much. Had she not fallen asleep the last time she was at his place, she wouldn't have stayed then. As much as she loved having him hold her all night, his gentle breathing lulling her to sleep, she needed her space.

"I can't." Tommie didn't look Gray in the eyes. She headed to the office door until Gray's stood and blocked her.

"Yes, you can. Don't put this wall between us. I want more than just a physical relationship with you. I want more. I need more."

She shook her head. "You can't have everything. I'm starting to learn that the hard way." She pushed past him. As she bolted through the office door, Hobby arrived holding a frosty bottle of water. She grabbed it and continued her trek out the door.

Gray fit into her world. They got along. Even the sex blew her mind. Why was she fighting this so hard? Oh yeah. Her father. Mo. Bix. They were all people she'd cared about who'd walked out on her. If Gray did that too, she would be devastated. No use making any more personal attachments than necessary.

She reached her car but didn't notice that Gray had run after her when she'd left the building. He held her arm and spun her around.

"I don't care who sees this. I need you, Tommie." He put his hand to the back of her head and kissed her hard, crushing her lips and almost her resolve.

She pushed him away. Without a word, she hopped into her car. Screeching away, her mind raced with things she had to do. Gray topped her list. She'd started this thing with Gray. She would have to finish it right.

* * * *

Tommie didn't know what she had expected to find at the hospital where Gray used to work. It was worth a shot to at least try although she didn't know the first place to start. All she knew was that Gray was a magnificent doctor who cared a great deal about people. He deserved to have his name cleared and his job reinstated. Maybe with him far from her, she can resume her life again.

Her only lead was the fact that Gray had worked in the E.R. She would have to start there. How she would continue was a different story altogether.

Tommie walked through a set of doors and found a few parents waiting in the room with their children. A box of used toys sat in a corner below a TV set to Nickelodeon. She sat on a couch and took all of it in. The smell of disinfectant and dirty diapers. The red, blue and purple plush chairs in the white waiting room. The sound of the whirring snack machines by the bathroom.

She scanned the room, looking over the children waiting to be seen. Her eyes settled on a young black girl sitting next to a woman who was probably her mother. The girl with two rope-like braids favored her left wrist. Upon closer inspection, Tommie saw that she had a nasty bruise on it. The child leaned her head onto her mother's ample bosom. When she looked at Tommie, she flashed a smile then hid her face.

Tommie wondered if the child with diabetes that Gray had helped was anything like this precious girl with the doe eyes.

What was she doing? She wouldn't be able to get anyone to talk. Probably some hospital code or something. 'Thou shalt not squeal on thine co-workers.' Or something like that.

She stood. It was a mistake coming here. As she headed to the door, she heard something unusual. Her name.

"Ms. Balford? Is that you?"

Tommie turned around and saw Debbie, the nurse who'd taken care of her when she had her stable angina. She didn't know if it was because of the smile on the nurse's face or because of the fact that she'd helped her not too long ago that made Tommie reach out and give this pleasantly plump woman a hug.

"Debbie? I didn't know you worked in this department. I thought you worked in the main hospital."

"It's a new hospital thing. Some corporation owns both the main hospital and the children's so they started some new thing where nurses have to split time between the two. I like being here more though. I love the kids. Are you here for your child?"

Tommie smiled. "No. I don't have any kids. And I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here."

"You're not having problems with your heart again, are you?"

"No. Nothing like that." Tommie shook her head. "It's dumb."

"Trust me. Nothing is as silly as it seems. Tell me. I might be able to help."

Tommie hoped so. She was her last chance. "I'm here for Gray. Dr. Kennebeck. Actually, he doesn't even know I'm here."

The nurse's face flushed. She glanced around like she was checking to see if anyone was listening to them.

"His case is coming up in a few days. I was trying to help him clear his name."

Debbie's rosy cheeks went pale. "If I tell you something, Ms. Balford, you have to promise not to tell anyone where heard it."

Tommie's heart started its wild dance again. "I promise. And call me Tommie."

Chapter Eighteen

The locker room had an eerie silence through it. Three rows of battleship gray metal lockers lined the walls leaving the middle space empty. The walls were painted a light lime green color. A heavy mixture of different perfumes swirled in the air. It reminded Tommie of walking past a perfume counter at a department store where the young women there eagerly awaited spraying their next victim.

"I know Dr. Kennebeck didn't take those drugs--at least not the ones he's been accused of," Debbie began.

Tommie started to say, "Dr. Kennebeck didn't steal--"

But Debbie stopped her. "Yes, he did. But he did it for other people and he did put whatever he took back on the shelves."

"So if you knew, why didn't you--"

"All of us nurses liked Dr. Kennebeck. He was the only doctor in the E.R. who treated patients and the staff like people." Emphatically, Debbie shook her head. Then she fanned her face with her hand. "Plus have you seen his backside? Not bad, right?"

Tommie wondered if Gray knew how influential his butt was how that would make him feel.

"So if you all knew what he was doing, how did he get accused?" Tommie kept her voice low, not wanting to get this woman in trouble.

"Because Dr. Wiley has a lot of pull with a lot of hospitals. She could end careers. I'm a single mom with three kids. I can't afford to lose my job."

"And do you think Dr. Kennebeck can?" She stared into Debbie's eyes. Tommie felt her stomach tightening. "He wants to help people."

"I know. That's why he wanted to open his own clinic." Another door slam made Debbie jump but Tommie stood perfectly still this time.

Gray wanted to open his own clinic? Tommie just made love to a saint. Every time she thought she knew him, she learned something else wonderful about him.

"They had Dr. Wiley on security tape going into the room with the drugs, but so did Dr. Kennebeck and other authorized personnel. If she didn't pin it on Dr. Kennebeck, she would have pinned it on someone else."

"If they have the tape, can't that be used?"

"Like I said, they *had* the tape. Mysteriously it's been erased. One person saw her popping pills in a broom closet but no one knows for sure what she took. For all we know, it could have been aspirin, at least that's what she would say, I'm sure."

Tommie shook her head at the hopelessness of clearing Gray's name.

"The only way Dr. Kennebeck is going to get out of this is if Dr. Wiley admits what she did. To be honest, I think she's too far gone to think of anyone but herself." Debbie patted Tommie's hand before walking out of the locker room.

All that stood between Gray and his freedom was truth. Time to make a trip down to Con Wiley's.

* * * *

Tommie's boldness had gotten her a crucial piece of evidence. As she knocked on Con Wiley's door for a third time, she prayed her instincts would guide her again. She knew the woman had to be home. A Mercedes parked askew in the driveway gave the occupancy of the house away.

As she raised her fist in the air to knock again, the door flung open. Con Wiley jumped back seeing Tommie's fist in the air. As tempting as it was to hurl that fist into Con's face, Tommie, instead, brought it down.

Con Wiley rolled her eyes. "God, you're like a stray dog. Feed it and it keeps coming back to you." She folded her arms. "I have no food, little doggie. So go on and run off to someone else who'll feed you."

"You're funny, Con." She opened a flap on the side of her purse. "Let's see how funny you are when you see this."

Tommie jerked a tape recorder from her purse and held it up to Con's face. Con Wiley raised her hand in front of her face, stared at it for a second then lower her hand.

"I thought you were getting a gun. What the hell is that?" She pointed to the digital recorder.

"This is going to free an innocent man." Tommie waved the recorder in front of Con Wiley's face.

An expression of recognition washed over Con's face. Although she tried to hide them, Tommie caught Con's hands trembling. Something spooked her.

"What are you talking about?" Con asked.

"I'm talking about you making amends and clearing an innocent man's name."

Con waved her hand in the air. "Gray will be fine." She leaned against the doorjamb.

Tommie guessed the woman wasn't going to extend a warm welcome back into her home. "He's young. He's intelligent. He's good looking."

"He's not a politician. He's a doctor. It's not about image. It's about skill."

Con wagged her finger at Tommie. "That's where you're wrong, little girl. A hospital is a business. And they're in the business to make a profit and sell an image. Gray fits that bill well. Did he tell you that he's up for my job?"

Tommie's furrowed eyebrows must have answered Con's inquiry.

"I guess he didn't. The board said that they needed my expertise elsewhere. That's another way of saying that I'm too old and stupid to do the job. But Gray is young, hip and fresh."

"You just said he's intelligent."

"That's icing on the cake."

Tommie smelled the alcohol that reeked all over Con's clothes and wafted from her mouth whenever she spoke. There was nothing appealing or endearing about this woman. Her words stunk as horribly as her breath. And with her silk shirt stained and hanging loose outside of her matching slacks, she appeared disheveled.

"So you set him up?" Tommie asked.

Con glanced at the recorder before answering. "No."

"Gray is fighting to keep his job and protect you. Why is that? What kind of hold do you have over him?"

Con snickered. "Jealous?"

"Not hardly. Why would Gray be interested in a drunk like you?"

"Why, you little--" Con stammered and stumbled out of the door. When she nearly fell after tripping on the front step, she stopped and smiled. "You're not going to rattle me. I'm stronger than you think."

"Is it the Vicodin or the Ritalin that gives you your strength?"

The smile dropped from Con's face for only a moment. Then she jerked up another smile. "I wouldn't know."

"I have enough on this recorder to save Gray."

"Who the hell would believe some sideshow freak owner to a respected surgeon?" Con turned to her front door.

"Probably not anyone. You're right about that."

Con held the door, preparing to close it.

"But what about a former successful stock broker and a washed up hag of a doctor who stinks of booze? Who do *you* think is more credible?"

Con remained quiet as Tommie made her way down the walk to her car.

"Do what you want, gal," Con screamed after Tommie. "No matter what the outcome of the case, we're both going to lose Gray."

Tommie stopped in her tracks. She pivoted to Con still taking up residence in her doorway.

"If he wins, he'll leave your little dog-and-pony show to go back to the hospital and take my job. If he loses, well I guess you'll have no use for a doctor with no license to practice medicine on your staff, right?"

The thought had crossed Tommie's mind a number of times. To hear it verbalized smacked her in the face with the reality. As much as she wanted to scream to Con that she was flat out wrong, she turned back to her car, a chorus of Con's cackling laughter behind her until she got into her ride and closed the door, muffling the sound.

Tommie turned her radio and her air conditioning up high to drown out any outside noise. She backed out of the driveway with one destination in mind.

* * * *

Even as the billiard balls smacked each other on the custom made mahogany pool table, Gray's mind wandered over every inch of Tommie's incredible body. As he sat in Danny Boy's rec room, he thought about how her skin flushed when he'd told her his fantasy. He had a feeling that more of his tale would have gotten him an invitation to the backseat of her car.

However she had run away from him. With the idea of simply spending the night, she'd taken off like he had the plague. He didn't understand her fear. He'd been truthful about everything with her.

Maybe she was worried about what all would happen after the case. If he won, would she want to give up her career, her life, to be with him?

No, wrestling was her life. She'd told him that a million times over. She wouldn't leave it and he wouldn't have wanted her to.

If he lost, he would have to leave her business. What could he do for her if he wasn't the company doctor? Roadie? Her assistant? A wrestler? None of those ideas appealed to him. He strived to be the best in his field as much as she had in her own, something else they had in common.

"Are you going to sit there and look goofy all night or are you going to play?" Danny Boy asked as he leaned against the table.

Gray directed his attention to him. "I thought we were going to go over my case."

"Later. I need to unwind. Rough day today at work." Danny Boy set himself up for another shot.

"I know what you mean. It wasn't a picnic for me either."

Danny Boy smirked before taking his shot. "What are you talking about? You work with an absolute fox. How could work be anything but heavenly?"

"Do you think we're having sex the whole day or something?"

His friend's imagination went beyond creative. It was downright pornographic.

"I'm going to start calling you Hef. What a friggin' life you have. Sexy woman bossing you around. Junior Vickers right there with you." He took his shot and stood up straight. "And look at what you get to wear to work. Wish I could get away with shorts and a t-shirt at the firm."

Gray sprang from the leather couch. "It's not like that."

"Please, tell me what it's like. Does she wear those short skirts like she came here wearing the other night to work? Does she bend over and give you a peek at heaven?"

Gray snatched his pool stick off of the bar and gripped it to prevent himself from bopping his friend in the head. He ground his teeth as Danny Boy spoke.

"Do you think those cute tits are real or fake? I could be wrong, man, but I don't think she was wearing a bra the other night and those bad boys were--"

"Are you looking for a beat down because you're going to get it if you keep talking about Tommie that way." He leaned over to take his shot.

But Danny Boy continued. "And that mouth of hers! I still have dreams of that around my--"

Gray had had enough. He threw his stick down and grabbed Danny Boy by the collar of his opened shirt. From Danny Boy's confused but frightened expression, he knew the rage in his eyes translated to him.

"Don't talk about her that way. I'm not going to repeat myself again."

Danny Boy held up his hands. "Whoa! What's up with you? It's the same talk we would do about any woman we found attractive. How come you didn't get this bent out of shape when we talked about banging Halle Berry or Pam Anderson?"

Gray let him go. Stepping to the bar, he rested his hands on the counter while keeping his back to his friend.

"Dude, you act like you and Tommie are involved or something."

When Gray didn't answer, he heard Danny Boy's pool stick fall to the floor. Fear kept him from checking to see if Danny Boy had also fallen to the floor until he spoke.

"Did you two have sex?" Danny Boy asked.

Gray squeezed his eyes shut. He wasn't the kiss and tell type. Danny Boy knew that. All of the bravado talk with female celebrities was all Danny Boy. Gray would knock him down with each crazy fantasy. When he talked about Tommie like some sex object, it hit him harder than he'd expected.

"That's the Gray I remembered," Danny Boy continued. "You sly fox. Up to your old tricks again, huh? Just bang her and walk away."

Gray stomped around the bar. He wasn't much of a drinker but he needed

something stronger than a beer right now. He clinked a couple of ice cubes into a short whiskey glass then poured some Jim Beam on top.

"It isn't like that." Gray twirled the glass between his hands.

"What makes this one different?" Danny Boy covered his mouth. "You're in love with your boss."

Gray held the glass to his mouth but stopped. "Shut up."

"Admit it."

"I'm not telling you jack."

Danny Boy slammed his hands against the bar. "Have you learned nothing from me?"

"God, I hope not." He set the glass down without taking a sip.

"If you're going to go with your plan of falling in love then having sex, do that. Less people get hurt that way. But if you have sex then fall in love, it's not Big Gray that's doing the thinking. It's Little Gray." He pointed to Gray's crotch. "Listen to me, man. Hit it and quit it. I'll get you your job back at the hospital. With all that touring and shit she's got to do with her company, you'll be a distant memory for her."

"I want my job back."

Danny Boy clapped his hands and gave him the thumbs-up sign. "Good. That's the first logical thing you said all night."

"But I don't want her forgetting about me." He shook his head. "The funny part about your whole philosophy is that she wants to do just that. She wants nothing more than a physical relationship."

Danny Boy put his hand to his head in a dramatic way and acted as though he was going to faint. "Why do these things always happen to you and not me? Why couldn't I get a hot piece of tail like that?" Danny Boy caught Gray's serious expression and decided to amend his previous question. "I mean, why can't a woman like Tommie want me for just my body? I could handle that a lot better than you."

"Yeah, but talk about a charity case." Gray finally smiled.

"Yes! There's the old Gray back in form."

Gray strolled back to the couch. He eased down on it and covered his eyes with his hand. "What can I offer that woman that she doesn't already have?"

"Stop fighting her on this and give her what she wants. If she wants your body and Little Gray, give them to her. This is a no brainer." Danny Boy skipped to the fridge. He retrieved a Heineken from inside and twisted off the cap. "You're the only man I know with a conscience about sex."

"I'm sure I'm not the only man."

"She's got the right idea. Don't get too attached. When all this is said and done, you're going to be well on your way to great things. Why would you want a pro-wrestling company owner beside you?"

Gray removed his hand. "Don't get all stupid and elitist on me. She's a classy woman."

"I'm just telling you the truth. At charity dinners and hospital functions, do you see her by your side?"

"Yes."

"She doesn't. That's the important thing you're not getting. She sees this

relationship for what it is. A quickie with no potential. Don't dig too deep."

Gray shook his head. "How come in court you will argue until the cows come home? You won't settle for anything less than what you want. But in personal relationships, you could give a damn about feelings or matters of the heart? I care about this woman. She means a lot to me."

"I can argue a case because it makes sense to me. If A is B and B is C, then A is C. But with you and Tommie, that philosophy doesn't work. If she wants a physical relationship and you keep pushing for more, then you're going to push her away from you so that you'll never see her again."

"But win or lose in this case, I'll still lose her."

Danny Boy sat down next to Gray. "Ah ha. But if you allow her space and let her control the relationship, you'll at least get in-town nookie whenever she blows by. Isn't that better than nothing?"

No. It wasn't better. A relationship like that wouldn't work with Gray.

The chime of the doorbell broke Gray's thoughts.

He peered over to his friend. "Don't you ever cook?"

Danny Boy smirked. "Why cook when you can have stuff delivered?" He hopped from the couch. "Don't think we're off of this topic. I want you to describe every inch of that woman's body." He headed to the steps to doorway that led to the main house. He turned back briefly to say, "But you can do it in a sensitive way."

Gray rubbed his hands over his eyes. He propelled himself off of the couch. The least he could do was help pay for dinner and carry it into the house. He took the steps by twos and strolled toward the living room only stopping when he heard Tommie's voice. He ducked behind a wall but listened intently.

"Well hello," Danny Boy said in a salacious way. "Speak of the devil and she shows in cream colored pants."

"Cute, Danny Boy," she began. "I saw Gray's car out front so I won't stay long. And please don't tell him I was here. I need to tell you something. It's important."

Chapter Nineteen

"So what burden can I relieve you of?" Danny Boy asked.

Tommie's skin crawled when he spoke. Or maybe it was the way he rolled his tongue over his short teeth.

"I gathered some evidence that's going to help Gray in his case." She handed him her recorder. "On it you'll hear Con Wiley damn near admit she stole those drugs and set Gray up."

"She said that?" Danny Boy took the recorder.

"Not in so many words. But it's implied."

"And did she know you were recording the conversation before you taped her?"

"Well, I held up the recorder and she didn't stop me."

Danny Boy's jaw dropped as though she had implicated the president. "It's inadmissible. If she doesn't know she's being recorded then--"

Tommie cut him off. "She didn't care. Of course, she was drunk at the time."

Danny Boy shook his head. "Gray's got a soft spot for the alcoholics, addicts." He gazed at Tommie and must have caught her confused look. "Gray didn't tell you about his mother?"

She shook her head. All she knew was that his parents lived in Florida.

"Gray's mother drank for most of his life. She was one of those quiet, closeted alcoholics. Functional in public but out of control at home. He told me a year after I met him. His parents came to visit him at school once and his mother blubbered all over the place about her boy being away and having no one at home to take care of her. It was touching at first. Then it got sad, then weird. He told me later about her problem. The real reason his parents moved to Florida was because of her drinking. His dad didn't want the neighbors knowing she was going through the twelve-step thing."

Tommie's heart swelled for Gray and his family. He wasn't putting himself out there for Con Wiley. He was doing it for his mother. In the same way she put herself out on a limb for a business solely created for her father. One of their crazy schemes had to work. Either Constance was going to be saved or Junior would appreciate his little girl's efforts. In the meantime, Tommie still had herself and Gray to rescue.

"If this evidence helps Gray, you know what'll happen?"

Tommie didn't answer. She'd hoped that her show of friendship and belief in Gray would make him want to stay with her and not run back to the hospital but even she couldn't hold on to that dream.

"Before all of this happened, he was practically guaranteed the head of the pediatric department. He would be the youngest department head anywhere. The only reason he was suspended was for show. Your evidence could oust Dr. Wiley from her chair. I just hope he takes that chair job instead of opening that damn clinic."

She smiled and nodded but all she wanted to do was kick herself. She was damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

A crash from the kitchen broke both of their attention. It also started Tommie's

heart racing.

"I have to go." She turned back to her car. "Good luck tomorrow. Don't tell Gray I was here." She hopped into her sedan. Like an action star, she sped away from Danny Boy's house but she knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. The crash had to have been Gray listening in on her. How was he going to react? Happy? Angry? Disappointed? Only one way to find out.

* * * *

"Dude, you broke my stoneware." Danny Boy stared at the broken terracotta-looking pieces of his stoneware cooking sheet that lay scattered on the floor. The jagged, angled shards could have been pushed together to make the circle again...if Danny Boy was willing to glue all of the pieces together.

Gray had bumped into it backing away from the doorway once he'd heard Danny Boy detail Gray's mother's drinking problem.

What Tommie must think of him now. She seemed so enamored with the idea that he came from a well-adjusted, happy home life. Now she knew the truth. His repressed mother who had given up everything to be something she wasn't, was also an alcoholic. Of course, she hadn't touched the stuff in over twenty years.

"I'll buy you another one." Gray raced to the front door in time to catch Tommie speeding out of the court. He cursed under his breath.

"You heard everything that went on between me and your girl, didn't you?" Danny Boy asked as he mourned over the lost cookware.

"Yeah. And stop hitting on her." He raced past Danny Boy to return to the rec room. He had to go find her.

"I think she likes me."

Gray retrieved his car keys off the top of the rec room fridge. As he ran back through the kitchen, he hopped over Danny Boy's crouched body.

"I gotta go, man," Gray said.

Danny Boy waved him away. "Just go. I don't want you doing any more damage." He shook his head. "I had it seasoned perfectly."

The man was upset about a broken piece of stone he cooked on. It couldn't get any sadder than that.

"I would help you clean it up but--"

"Yeah, yeah. Get your girl."

Gray slammed some money on the counter. "That's for dinner and the broken plate." He ran to the door with Danny Boy hollering behind him, "It's stoneware!"

Gray hopped into his car. Now if he were Tommie, where would he go? He knew where he would like her to go but fantasy and reality were two different things. As he drove down the interstate toward her Chesapeake home, he punched in her cell phone number.

Voicemail. Since when did Tommie Balford have her cell phone off? *Since she's supposed to be taking time off work, silly.* He tried her home number. No Tommie. Not even Bix. He got another answering machine. Where in the world was she? And why had she gone to great lengths to clear his name?

It hit him then. She wanted him happy. She knew what made him happy, professionally, was his work. Bottom line. She wanted him back at the hospital. She

didn't want him at UEW anymore. Was it a selfless act or a way to get rid of him?

After driving all over Hampton Roads, from her house in Chesapeake to her gym nearby to Constance's place just in case, Gray decided the best thing to do would be to wait at his home and make calls from there. At least he would be in one spot and not driving himself crazy, literally. As soon as he pulled up to his driveway, his headlights caught her.

Better than a doe, it was Tommie. Beautifully calm, waiting patiently next to her car that she'd parked in the street in front of his house. He pulled into the driveway.

As soon as he opened the door, she was there. Her wildflower scent swirled around him. She had on the same slacks and top she'd had on at the gym earlier so she hadn't been home yet. Despite it all, she still looked fresh and clean. From the sound of what she'd given to Danny Boy, this lady had had a busy day.

* * * *

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Tommie wasn't quite sure of the answer herself. Leaving Danny Boy's place, she'd driven around to clear her head. Never had a man had her thoughts wrapped up in his well-being. When she was on the brink of madness from obsessing over Gray, Tommie decided to face her demon head on.

"I was thirsty," she said.

Gray strolled to his front door with Tommie behind him. "Maybe I can't give you what you want."

She smirked. "Water?"

He unlocked it and held it open for her. She sauntered past him.

"You want something?" she asked as she made her way to his kitchen like she'd done it before.

"The same thing you want," he replied.

She kept her gaze away from him. Gray was baiting her. Wasn't it enough that she was there? Why couldn't he appreciate her gesture? She didn't have to tell him her motivation for what she'd done for him. It should have been apparent.

When she did return her gaze to him, she found him flipping through his mail. She retrieved two bottles of spring water. After closing the refrigerator door, she stared at him. He appeared strong and stoic like nothing could bother him but there was something different about him. Or maybe it was the way she saw him now. He was a vulnerable warrior dedicated to defending his tribe, his principals. He wasn't taking the blame for Con Wiley's actions because he was being played for a fool. He was fighting a belief that this woman, like his mother, could be saved.

When he glanced at her after tossing his unopened mail on the table in the foyer, she snapped out of her stare and hung a smile on her face. She came around the breakfast bar and handed him his bottle.

His fingers brushed against hers. His touch sent a sizzling surge through her body. Her toes tingled.

"Thanks." He cracked the top off and tossed the cap on the bar.

"Lock up down here. I'll meet you upstairs." She glided up the stairs with the sounds of turning tumblers and flicking switches behind her. Whatever was unspoken between them spoke volumes in their actions.

She got to his bedroom and turned on the light. Still neat as a pin. Bed made. Items on top of the dresser in order. She sat on the edge of the tall bed and slipped off the slides from her feet. After setting her bottled water on the night stand, she rubbed her toes just as she heard Gray's footsteps coming up the stairs.

He entered the room and gave her a stare like it was the first time he'd seen her. "What makes you think I want you on my bed?" He strolled to the other side of the bed to his answering machine.

Tommie didn't answer. Her actions would shout her intentions.

Gray clicked a button on his machine as he took a hefty drink from his water bottle. He set it on the dresser. Then he crouched down and untied his shoes when the first message played.

"This is Mr. Everhart from the Sports Entertainment Commission."

Tommie twisted her body around. She popped her lower lip into her mouth and chewed it. What would he be doing calling Gray?

"We didn't get a chance to meet the day I was in the gym when Ms. Balford had her heart attack."

Gray stood, kicked out of his shoes and walked over to her. He leaned down and whispered, "Stable angina," in her ear. When he pulled back, his lips brushed against her cheek.

Mr. Everhart's voice broke her concentration.

"Our office has been watching your case. We warned Ms. Balford's assistant weeks ago that a suitable replacement should have been made for you before the *Home Invasion* show but it looks like our requests have gone unanswered. We are calling you because although your hearing is coming up shortly, we have removed your name from a list of suitable candidates qualified to work in the sports entertainment field. You can reapply once the trial is over. Please see Ms. Balford for your suspension papers. Any questions, please give us a call."

Did they just fire her company doctor under her nose and behind her back? How dare they? Where do they get off treating her like a puppet? They could fine her. Close down her business. Threaten her business practices every day of her life. But she would be damned if they thought they were going to run it for her.

She balled her hand into a fist. Anger clouded her eyes so much she wanted to spit fire. Why in the hell didn't Hobby tell her?

"Gray, I didn't know anything about this. I would never fire you or--"

He held his hand up to her. "Not surprised. Not the first time you've kept something from me."

Tommie's chest sank even as she held her chin up. "I thought you guys liked a mystery."

He silenced her with a kiss so soft and sweet that everything around her seemed to slow down. Her heart, her thoughts, her breathing. She slipped her hand behind his head and stroked his hair.

Gray pulled back. "You want mystery? Try figuring that one out."

Her mouth opened but as usual, she was halted by Bix. Bix's voice on the answering machine cut through the tension.

Oh no. Not again.

"Gray, it's Bix. If you and Toms are there, pick up. I have to talk to her. It's important 'cause--" Bix trailed off. Was that a snuffle Tommie heard? Was Bix actually crying? "Never mind. I'll talk to her later."

Gray peered over at his machine then back at her. "One more message and the phone is all yours."

She nodded. "Thanks."

The last message was from Danny Boy. "Gray, I'm sorry about all that stupid stuff I said about Tommie earlier. She's really cool and if you want to go off and keep--" Gray slammed his hand on the machine, erasing all messages.

If Gray wanted to keep doing what, she wondered. Working for her? Fantasizing about her? Wishing he had a career with her instead of at some dumb, ol' hospital? Nah. More than likely Danny Boy was talking about sex. If Gray wanted to keep sleeping with his boss, Danny Boy gave the decision his blessing. It was her fault if Gray viewed her as just a piece of ass. It was easier to give her body than her soul.

He handed the receiver to Tommie who couldn't help wonder what it was Gray had told Danny Boy about their relationship.

"Call your friend. Sounded like she needs you," he said. He turned and disappeared into the bathroom.

Tommie punched in Bix's cell phone number. She didn't think her friend would be at home or even at Tommie's house. She always carried her cell phone.

When Bix answered, Tommie took a deep breath before speaking.

"It's me," Tommie began.

"Oh, Tommie! I'm so glad you called me back. I've been worried about you. After this morning, I calmed myself down. I tried calling you but I kept getting voicemail on your celly."

"I turned it off."

"And I kept getting your answering machine at home. I thought something happened to you, like you had that heart attack thingy again."

"I'm fine." Tommie heard the shower start. She needed one of those.

"I want to say I'm sorry for the way I acted this morning. Here I am encouraging you to go out and get your groove on and when you do I get all mad at you."

"I'm happy that you're over you're stupid trip on Gray." Tommie undid the buttons on her blouse while balancing the phone between her ear and shoulder.

"I never said I was cool with Gray." Bix sucked her teeth, the sound audible through the receiver. "I still think it's a mistake for you two to start something with him. We grew up with guys like him. They thought they were better than us. Do them like they tried to do to us."

Tommie had her shirt open. She caught her reflection in the mirror on Gray's dresser. With her opened blouse and tired expression, she propelled back to high school when she dated the quarterback on their high school team. After a night of quick, sweaty sex, Brad the quarterback had told her, "Thanks, babe. Gotta go before my parents see you here. Can't be seen with a wrestler's daughter."

Bix finished her rant. "Remember what we used to say, girl. 'Screw them before they screw us.' But don't take any of this seriously."

Tommie wasn't that humiliated teenager again. And she wouldn't be used. At

least not without her consent. "Thanks, Bix. Right now I need a long shower." The steam slithered from under the bathroom door. "Then I'm going to hit the bed."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Some time. I have plans tomorrow night. But I'll talk to you later." Tommie disconnected the call before Bix could get in her twenty questions about her plans. She set the phone back in its cradle. Sliding the garment down her arms, she let the shirt drop off of her then undid her pants and stepped out of them. Once she was completely nude, she padded to the steamy bathroom.

Gray's back was to her but as though he felt her presence, he turned before she even reached him. As much as she wanted to, she didn't stop her trek. Didn't hesitate. She willed herself to do what felt right. Would Gray be like the boys of her past or like the man she wanted to have?

He opened the glass door of his shower to allow her passage. She sighed as she entered and the steam took her breath away. She'd like to think it was only the mist.

Once inside, she stood under the hot, rushing water pellets that soaked her hair. Her back was to Gray. With soapy hands, he eased them around her waist, caressing her body with the fragrant suds.

"What makes you think I want your hands on my body?" she asked. She squeezed her eyelids closed.

"Just take it as a helpful gesture," he growled in her ear.

Her fingertips feathered up his slick arms. "How's that?"

"If you're going to share my shower, I'm going to help wash you."

She smiled. She didn't want him to stop.

"I guess you had a busy day."

Tommie leaned back, pressing her flesh against his broad chest. "I told you I had some errands to run."

His hands smoothed up to her breasts, cupping them until her hard nipples ached. Relief would only come when his lips touched them. She reached her hands back to grab his firm behind. She massaged them and pulled him close to her so that his erection pressed against her backside.

"Thank you," he said, kissing her cheek.

Tommie released her grip. She turned around while his arms were still around her to face him. He looked completely sexy wet. His hair appeared darker from being drenched.

"Did you and Bix have a fight today?" He nuzzled his face into the side of her neck, nibbling her neck up to her ear.

She moaned an affirmative response. "About you."

He lifted his head and smiled. "Danny Boy and I fought about you."

"Think they know something we don't?"

He shook his head. "You see who apologized first."

She laughed.

"Oh no." He reached behind her and turned off the water.

"What?"

"I shouldn't have made you laugh. I think that's about one of the sexiest sounds you make." He kissed her lovingly, his tongue exploring her mouth as his large hands

covered her back and her backside. Her hands glided on his slippery skin.

"I could take you right here. Right now." He said it like a dare or almost like a tease. Either way she quivered in anticipation for his next move.

Gray opened the shower door. Taking her hand, he led her out. He toweled her off, paying close attention to her backside and the apex between her legs. Her legs trembled like at any moment she would collapse to the floor. He was barely dry when he lifted her into his arms. He carried her to his bed.

"Get comfortable." He darted back into the bathroom. Probably to get the box of condoms. Tommie slipped under the comforter. Just as she had the pillows fluffed behind her the way she liked, a thought crossed her mind, which made her jump from the bed. She scurried to Gray's phone and unplugged it again. No more disturbances.

Tommie crawled into bed with Gray coming in after her. She settled on her side, staring at him as he looked at her. The electric bond caused her skin to tickle.

"Hi." She smiled. She inched her way closer to him.

"Hello." He slid closer to her. From behind his back he brought his hand around to her face and handed her a rose.

Tommie swallowed before she would allow her hand to move. She willed the reluctant appendage to grab the smooth stemmed rose. She must have missed it in the bathroom.

"Where was this?" she asked then took a whiff of the flower.

"It's part of the bouquet I had. I couldn't decide whether to give you the white roses or red."

She accepted the red rose from him. "Red means passion."

"I keep them in the bathroom because the steam is good for them." Gray removed strands of her damp hair from her face.

His thumb caressed her cheek. Such smooth, surgeon's hands. He leaned forward. His lips brushed over hers. She closed her eyes as he pressed his lips harder against hers. Her hand slid up his arm to his shoulder. She never felt so safe, so beautiful, so wanted in her life.

When he pulled back, she kept her eyes closed as though opening them would stop the dream. Then again, opening her eyes would give her a sweet reality. She slid her eyes open and found a real dream right in front of her.

"So how did you end up here?" he asked.

"I drove. You saw my car out there." She was cute with her answer hoping he wouldn't want to probe any further.

"What happened to not wanting to spend the night?" His fingertips brushed her arm, up the side of her body until it made its stop at her breast. She was so relaxed with his touch that she didn't flinch or gasp.

"Something changed." She rested her hand on top of his. "Or maybe nothing has changed."

He smiled. "An enigma wrapped in a riddle. That's what you are."

"And you're a man full of secrets." As his thumb twirled around her nipple, she almost didn't have the heart to ask him about what she'd heard from Danny Boy. To alleviate the pain of seeing his dour expression, she turned her back to him and pressed against his chest. He curved his arm around her waist.

After a deep breath, she asked her pressing question. "Was what Danny Boy said about your--"

"Yes." Gray didn't give her a chance to finish. But he probably knew what she suspected. What Danny Boy said was a painful truth.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Not something an employee shares with his boss." He pulled her in to him tighter.

Suddenly being nude with him felt weird, strange. He threw in the boss-employee roles making the scene surreal. Bix's voice echoed in her head. Gray was out of her league. Tommie had to prove her wrong.

"And this is not something a boss does with every employee. At least I hope not." She interlaced her fingers with his and squeezed his hand. "I'd like to think that we're something more than just boss and employee."

"Really? What are we?"

She was glad her face was away from his gaze. Nuzzling her face into the pillow, she continued with her questions. "Is your mother okay?"

He kissed the back of her neck. "My mother hasn't had a drink in years. She's clean."

"Yeah, but your memories aren't."

"What are you? Oprah?" His voice tensed. "I took up yoga to clear my head of all this stuff. I do Tai Chi to make myself stronger. I'm proud of my mother for changing her life around."

"Maybe Con Wiley will do the same thing?"

Gray sighed. Her heart heaved for his pain.

He said, "I wished my father hadn't taken her away. I wanted to be there for her. Help her through this. She needed her family with her."

The way he talked about his mother, his pure love for her, clouded her eyes with tears. She stared at the light from the lamp hoping it would dry any oncoming tears. He had her heart and as much as she'd tried fighting it, he had the deed to her soul.

"Besides, revealing family secrets is not something I say when I first meet someone...you know, like what you and Bix do on Friday nights. Your ritual."

She had to think about what he was talking about at first. Then it all clicked. The night he'd called her when she and Bix were doing their nails and watching gay porn. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

"Are you intrigued or jealous?" she asked, baiting him.

He pressed his hardness against her back. "It depends on what you say."

Chemistry. She flunked it in high school but now she knew what Dr. Conyers meant elements reacting well together.

"Back in college, Bix and I used to have a girls' night in that involved doing our nails, eating our favorite snacks, and one other thing that won't make any sense to you." She shook her head. How could she be admitting this to this man?

"And what was that one thing?"

Now Tommie was glad she couldn't see his face, notice his expression of horror, more than likely, when she revealed the last thing.

She swallowed hard. "We watch gay porn."

“Lesbian stuff?” He nuzzled his face into her neck. Men. They were all alike.

“No.” She lifted her head to give him better access. “Men. Men on men.”

He stopped kissing her. With a hand on her shoulder he flipped her on her back.

Oh no. He did want to see her face.

“Really?” He said it in a sing-song type of way. “And why would a heterosexual woman and a lesbian want to watch men go after each other?”

Tommie climbed on top of his body, resting her chest on top of his, their considerable heat causing a near meltdown under the sky blue comforter.

“Why do you men watch two women going after each other?” She kissed his chest. When his breath caught, she felt a surge of power spirited through her.

Gray pushed her wet hair back from her face. “That’s sexy. Women are so sensitive with each other.”

She licked his small, pink nipple until it became pebble hard. He moaned.

“That’s the reason why I watch gay porn.” She licked her tongue down his muscled stomach.

“Why?” he growled.

Once she got to his erection, she held it at the base, stroking it. His breath quickened.

When he peered down at her she said salaciously, “Because as Bix says, a man knows what a man wants.”

* * * *

“I knew there was something I liked about Bix.” Gray flopped his head back on his pillows and enjoyed Tommie’s expert training.

While holding the base of his cock, she licked her tongue around his hard shaft. The feeling blurred his vision and curled his toes. When she covered the tip with her mouth while massaging his balls.

Gray’s thighs stiffened. He tightened his stomach. It didn’t take long for him to undulate his hips back and forth to slide his erection in and out of her mouth.

Like she’d done it before, Tommie eased her mouth all the way down to the base and held him there. Her tongue snaked around his throbbing penis while Gray did everything in his power not to explode.

Tommie wasn’t making it easy for him to hold off his climax. She hummed, vibrating him into another level of pleasure. Sliding her mouth up, she kissed the tip then pressed her tongue against it.

Gray gritted his teeth so hard his head hurt. Her mouth provided sweet torture he wouldn’t be able to take for much longer.

“Tommie!” He reached down and stroked her hair. “I’m close, babe.”

His admission made her move her mouth up and down his shaft faster. Gray reached behind his head and grabbed the top of the headboard. Tommie flicked her tongue over his tip. The look she gave him while she had him in her mouth stopped his heart.

She peered up at him. He could have sworn she smiled with her eyes.

“Yes!” Gray screamed before releasing a stream of his sperm into her mouth.

Tommie continued sucking him until his body settled on the bed.

“Tommie,” he began between pants, “whatever you do, don’t stop that Friday

night routine.”

Tommie laughed. “I’ll have to tell Bix that the next time I see her.”

“So should Danny Boy and I watch lesbian porn to know what a woman wants?”

Tommie crawled over Gray’s body and straddled him. “I’m more in favor of the hands-on approach.”

Gray held her hips. “My kind of woman.”

In more ways than one, she was his kind of woman. If only she felt the same about him.

Tommie crawled up to Gray’s face. Very quickly, she gave him a peck on his lips. He barely tasted himself on her.

“Come on.” After patting her backside, he hopped out of bed.

“Back to the bathroom?” Looking sexier than he’d ever remembered, she curled her legs close to her body and winked at him.

“Nope.” Strangely, he slipped on a blue robe. For her, he held up one of his shirts. “Slip this on.”

“Why?” Tommie slowed getting out of bed. “What’s going on?”

“Trust me. You’ll like it.”

Without a word, she slid on the garment. Taking her hand, Gray led her downstairs. When he unlocked his backdoor going to the beach, Tommie squeezed his hand and ground her heels into the carpet.

“We can’t go out there.” Grabbing him with her other hand, she tried stopping him.

“Why can’t we? It’s way past midnight. No one is out here.”

If the room wasn’t so dark, she would have been able to see if Gray was serious or not. Since he stepped out on the patio and continued pulling her along, she assumed he was very serious.

“People could see us.” Tommie stumbled forward behind him.

“I guess we’ll have to stay where the light won’t catch us.” He closed the door behind her and coaxed her onto the beach.

The sand held some of the heat of the day’s sun. The tiny grains warmed her feet as she continued further toward the crashing ocean.

Once they got to the water, Gray positioned Tommie in front of him, looking out at the volatile ocean.

“Look at the beauty and the power.” He massaged her shoulders. “The moon causes all of that.”

The first kiss he gave her on the side of her neck surprised her. When he continued down the side of her face, she cupped his cheek. In a possessive move, he wrapped one arm around her waist. She took his other hand and slid it in her open shirt. With the same care and delicacy as his kisses, he cupped her breast.

“Oh, Gray.” Her moans came between the sounds of the crashing waves.

She turned in his arms. Cradling his face in her hands, she regretted that in the darkness she couldn’t see his face. The moonlight provided her some shadows of his profile. She untied his robe as he slipped the shirt she wore over her shoulders. Letting one another go, they let their garments fall to the ground.

Hungry to touch him, Tommie’s hands coasted over his shoulders, down his long

arms and over his waist. Gray guided her hand down to his throbbing erection. He was ready and so was she.

"Let's get wet." Tommie gave him one firm stroke before running to the ocean and splashing in the cool water.

Gray laughed. However it didn't take him long to follow suit, running down the beach to jump into the waves. She swam from him, going waist deep into the water. Not surprisingly, Gray joined her.

At first to steady her, Gray wrapped his arms around her waist. The proximity of their bodies ignited a passion in both of them. She felt his hardened cock against her stomach.

"Have I told you thank you for everything you've done for me?" he asked.

She shook her head then answered. "No."

Using the water, Gray lifted her legs and wrapped them around his body, letting her body float as he held onto her hips. He pressed his thick tip against her opening.

"I trust you." On the surface, she meant that to mean she was okay having sex without a condom. She was on The Pill and she knew Gray would have had himself checked regularly.

The deeper meaning was she truly knew he wouldn't hurt her. When everything with the hearing was said and done, he would do the right thing.

In a torturous move, Gray only slid the tip of himself inside of her. Heightening her sensation, he slowly turned his body in the water, spinning her around so she felt like she was floating on air.

The sensations sent shivers down her arms and over her body. Grasping her hips, Gray plunged deep inside of her. Tommie released a long moan that matched the roar of the ocean.

Gray found his rhythm, easing in and out of her while still turning. This had to have been the most erotic and exotic way of having sex that she had ever had.

He pumped faster into her, causing more waves than the moon. With his angled shaft, he managed to hit her spot. She screamed as much as she could. Neighbors probably woke up because of her but she didn't care.

Gray stopped turning and drove into her deeper and harder. The motion, the man, and maybe the moon all conspired to release her bound passion into an intense climax, one that almost made her scream out, "I love you!"

Instead she said, "Again!"

Gray didn't stop pumping his hips until she felt the inside of her womb bathed in his warm cum.

"Again? This coming from a woman who didn't want to come out here in the first place?" Gray laughed.

"Like always, you're right again." With his help, she sat up and brought her legs down to the ocean floor.

"Once you understand that, everything else we do will run smoothly."

Tommie wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She hoped for more magical nights like this. The pang in her stomach made her think that after his hearing, their magical ride would be over.

* * * *

When Tommie returned home in the morning, she looked like she'd been made love to all night long. A wide smile covered her face until her cheeks hurt. She bounded from room to room almost like she was skipping.

She hated coming down off of her euphoric high, but she did have some business to take care of. From her Rolodex, she found that slimy Mr. Everhart's phone number. No one told her what to do and got away with it.

When he answered the phone on the first ring, Tommie let him have it.

"Mr. Everhart, this is Tommie Balford of Ultimate Extreme Wrestling. You left a message on one of my employee's home answering machines that I do not appreciate."

"What employee?" he asked.

"Dr. Gray Kennebeck. How dare you fire my employee as though you run my business. You can't do that. And he's not leaving. He will stay employed with me through to the *Home Invasion* show."

"Considering the circumstances, Ms. Balford, I thought you would have been pleased with our intervention. He's a thief and a possible drug addict. This is the doctor you trust with your employees?"

His smile flashed from her thoughts. "With all of my heart." She put her hand to her chest and almost laughed at the pun. She continued. "With his hearing tomorrow, you'll find that he'll be cleared of the charges."

"I'm glad you mentioned that. We will be in attendance to see what happens. If the case does not come out to his favor, he will have to resign his position and you'll have to find a suitable replacement by Saturday night's show."

"Since I know I won't have to do that, I guess I'll be seeing you at my show." She disconnected the call before he had a chance to respond.

She turned to go to her bedroom until the chime of her doorbell stopped her.

She was surprised at who stood on the other side of the door.

Bix. With her hair pulled back and a short jumper dress, she looked closer to her age than she normally appeared.

"Why did you ring the bell? You have a key. Hell, you have a room here." Tommie opened the door.

"Had," Bix said as she stepped inside. "While you were away last night, I moved all of my stuff out. I know it's been a pain having me under your foot all of the time."

"Bix, what are you doing? You moved out?" Tommie barely recognized the serene woman who stood in her living room, keeping her gaze from Tommie's and appearing almost shy. Definitely not a Bix characteristic.

"You've changed, Toms. And I'm not saying it like it's a bad thing. It's good. You've matured into a great woman. Strong, assertive, willing to change and make change. Meanwhile, I've done the exact same thing since high school. Party too much. Dump all of my responsibilities on you. Look to you to bail me out of my problems. I won't even let you date in peace." She laughed a little.

"That doesn't mean you have to move out. You know you're welcomed here any time. You're like my sister." Tommie fought back tears ready to spill forward. She gained a man but lost her best friend. "Gray doesn't have to come between us."

Bix shook her head. "It's not Gray. As I thought about it last night after we talked, Gray is a pretty cool guy. He took care of you in the hospital. He made sure to

look after Junior and the boys when you're gone. And look at you. You're glowing."

Tommie smiled.

"You're not pregnant, are you?" Bix quickly asked.

Tommie's smile dropped. There was the old Bix. "Of course not."

They laughed together.

Tommie said, "I'll miss you not being here all of the time."

"You know I'll be around. I'm still your media relations girl, uh, woman. And I'll be here Monday through Friday from nine to five like a good employee. And if you ever want to talk, you can call me or come by my place for a change."

Tommie stepped closer to Bix. "But I like taking care of you. I like that you rely on me all of the time. It's like having two full time jobs."

Bix put her hand on Tommie's shoulder. "You shouldn't have to look after me. I'm your friend not your cause."

Bix strolled toward her bedroom. "I have a few more things to get."

"What if I need you?" Tommie asked.

Bix turned around. She tilted her head as though the concept confused her.

"I need you too, Bix."

"For what?" She hunched her shoulders.

Tommie smiled. She approached her friend and took her hands. "No matter what I do, where I go or who I meet, I'll always need you, Trixie McBaxter."

Bix smiled and she looked like her normal self again. Free spirited and fabulous.

Tommie hugged her friend. It was as though she truly saw her for the first time, almost like a child growing into an adult. Bix had made the transformation beautifully.

After spending the entire day together, Tommie had fallen in love with her friend Bix all over again. She was not an irresponsible woman who thought of her self more than others. She was a giver. Generous and kind.

Before Bix left Tommie's house for good, or at least for now, they shared a pint of moose tracks ice cream with Bix digging out the chocolate bits for herself.

"Do you love him?" Bix asked from out of the blue.

Tommie almost choked on her spoon when Bix popped that question. She could have tried acting like she didn't hear Bix, but sitting in her quiet bedroom, the act would have been a stretch.

Instead she carefully dodged the question. "I love what he does for me. At work, he satisfies my need to have a doctor on staff. At home, he satisfies my sexual needs."

Gray meant more to her than that. She knew that. And from the way Bix smirked, Tommie's glib answer didn't fool her either.

"It's okay if you do." Bix sat on the edge of Tommie's bed. Tommie caught Bix's gaze in the reflection in her mirror.

"I know that," Tommie answered. "It's just not an issue now."

"Because he hasn't said it first?"

That was part of the reason. Actually, that was the entire reason. She wasn't about to put her heart on the line for her feelings to not get reciprocated. She'd done that way too often.

Bix asked, "If he says it tonight, over dinner, over drinks, in bed, wherever, will you say it? Do you love him?"

Tommie's mouth hung open.

Bix dug for another hunk of chocolate morsel hidden under layers of vanilla ice cream. "You don't have to wait for him to say it first. As a matter of fact, don't."

She was more willing to admit that Junior was really her father than to tell Gray her true feelings, which she wasn't even sure of herself. Hiring professional wrestlers was a snap. Admitting love? Now that was the hard part.

Chapter Twenty

Gray pounded on Constance's door again. In his head, he counted to ten.

Come on, Constance. Answer the door.

"She's not going to answer."

Gray glared at Lawrence sitting in his car like he was preparing to leave.

"As soon as she realizes I'm here, she's going to slam the door in your face."

"No, she won't. Right now she doesn't know what she wants." Gray turned back to the heavy door. "That doesn't mean she still doesn't need help."

Pressing his finger on her lit doorbell, Gray continued ringing the bell until she finally answered the door.

"I told you. I'm not saying another word about--" She stammered and focused on who actually stood in front of her. "Gray? What are you doing here? I thought it was that friend of yours again."

"She was doing what she thought was right for me. But you know me, Connie. I fight my own battles."

She snickered and smoothed her hand through her tousled hair. "Are we at war?"

"In a way, yes." Gray shifted his weight from one side to the other. "I never told you this but my mother is an alcoholic."

Connie's lip twitched. She tried smiling her way out of this conversation but her expression looked pained. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"As a kid, I was so pissed at myself because I couldn't save her. I just kept making excuses for her or ignoring her altogether." He held her hand. "Connie, I can't do that anymore. As much as I want to be, I can't be your personal savior."

"Ha! Thank God." She folded her arms.

"That doesn't mean I don't want to help you. Before you hurt anyone else, Connie, you need help. I'm more than willing to be there for you but you have to be willing to put some effort into your recovery."

Connie's bottom lip trembled. Her normally bloodshot eyes appeared even more red as he spoke. "I don't have a problem."

"Admitting anything to me is not the point or issue. If you can look at yourself in the mirror and be proud of what you see, then you don't owe anyone anything. But I'm telling you this right now. I know you have a problem. I can't continue being your friend if you don't get help."

This time she cried openly. "Why not? First Lawrence and now you."

"If I didn't love you, I wouldn't care what you did with yourself. I do care."

Gray stepped aside, showing a white BMW at the end of the driveway. "And Lawrence cares about you, too. We all want to see you get better."

Connie collapsed in her doorway, prompting Gray to crouch down next to her and Lawrence to run from his car to attend to his wife.

"Are you okay, honey?" Connie's husband held her elbow and helped her to her feet. "Why don't I take you inside, make a nice, big pot of coffee and we can talk."

With her head hung low, Connie looked like she barely had enough strength to look him in the eyes to respond. She did nod her head.

"Gray, are you coming?" Connie held out her hand to him.

As much as he loved her, she had to do this journey on her own. Plus she needed to spend time with her husband.

Gray shook his head. "I have a hearing tomorrow. You do what you need to do and I'll do the same."

Taking bullets for friends exhausted Gray. Tomorrow he wouldn't be a stool pigeon, ratting on a friend. He had to tell the truth. For his soul and his sanity, he couldn't handle the situation in any other way.

* * * *

This time it was Gray's turn to surprise Tommie at her place. He showed up after work. Wearing jeans and a white t-shirt with the name of her wrestling company on it, Tommie wanted to rip the garment off with her teeth.

"Honey, I'm home." Gray kissed her at the front door.

Tommie's neighbors would love that display.

Feeling a little cheeky after Gray's welcome, Tommie said, "Ward, I think something's wrong with the Beaver."

He reached his hand down, heading between her legs, until she grabbed his wrist.

"Not that beaver."

He wrapped his arm around her waist. "Very funny." After kissing her on the top of her head, he continued. "I've made a decision. It involves us."

She took his hand and pulled him into the dining room. "You made a decision about me without consulting me?"

"And I admitted it to you. So how smart am I?"

"I'll probably say no but let's hear it anyway." She led him to the chair at the head of the table, her chair. That was where it all started. She just hoped that it wouldn't be their ending, too. Or maybe he wasn't bringing bad news. Maybe he wanted to ask something, *propose* something. Hell, what was she thinking? He hadn't even said those three magical words yet. As she told Bix, she wouldn't be saying it until Gray said it first. The plan sounded childish but it was the only way to preserve her heart.

"When I win and clear my name tomorrow, because I'm determined to beat this, I'm going to go back to the hospital and accept that head of pediatrics department position instead of concentrating on the clinic."

Tommie relaxed her hand and turned her face away from him. She heard the excitement in his voice. She couldn't bring him down but she would ask him why. Why would he want to leave her after all the time they spent together? Did she mean nothing to him? And why the hell would he abandon something as noble as opening a needed clinic? This wasn't the man she had fallen in love with over the past few weeks.

"And how do you figure that this would involve me?" She wanted to maintain her light, airy tone but it deepened on its own beyond her control.

"It's because of you that I came to the decision. I realized after hearing what you did for me to clear me that what you want for me is to be happy."

Great. Her plan backfired. Clear his name. See her loyalty and stay. He saw it differently. How could she fault him for her own actions?

"Then we won't be working together," he said.

She whipped her head around to him. His teeth gleamed. She was glad the room was too dark. He wouldn't be able to see her chin quivering and the redness of her eyes.

He nudged her. "You're not saying much. What do you think?"

She cleared her throat and smiled so that the forced happiness would resonate in her voice. "I know you're going to win. And you'd be a fool to turn down a job like that. But how do you expect for us to continue seeing each other? I'm hardly ever home."

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder. Besides, we'll never be more than a phone call or car trip away."

"I guess you have it all figured out." Tommie gave him a quick kiss then headed toward the kitchen to get their dinner.

"If it wasn't for you, I would have given up. You make me a better person."

He'd said the one thing she'd longed to hear from a man, her future partner, her fantasy husband.

"You'll come with me tomorrow, right?"

She turned and caught his expectant expression. Tommie shivered then cleared her throat. "I don't know. I have so much to do for the show next week."

Gray stood. "Please, baby. I need you there."

To keep him at his position, far from her, she grinned, showing off a phony smile. "We'll see."

Tommie hoped that answer would satisfy him. It must have the way he returned to his seated position.

Tommie wept on her way to the kitchen. For all that she'd tried to control around her, her business, her father, her love life, it had all blown up in her face. She was back at square one but now she came with a broken heart.

A long distance relationship wouldn't work. Not even one with Gray. He would eventually get tired of not having her with him. Then trust issues would arise. It happened with her parents. It happened with Warren, the wrestler she'd dated right after high school. It would happen between her and Gray, too, no matter what they did.

* * * *

Nerves never got to Gray. He went through med school so confidently that other students called him Gray Matter because of his cool demeanor. He'd jumped out of planes to beat his nerves. He even did yoga to control them. As he walked back and forth in the hallway at the hospital, alternating his gaze from the white speckled tiles on the floor to the cratered cream-colored ceiling tiles, he realized that his nerves were getting the best of him.

After leaving Tommie's house that morning after an incredible evening, he couldn't get a handle on whether or not she was going to make it to the hospital boardroom. Maybe she was tired. Or maybe her work was getting to her.

Maybe she just didn't want to see him look like a thief. He couldn't blame her for that. As strong as she was, Gray found that Tommie could be very vulnerable at times.

It had warmed his heart to see her that way. He could see himself with her for the rest of his life. No question. If it meant playing the relationship her way, he would do that. If she felt a relationship would only work if the couple didn't work together, then he would make that happen. Every fiber in his being wanted nothing more than to stay with

this woman forever.

A jolting whiff of coffee stung his nose as Danny Boy waved the steaming cup of dark liquid under Gray's nose.

"Something to calm your nerves?" Danny Boy handed Gray the coffee.

"So you hand me caffeine? Makes sense." Gray took the cup but couldn't take a drink. It felt good to have something occupy his hands.

"You doctors. Always overanalyzing something." Danny Boy sat on a couch in the waiting area. He gazed down the hall and his eyes widened. He peered back at Gray. "I didn't know E. was coming."

E. was Danny Boy's nickname for Gray's brother Ian. Gray turned around. Ian and his wife, Evelyn, ran down the hallway toward Gray. In one smooth move, Gray handed the coffee cup back to Danny Boy and held out his arms ready to welcome his family. His heart slowed to a normal pace as soon as he saw his brother.

When they embraced, Gray couldn't take the smile off of his face. "I didn't know you were going to come out here."

"What? And have you go through this alone?" Ian patted Gray on his back. Evelyn leaned in and kissed Gray on his cheek.

"I'm glad you're here." Gray looked around them. "Where are the kids?"

"At my mother's back in Pennsylvania," Evelyn said. "We didn't think it would be a good time to bring them just in case--"

Ian nudged his wife with his elbow.

Gray sighed. "I understand."

"Besides, we wanted to meet that new woman in your life. Where is Ms. Perfection?" Ian glanced around the bustling hallway.

Gray didn't know if Tommie was going to come or not. He wanted her there. He needed her with him but he could understand it if she decided not to show.

A young woman rushed down the hallway and whispered in Danny Boy's ear.

"I hope Tommie shows," Gray began. "She's a wonderful woman. I think you'll really like her."

"Will our confirmed bachelor finally get married?" Evelyn asked with a smile as big as a lottery winner's. Evelyn's petite stature looked odd next to Ian's tall height. Her short black hair, styled in a bob, stayed tucked behind her ears.

Ian gave his wife another friendly nudge. "You know Gray will get married in due time." He looked at Gray. "But let's say this is the time. Is she the one?"

Gray laughed just as the young woman who was talking to Danny Boy ran off.

Danny Boy stood. "I have some great news."

"What?" Gray asked.

"The hospital dropped their claim." Danny Boy pumped his fist in the air.

"What?" Gray and Ian asked at the same time.

"Your girl, Constance, gave herself up. Confessed to the whole thing. The hospital will give you a slap on the wrist for your Robin Hood routine."

As Ian and Evelyn cheered, a part of Gray swelled with pride that Constance did the right thing. Maybe now she would get the help she needed.

The doors of the main conference room opened. Being held up by her husband, Connie dragged herself out of the room. Not looking at the floor, her head was raised a

little. Maybe telling the truth set her free as well.

She stood in front of Gray, whispered something to her husband, which made him take a few steps back away from the duo, then she let out a long breath.

"Gray. Still my star pupil." Connie cupped his cheek. "If it hadn't been for you, I don't know where I would be right now."

"I'm glad you recognized how dangerous your lifestyle had become." Gray's heart pounded with pride as he watched Connie talk with the most sincerity he'd ever seen in her.

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you for giving me my life back."

"What will happen to you now?"

"I am losing my chair as head of pediatrics. I knew that was coming. I'm going to go through therapy at a drug addiction clinic to get myself clean. I won't think about practicing medicine until I'm done."

"Good for you." Gray patted her shoulder.

Connie nodded. "I have some tough work ahead. But it'll be all worth it, right?"

Gray nodded. "I love you, Connie."

This time she let the tears stream down her cheeks. "I love you too, Gray."

As soon as Connie and her husband walked away, Danny Boy approached Gray. With a hand on his shoulder he said, "Glad the guilt got to her. This situation could have turned out a lot worse."

Ian nodded. "Makes you want to call Mom now, doesn't it?"

Gray peered around his brother and sister-in-law and saw Tommie standing behind them. She was a quiet calm in a light blue sundress and sandals.

Gray moved past his family and went straight to her. "You came."

Before he could touch her, hug her, she stepped aside and pointed to Danny Boy and Gray's brother. "What's going on? Who are they?" She squinted as she stared at him. Then she looked at Gray. "Is that your brother?"

"You recognized him from the picture." Gray nodded. "Great news, baby. The charges have been dropped."

"Really?" Her mouth dropped open.

Gray nodded. "Constance confessed."

Tommie folded her arms.

Gray turned to his brother and waved for him to come over. "And you know what that means."

Tommie nodded as soon as Ian and Evelyn stood next to him. "Yep. I do." She peered over at the duo before she spoke. "I'll take this as your two week notice." She turned and hurried down the hallway without another word.

"Was that the mystery woman?" Evelyn asked.

"What's up with her? Wasn't she happy that you're a free man now?" Ian asked. No, she wasn't and he had to find out why she was pushing him away now.

Chapter Twenty-one

As Tommie sat in her office at the gym, bouncing a tennis ball off of the wall, she felt the world crashing down around her. The sound of the colliding chairs bouncing off of her wrestlers' heads didn't help her from feeling that way either. She glanced out of the office window into the crowded ring. One of her wrestlers fell on top of his head.

She jerked out of her chair, about to rush to his aid, when she got a signal from one of the trainers in the ring that the young man was all right.

"They do it once and learn not to do it again!" Ed, her oldest trainer, screamed from the ring.

She nodded as she sat back down. The instinct to get up and help her performers felt foreign to her. She'd never been the one to wear her heart on her sleeve like that.

Gray. He'd changed her. He made her...he made her...better. She slammed the ball against the wall again just as Hobby walked through the door.

"Whoa! Are you acting out your Venus Williams fantasy or something?" He scanned her office, obviously looking for Ol' Trusty.

Tommie caught the yellow ball and set it on her desk for now. Rocking back and forth in her chair, she took in a deep breath. The strange minty mixture of leather, Ben Gay, and sweat filled her lungs.

"Just a couple of days until the show. Aren't you excited?" Hobby asked. He stepped closer to her desk but Tommie remained silent.

She should have been excited. This event was going to make or break her company. She would prove to herself, to her mother, to anyone that doubted her, that her dream wasn't foolish. As she glanced over the fliers, contracts and personnel folders on her desk, she couldn't help but wonder if it was all worth it.

"Boss, are you okay?" Hobby asked.

She kept her gaze down. "Fine. I'm fine." She swiveled her chair around so that her back was to Hobby.

"You know, even without Mo, we're still going to have a great show. How can we not? We have the king of pay-per-view on our side." He put his hand on her shoulder.

The old Tommie would have slapped it away and reminded him of his place. Now the show of warmth comforted her.

She smiled. "Do you know why I call you Hobby?"

"Because you said you didn't want to call me Marvin all of the time."

Had she said that? She sounded so immature and insensitive.

She shook her head. "That might have been part of the reason then. But I call you that because just like a hobby, you relieve me of my stresses. You're a comfort to have around." She gazed into his eyes. "I don't know what I would do without you here."

Hobby tilted his head like a confused puppy. Then stepped back. "Are you dying? Should I call someone?"

She feigned a smile. Her changed attitude not only scared herself, but her

employees. "I'm fine, Hobby."

He looked behind her then winced. "I wish I could be here for you now but Junior's on his way in and he looks pissed." He patted her on the shoulder.

When Tommie turned to her door, she caught Junior walking into her office just as Hobby walked out. Junior nearly knocked her thin assistant to the floor when he barreled through.

Her father slammed the door behind himself, echoing the smash throughout the airy gym. Even the wrestlers stopped practicing to glance over at the noise.

"What the hell is this?" Junior flung a piece of paper onto her desk.

As soon as Tommie retrieved it, she opened the crumpled paper. After reading it three times without uttering a word, she looked up at her father.

"That crazy-ass doctor wants me to bow out of the show. Says my blood pressure is too high and my knees are fucked up."

Actually the note wasn't that crass. It did say that because of Junior's elevated blood pressure this past week that Gray advised him to take at least a week off to check himself into a hospital for tests and treatment.

Junior continued. "I know my knees are bad. He didn't have to tell me that."

Tommie smoothed the paper out on her desk with her hand. Since turning Gray away, she was sure this was as close as she would get to the man.

"I don't know why you hired that quack. I heard he had some charges against him. He's a drug addict or something." Junior planted his hands on his hips.

That stance used to scare her as a child. Her big, scolding father with his harsh stance would scare King Kong. Yet she remained calm.

"He's a good doctor," she finally said. "The charges were dropped against him."

He furrowed his eyebrows. "How do you know this?"

"I was there at his hearing." She would leave out the part that she ran before he could tell her he was going to quit.

He raised his expressive eyebrows. "Oh, so you're showing up to hearings for this man. What are you two doing? Dating?"

She glared at Junior. "Don't turn this around on me. You're angry because Gray told you what we've all been saying for years. You're too old and worn out for this business. I should have recognized this a long time ago but--"

She stopped. She couldn't tell him that she wanted the business to get close to him. It all sounded so crazy now.

"But what? You enjoyed the money too much to stop the old man?" He gritted his teeth.

Tommie sprang from her chair. "This job, you, us, it was never about the money. You know that."

"Well tell me what it's all about. I must be too stupid or something to understand."

Tommie took a deep breath. "It's about putting on a good show for the fans. As much as I don't want to," she swallowed uneasily, "I'm going to have to go with Dr. Kennebeck's assessment and pull you from the show. I can't risk your health."

"Bullshit!" Junior kicked her desk. He paced in her small office. His stomps shook the floor. Tommie braced her hands on top of her desk, which wobbled even

worse than before after the harsh kick, to steady herself.

He turned his back on her, looking out of her main window into the gym. Then he pivoted around to her. "If I'm going to sit out, let him tell me." He pointed out of the window.

When Tommie looked beyond him she saw Gray running toward her office. Her knees buckled. She wasn't ready for Gray to come back. She'd given him his out. Why wasn't he running for the hills?

Gray sprinted inside her office. "What was all that talk about today?"

"Forget that, buddy." Junior snatched the note from Tommie's desk. He held it in Gray's face about an inch from his nose. "What do you mean by this? I ain't sitting out."

Gray snatched the note from him. "Then you're risking your life. You need to be in a hospital."

"So do you, pal. A mental one. No one tells Junior Vickers what to do."

"I am." Tommie stepped around her desk. "As your boss, I'm telling you what to do. And I'm telling you to sit this one out. They'll be other shows."

Junior split his harsh gaze between Gray and Tommie. "Unbelievable. You took his side."

She rubbed her forehead. She didn't want it to come down to who was right and who's wrong. She did what was best for all of them. "There are no sides. I did what was best. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"And this is how you treat me? You're going to do me this way?" Junior put his hand to his chest. "After all we've been through."

"Tommie is right," Gray stood in between Junior and Tommie. "You'll live to fight another day."

"Stay out of this, Romeo. This doesn't concern you."

Gray put his hands on his hips. "Yes, it does. Your health and well-being is my job. I made an obligation to Tommie to make sure all of her wrestlers are in tip-top shape." He turned around to face her. "And she's too important to me to not do all I can for her." He put his hand to the side of her face.

As much as she loved the touch, Tommie wanted to pull away from him. She couldn't have Gray show her affection now. Not in front of Junior.

Gray continued. "That's what I wanted to say to you earlier today. I--"

Junior cut in. "Wait! Hold up! Are you telling me that you two have been--"

"Junior, stop it. My personal life is not the issue here. We need to talk about you." She pulled Gray's hand down from her face but continued holding it.

"So talk about ending my career but we can't talk about your love life."

Gray faced Junior but kept his hand in Tommie's. "And who are you to delve into her love life anyway?"

Tommie saw the words forming on Junior's lips. She reached her hand up to stop him but it was too late.

"I'm her father, damn it." He stared into her eyes until she had to look away. She felt Gray's hand tense when the words came out. "That's another thing I'm tired of. I'm over you treating me like you don't know me, like we aren't related." He hurried to the door but turned back to her before leaving. "And if that's how you want to treat me, if

you think I'm too old and feeble to work, then you just wait until show night. I'll prove to you that I can do it. With or without you." Junior left on the steam he'd come into her office with, leaving her alone with Gray.

Gray slid his hand away from hers and stepped back. She couldn't look at him. When she glanced up briefly, he had a shocked look on his face that bordered on horror and disappointment. Her stomach lurched like she wanted to vomit.

"All this time," he began. "All this time you could have told me and you didn't. Why didn't you tell me Junior was your father?"

The reasons all seemed ridiculous now. The omission had more to do with old feelings of her father not being fully present in her life than with work. Gray wouldn't understand and she didn't know exactly how to explain it.

"No one here knew except for Bix." Tommie's voice was low, barely audible. "I didn't want anyone thinking that he would get preferential treatment."

"Forget that. I'm talking about us. I told you everything about me. I shared secrets that I haven't even told my own family. And you're telling me that after all this time, after all I've shared and been through with you, that you still lied to me?"

"I never lied."

"How many times did I ask you about your family? About your father? You had plenty of opportunities to tell me." He shook his head. "Our last night together. You could have told me then. Why didn't you?"

Her lips moved but nothing came out. She cleared her throat before speaking. "I'm not sure why I kept it from you."

"I do. You don't trust me. And if you still don't trust me then we have nothing." He headed to the door.

"We had nothing, Gray."

He turned back to her when she spoke.

"After all we shared? Give me a break. My parents' relationship broke down because of constant touring. And what do you decide? That going back to work at the hospital was best for us. You're no better than the high school boys that broke my heart."

"Baby, I bent over backwards for you and it wasn't good enough. I jumped through all of your hoops and you still weren't satisfied." He shook his head. "I wanted nothing more than to show you off to my family. You're the one who wants to keep me hidden. Now I see why you wanted a sex only relationship. You're not honest enough to have a real one." With that he walked out the door, out of her gym, out of her life.

The insult pierced her heart until she wanted to crumble to the floor. To keep from reaching out to him, Tommie clasped her hands together and kept them secured in front of her. He'd dropped the note asking that Junior be hospitalized on the floor.

When the dust settled, Hobby returned to the office with caution. He crept through the doorway then reached down for the note. After scanning the paper, he directed his attention to Tommie.

"Is Junior out of the show?" Hobby asked as Tommie gathered her purse.

Her throat tightened. She felt her itchy eyes brimming with tears. "I don't know." She grabbed her car keys. As she past Hobby she said, "Don't mention this to anyone." She didn't look into his face but she caught a head nod from him from the corner of her eye.

Tommie scurried to her car. Once she got in, she slammed her door, leaned her head against the steering wheel and wept.

How had she lost it? How had she lost all of her control? At one point she had it all. Career. House. Manageable life. Then she gave it all up on a dream. Now this nightmare had become real. She'd lost everyone important in her life. Bix, Junior and now Gray.

A glimmer caught Tommie's eye. She peered down under her passenger seat to a glowing object. She reached down and picked up a card. A golden card.

Hayes Hamilton. *The Slamtastics is Fantastic!* read the card. Tommie wiped the tears from her cheeks. As she held the card in one hand, she started her car. It was time to take her life back. She needed some normalcy again. Maybe a big man in a shiny suit would be her key.

* * * *

Gliding down to earth, Gray kept his eyes closed, imagining Tommie's face in his thoughts. Skydiving was supposed to help him clear his head not conjure thoughts of things and people that bothered him. He couldn't deny the fact that Tommie had a big impact on him. She invaded his world, his soul. He wanted nothing more than to have her by his side. Not like this. Not with a lie.

The more he thought about the fact that she kept her relationship with Junior a secret the more it angered him. His hands gripped the parachute controls. He gritted his teeth until he jaws ached. Not even the cool, clean woodsy air relaxed his nerves.

Rushing wind whooshed by his ears until he was oblivious to everything around him. Then he heard car horns blaring.

He opened his eyes. Down below waving his arms like a wild man looked like his brother. When Gray noticed he was closer to the ground than he thought. He pulled on the parachute controls and raised his feet in the air to do a safe but painful butt landing.

He connected to the ground with a thud and slid about three feet before coming to a stop. "Oww. That's going to leave a mark." Gray stood. He heard footsteps coming from behind him. When he turned he caught a smack to his forehead.

"What are you, crazy?" Ian grabbed Gray's helmeted head and shook it like he was shaking a can of spray paint.

Gray brushed his brother's hands from his head. "I knew what I was doing. Just back off."

"Oh here it comes." Ian marched next to his brother. "No one understands you, right? All this happens to poor ol' you."

"Shut up." Gray unhooked his chute as the ground crew collected it for him. "Just let me be."

"Let you be miserable for no reason? Okay, sure. That's what good brothers do." Ian's sarcasm dripped with truth.

Gray still wasn't ready to hear it. Gray snatched off his helmet. He tucked it under his arm. He wished Ian would take a hint and take a hike. He wasn't ready to talk. Sulking felt good to him right now.

"You want to talk about it?" Ian asked as he trailed behind him.

"No." Gray headed to his Volvo. He popped open the trunk and threw his helmet

inside.

"Jesus Christ, man, stop acting like a spoiled brat." He nudged Gray on his shoulder. In response, Gray shoved his brother back and onto the grass.

"Boy, don't make me beat you down in front of all of these people." Ian stood. Although he was Gray's same height, he was considerably bigger than him.

"I'm not five anymore. You can't bully me around like you used to." Gray unzipped his jumpsuit and had it down around his waist when Ian charged at him like a bull and knocked him down with a shoulder to his stomach.

Gray grabbed Ian's collar, pulled him down and landed a punch to his eye. The force knocked Ian off of him but Gray wasn't content with that. He rolled on top of his brother, straddling his legs over his wide chest. He balled his hand into a fist. Just as he raised his hand in the air, Ian landed a hard hit to Gray's face, forcing him to the ground.

The two men remained on their backs, huffing like rabid dogs until Ian chuckled. His chuckling eventually became a full-on belly laugh that Gray joined in on.

"What in the world are we doing?" Ian asked.

"I don't know. But I'm telling Evelyn." Gray touched his gradually swelling eye. He sat up, drawing his knees close to him and bracing his forearms on top of them.

"How did you know to find me here?"

After Ian sat up, he said, "When Mom admitted she had a problem with alcohol you came here. Just thought that you might be working out some issues again."

Gray turned his head away from his brother.

"So what's it this time? Does it have to do with Tommie?" Ian tapped Gray on his shoulder.

Gray shook his head. "I thought she would be different."

"She's not? I don't really know her but from what you've told me she seems smart as hell to run her own business. From what I saw, she's gorgeous."

Gray held his hand up. "Hey, I'm really telling Evelyn about that."

"And most importantly, you dig her. I can tell. Your face lit up the moment you saw her. She's nothing like the other women you're used to dating. You know. The vapid pool you choose to dive in to when Little Gray points north."

"Very funny." Gray rustled his brother's hair and pushed him. "I told her everything about me," he glanced at his brother, "about Mom. And she kept a huge part of her life hidden from me. She never told me her father was Junior Vickers."

"No way! *The* Junior Vickers?" Ian glanced to the sky and nodded. "Now that I think about it, yeah, I can see it. It's in the eyes."

Gray thought about his brother's statement and realized what he said was right on the money. If he had really thought to compare the two, to look into their eyes, he would have seen the resemblance. Both have a striking blue eye color that was hard to miss.

"So are you two going to talk about it?" Ian brushed some grass clippings off of his bare legs.

Gray hung his head low but didn't respond.

"Don't tell me you're not going to fight for her?"

Gray brought his head up. "Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"I don't know. Maybe there are some unresolved issues between her and her father." Ian put his hand on Gray's shoulder. "Do you remember how you were in high

school with Mom? Don't think I didn't know that you told people that Mom had Parkinson's and that's why she never left the house. You were ashamed."

"I wasn't ashamed of her. I--"

Ian held up his hand. "I was there in the house, too. I know. But when Mom acknowledged that she was sick and got help, we talked about her problem and resolved the matter. You forgave her. You understood where she was coming from. Not everyone has had the good fortune to work out their family issues."

Gray gazed at his brother. Ian flashed him a knowing smile and a wink. For a guy who used to read comic books and collect G.I. Joe action figures as a kid, Ian had become quite insightful as an adult.

Gray sprang to his feet. "No, man. If she's hiding this, what else could she be keeping from me?"

Ian remained seated like a wise Buddha. "Ask her. I'm guessing she's feeling pretty low right now. If you truly care about this woman like you say you do, go back and talk to her."

"But I don't know if I can trust her again."

Ian rose to his feet. "Amazing. You'll fight for the wrong people all of the time. You'll defend people on principal. Why won't you go after this one?"

Gray strolled to his car. When he reached the door, he turned back to his brother. "Too much at stake if she doesn't feel the same way."

"That's the risk you take for a good woman."

"I'm not ready to take that risk." Gray opened his door and hopped inside. After starting the car, Ian knocked on the window.

When he powered the window down, Ian said, "You going home? Evelyn's cooking pansit, lumpia, sweet bread." He rubbed his stomach.

"Yeah, in a bit."

Ian put his hand on Gray's chest. "Think about this, bro. *You* need to figure out why it is that you're not willing to forgive Tommie when you're so willing to stick up for people who have done worse."

Gray put his car in gear but had to get in the last word. "How did you get so smart? Oprah?"

"Come on. Give me a little credit." Ian walked toward his truck. He stopped, turned back to Gray and said, "Dr. Phil. Evelyn loves my new sensitive side."

Gray shook his head. As much as he didn't want to admit it, his knuckleheaded brother was right. Why was it that he was willing to go to the mat for Constance but one slip up from Tommie and he bolted? Probably because she was the first woman he'd opened up to, admitted his feelings, saw the possibilities. She was his last glimmer of hope that there was some good in the world, in his life.

What bothered him the most was that Tommie didn't see them having a future together. 'We had nothing,' was what she'd said to him. Did she mean it or was it said because she'd felt hurt? He had to know. Tonight.

Gray took the interstate exit heading to Chesapeake, to Tommie's house.

* * * *

Tommie swallowed hard when she heard Hayes sigh for the third time in their two-minute conversation. She leaned on her kitchen countertop tapping her fingernails

on it to keep from chewing on them.

"I don't know if I'm interested in meeting you, Ms. Balford," Hayes began. The worm obviously wanted to hear her squirming. She wouldn't give him the pleasure.

"Fine. I guess when you made repeated offers to buy my business that you weren't being sincere."

"So now you're interested in selling. Something wrong?"

His smarmy tone made her feel filthy like she was bargaining with Satan. "Yes. I'm negotiating with a moron when I have better things to do. Good day."

"Hold on, Tommie. You've come crawling back to me for a reason. I'm going to capitalize on it. Meet me Monday morning for breakfast. I figure a day after both of our shows will give me a perspective on just how well you'll be able to negotiate."

He named a restaurant and time for the meeting. He hung up before Tommie could say anything. As slimy as he was, Hayes knew good business. He knew that seeing Tommie's take on the *Home Invasion* show would dictate her asking price.

It didn't matter what she sold UEW for. She wanted out. Bottom line.

Speaking of wanting out, Tommie decided to take Bix up on his offer to crash at her place. After Tommie called Bix, she prepared to go to her best friend's townhouse complete with frozen grapes, bad gay porno and a great, sympathetic ear.

When she opened the door to leave, she didn't expect to see Gray on the other side. She gasped and dropped her bag on the floor.

"We need to talk," he said.

Chapter Twenty-two

Tommie scanned over every inch of Gray's body but never looked into his eyes. She noticed his blue, thin jumpsuit that hung around his waist. His white tank top showed off his broad shoulders and muscled chest. He even had grass clippings stuck in his hair. A man this good looking shouldn't even be allowed to walk outside by himself.

She held her spot at the doorway. After recovering her bag, she secured her purse on her shoulder. She squeezed her keys in her hand, jingling them a bit to give Gray the impression that she was headed out the door for a reason.

"I've got your two-weeks notice. And I think you've said enough." She attempted to walk past him. As long as he didn't touch her she would be fine.

He grabbed her arm, spun her around until the touch and the twirl dizzied her.

"Then you talk." He lowered his face to her level to gain eye contact. "Tell me what I mean to you."

Her bottom lip hung down. She fought back the urge to reveal how she longed to have him in her life. Before she had imagined sharing her heart, her soul, with this man but after the way he'd looked at her earlier like she had kicked his dog, she wasn't about to put herself out on a limb again.

She slammed her front door. "All you mean to me is that when I sell UEW, I'll have to let the new owner know that he won't be getting a doctor with the package." She wriggled from his grip. She hoped he couldn't tell she was lying. He'd meant more to her than that.

"What do you mean, sell? I thought the business was your life. Your employees were your family."

His confused and disappointed look gripped her heart and squeezed the passion from it.

"You see what I'm like with my family," she mumbled. She hurried to her car, dragging her bag behind her. She opened the car door but Gray reached her and pushed it closed.

"I don't get you, Tommie. You draw me in then push me away."

"And this is why we should have never gotten involved. Too many complications."

Thank goodness Bix wasn't around to critique her using the word 'complications' again. At the moment, the word described their situation completely.

Gray said, "I'm here."

"You're too late." She pushed her hair back from her face. "Look, go have your life at the hospital. Be that great young department head you were destined to be. Find yourself the appropriate woman to be your wifey and be Dr.-and-Mrs. Perfect. But you were right. If you can't trust me then we have nothing."

Gray stepped back, his face masked with pain. "So this is it? Everything we shared was just--"

She held up her hand. Another crass word about how he thought she believed

their time together meant nothing would reduce her to tears.

This time she looked into his eyes. She noticed something unusual, startling. "What happened to you?" She reached her hand to his face but stopped herself. "Why is your eye swollen?"

The harsh expression Gray once had melted away so that compassion clouded his eyes. Tommie averted her gaze to stare down at her feet. Gray's bright blue jumpsuit grabbed her attention. What had he been doing? Painting? She returned her gaze to his. If this would be the last time she saw him, she wanted to take him all in.

He rubbed his eye, wincing when he must have hit a sore spot. "I went parachuting after we talked."

Tommie gasped. "You got a black eye from the dive?"

"No. The fight I got in with my brother over you." He stepped closer to her. "I want you to tell me why it is that you thought you had to hide the truth from me."

"It doesn't matter. You can't un-ring a bell."

The thought brought her up short. No matter what role she played in Junior's life, maybe she needed to come to grips with the fact that he didn't want to play an active role in her life. Maybe being a father wasn't for him.

Tommie reached for the car door again. This time Gray didn't stop her. She threw her bags inside of her car. Before sitting, Tommie held out her hand to Gray. No use ending their professional relationship on a sour note.

"I thank you for your services, Dr. Kennebeck."

He shook his head but didn't take her hand. "No. Don't do this. I'm not accepting this cold, standoffish attitude from you now."

"That's your problem. You don't know when to give up the good fight." She lowered her hand and got into her car. Even though the sweltering heat baked the inside of the car, she left the windows rolled up with the air conditioning blasting its initial warm air until she could be safely away from Gray. Another word from him and he would have had her running into his arms.

Instead as she sped down the street, weaving in and out of traffic to get to Bix's place. She muttered under her breath, "I love you, Dr. Gray Kennebeck."

She'd known she loved him when he took care of her after her angina attack. It wasn't until opened up to her and told her intimate details about his family that she knew for sure she loved him.

One thing she did know. With all that Gray had said, the questions he'd asked, the arguments he'd posed, he'd never said how he felt about her. He wanted her to confess all to him and get nothing in return.

No, she'd done that before for her father. The pain of not getting that love in return twice in the same day would have crushed her.

Tommie dialed Bix's number. She warned Bix of her arrival. Bix had better be wearing a raincoat because Tommie was prepared to let the tears and the emotions flow.

* * * *

Gray meandered around his quiet condo thinking about how this was the last place for him to be. It was the day of the show, *Home Invasion*. He had had his mind on the show, work and, especially, Tommie since their last meeting. She could barely look at him then. Had he been that big of a jerk about the whole thing?

Yes. Ian was right. He should have kept his cool. Instead when he'd tried to recover some lost ground he seemed to have made it worse.

He'd been sad to see Ian and Evelyn leave that morning. Their short visit had given him a chance to see what a loving relationship was like. Had they'd brought the boys with them, Gray would have been in worse shape.

Ian would have gotten on his case about Gray not eating or sleeping because of Tommie. He missed that woman. He missed everything about her from the way she argued to the way she kissed to the way she made love. Now she was out of his life.

His doorbell chimed breaking him from his slump. It was probably Danny Boy playing hookie from work again. Maybe he wanted to do a day trip to Atlantic City. Gray could use the break before heading back to the hospital.

Gray opened his front door. At first he thought the person on his front step was a child selling cookies or candy or whatever it is that pre-pubescent girls sold. On closer inspection to the shorts wearing, gum-popping, pony-tailed girl, he realized it was Bix.

"Good. You look like hell, too." Without a word or invitation, Bix walked into Gray's condo. "Hey, nice digs, Doc. How much did this set you back?"

"Hi, Bix. Come on in." He closed the door. Following her into his living room, he wondered what her impromptu trip was about. Did Tommie send her?

"Geez, I can tell you don't have kids. I've never seen so much beige in my life." She turned to him. "Did they have a sale on this color at Crate And Barrel or something?"

"You wanted something?" He folded his arms over his chest.

She turned to him. "Yeah. You."

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Don't get all perverted." She blew a large, pink bubble and sucked it back into her mouth so fast it would have made a Hoover vacuum cleaner jealous. "You're going to the show tonight."

"I hadn't planned on it."

"Oh, you thought I was asking if you were going. No, as part owner of the company, I'm telling you you're going. Get packing. We have to be in Richmond in less than two hours." She plopped down on his couch. Bix crossed her legs as she ran her hand over the couch fabric. She nodded her head in approval.

"In case you haven't heard from the other co-owner of the company, I no longer work there." He couldn't forget the terse goodbye Tommie had given him.

"No, you gave us your two-week notice. Are you saying you're not going to honor that?"

"What are you really here for?" He grew tired of the games.

"Do you miss Tommie?" she asked.

He thought about his answer carefully. He didn't want to come off as desperate but he wasn't a pushover either. "Why? Does she miss me?"

Bix huffed. Shaking her head, she said, "I swear you two belong together." She stood up. "Tommie is a mess without you. Looking at you, you're no bed of roses either."

"Did she send you here to check up on me?" He folded his arms.

"Of course not. Tommie is in Richmond right now getting ready for the show. I

told her I would meet her there. But these last couple of days that she's been at my place, she's done nothing but talk about you. The last time I saw that girl cry like that was when her father finally moved out of the house when she was a kid."

Gray's hardened demeanor slipped away when he heard about the pain Tommie was going through. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Why would I do that?" Bix planted her hands on her hips.

"I don't know. You all have to have a company doctor on staff at all times and without me you have no one there to cover."

"That's true. But I'm not here for that reason. That woman truly misses you."

"Then why didn't she tell me about Junior? Why all the secrets?" He had to hear this. Since Tommie wouldn't tell him maybe Bix, with her big mouth, would.

"Do you know why Tommie started UEW in the first place?"

Gray shook his head. He had assumed it was for business reasons. Pro-wrestling was hot again. Instead of just buying stock in a franchise, Tommie probably thought it best to have one of her own.

"To get close to Junior."

Gray furrowed his eyebrows.

"Yeah. Most kids who miss their parents write letters or visit. Not Toms. She quits her job, buys a gym, gets a stable of wrestlers, and starts her own company knowing very little about the business. Her plan was to make her father the lead and the plan worked. She got to see her father every day. That was way more than she got to be with him growing up. He was either coming home early in the morning or late at night until eventually he never came home at all."

Gray imagined Tommie as a little girl missing her father, feeling alone and sad. "You would think after all this time she would have been happy to admit Junior was her father."

"Yeah, you would think so. But Tommie spent the majority of her life denying he was her father. I mean, picture her childhood. She's biracial. Her parents divorce but lived together for several years. And her father is a pro-wrestler who used to be known as the Emperor of Pain. Talk about having the trifecta of hurdles."

Gray pushed his hair back from his face.

"Doc, to be honest, even though Junior came back into her life, I don't think she ever got over the fact that he left her so many years ago. I think she still thinks she's that little girl sitting by the bay window looking for him to come home."

Gray didn't have to think long about the situation. As much as he needed Tommie, Tommie needed him. He knew exactly what she was going through with wanting ideal parents. Only he had time to come to grips with the fact that even though his parents weren't perfect, they did the best they could.

Bix continued. "Now that I think about it, I feel bad. I moved out of her house. And Junior's talking about not showing up for the show. Now you're gone and--"

"Give me five minutes." He rushed upstairs to his bedroom.

"I'll give you ten if you agree to drive!" Bix called after him.

Gray would be the last man to disappoint Tommie again.

* * * *

The show was not going well. Tommie knew it. The performers knew it. The

crowd knew it. As she sat backstage looking in the black-and-white TV monitor at each match, she sensed the wrestlers giving up, not performing up to their usual standard.

The crowd chanted "Boring! Boring!" during each match.

Tommie glanced at her watch again, the third time within five minutes. "Where's Bix?" she asked Hobby as he paced next to her.

"I don't know. She called a couple of hours ago to say she was on her way but I haven't heard from her since." Hobby paced again.

Tommie peered to the side. The two agents from the Sports Entertainment Commission stood like FBI agents near her table. She'd promised them that their doctor was coming soon. Bix had told Tommie she knew a doctor who would take Gray's place in a pinch. Where was the woman getting him from? China?

"Did you try her cell?"

"Ten times. Keep getting her voicemail."

"What about Junior? Have you seen him?"

Hobby shook his head so solemnly it was as though Junior had died. If Junior didn't show up for the show, in Tommie's eyes, he would have been dead to her.

A sweaty duo of wrestlers burst through the black, tarp curtain that separated the arena from the backstage. Wildman, one of her wrestlers, had something thick dripping from his hair.

"Is that egg?" Tommie stood as she made a closer inspection.

"It ain't sweat!" Wildman ran his fingers back through his thick, dark, shaggy mane, extracting bits of white shells in the process. He shook his hand out, spraying egg yolks and shells in the backstage area. "Those people want blood. Where the hell is Junior?"

A small crowd formed around Tommie. Enough hiding. She had an obligation to these people. It wasn't only just her chance to make it big, but theirs too.

"Junior and I had a falling out," she began, addressing the crowd of wrestlers around her. "I don't think he's showing up."

The crowd rumbled. They looked to that man like a god...like she had. They appeared lost without him. She wouldn't let them falter. They could make it, with or without him.

"Hey!" She clapped her hands. "What are you guys doing? You trained hard for this show. Don't let the fact that Junior's not here get you down. Let's give that crowd a kick-ass UEW show."

"What do you mean?" Firestarter asked.

A wicked smile came across her face. If she and her group were going down, they were going to do it with a bang. "An old fashion melee."

Firestarter and the others smiled and nodded with her.

Tommie's heart raced as she thought about the prospect. This was the reason she loved the show business side of the business. The unpredictable nature of each show.

"During the last championship match with Cool Daddy and Pee Wee, one by one I want you all to go out to that ring until eventually the ring is completely packed with you guys. An impromptu last-man-standing match." She scanned her eyes over the enthusiastic crowd. When she spotted Greta, the statuesque blond from Sweden by way of Moyock, North Carolina, Tommie's eyes widened. "Greta, you'll be the last one

standing in the ring.”

Greta put her hand to her ample chest, her mouth hung open. “Are you sure?” Her southern accent was thick. Thank goodness she got no mic time.

“Positive.” She peered over to Wildman. “Manny, make it happen for her.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” He gave her a wink and his famous toothless grin.

Tommie loved her motley crew. She just hoped this stunt would work, more for them than for her own career. They deserved a chance at happiness too. Maybe they could find it at Slamtastics when she sold it. And maybe Reverend Al Sharpton was a quiet man with little to no opinion about anything.

“Now you guys get out there and have a great show! I’m proud of you all!” The last few words choked in her throat, thankfully, as the crowd cheered. They pumped their fists into the air as the next set of wrestlers went out to the ring to perform.

The wrestlers went at each other with a renewed energy that even turned the crowd around. Tommie got into seeing her people perform. High drop kicks, amazing, sweeping suplexes, magnificent vaults from the ring corner. Half the show was brutish in nature. The other half was like watching Cirque du Soleil.

Now it had been every fifteen minutes that Tommie looked at her watch. Bix. Tommie could understand her not showing up. Bix had never been one to attend the shows, not even the big ones like these. Deep down she’d hoped that Gray would have shown up. She thought his Boy Scout side of him, his compassionate side and good heart, would have turned him around enough for him to show up.

Actually, she’d hoped that he would have realized how much he’d missed her and come back to her. Then again, why couldn’t she be proactive in what she wanted? She could have gone after him.

No, Tommie had a taste of fairy tale life. She’d been awakened by a prince with a kiss and a touch. This time Tommie wanted the fairy tale. She wanted to be pursued. She wanted her happy ending.

At the end of the show as each wrestler entered the ring, the audience went crazy. Nothing brought a house down more than a good old fashion riot. And her performers knew exactly what to do. Wildman watched out for Greta in the ring...and in life.

Tommie knew they were secretly seeing each other when they didn’t work together. They thought they were being discreet but she saw the way they would look at each other when they trained. It was like seeing a flower grow in the middle of a battlefield.

A touch on her shoulder broke her out of her thoughts. She removed her headphones and turned. Mr. Everhart stood behind her wearing a black suit. Did the man have any other suits in his closet?

“It’s nearing the end of your show, Ms. Balford. Where’s your doctor?” he asked, splitting his attention between her and the monitor.

She stood, blocking the small TV set from his view. “I don’t know, Mr. Everhart. I would have hoped my partner’s new replacement would have been here by now.”

He shook his head. “I hate to do this to you. But you’re going to have to shut--”

“The doctor’s here!” Hobby screamed.

Tommie’s knees buckled as she managed to make her way past the Sports Entertainment Commission agents to get to her excited assistant. Her heart told her that

Gray wouldn't let her down. However her eyes saw something else.

A scrawny nebbish of a man crept through the backstage door. His circled rimmed glasses hung at the end of his pointed nose. If it wasn't for his large ears, the glasses looked like they would have fallen off of his face. He kept his gaze down to the floor as he held an old black doctor's bag in his petite hands. Strands of gray hair stuck to his forehead and were swept over his bald spot. If it hadn't been for the thick layer of sweat covering his face, his few hairs would have blown all over the place.

As Tommie took a closer look at him, she saw the man's hands trembling. He was like a human version of a Chihuahua. She was afraid that if she stared at him too long, he would have piddled on himself like her mother's old Chihuahua Pepper that used to pee if its name was mentioned. It made dinners fun when the salt and pepper were requested.

Tommie peered over at her assistant. "Who is this?" She gave the doctor another look from his head to his big feet. "And where did you get him from?"

"I have a friend who lives in town. I told her my dilemma. She told me about her grandfather." He held his hand up to the man. The doctor flinched like Hobby was going to strike him.

"This is a man you think can handle a bunch of wrestlers?" Tommie shook her head.

Hobby walked over to the doctor. In an elevated voice, he said, "Dr. Hanbury, this is Tommie Balford, the owner of the UEW." He turned to Tommie. "Tommie, this is Dr. Jeb Hanbury."

Between gritted teeth as she shook his tiny hand, she said, "He's hard of hearing, too?"

"That's why he had to retire."

Tommie bit the inside of her bottom lip to keep from screaming. The agents approached the group. "Hobby, you handle the introductions with the agents. I have a show to run." She made her way past the agents to go back to her table.

Her heart sank when she didn't see Gray come through the door. She was foolish to think that the fairy tale could happen to her. Happy endings only happened in soap operas and romantic movies. This was the real world. In the real world, heartbreaks were a common occurrence, at least in Tommie's life. Still didn't stop her from thinking about Gray and what he was doing now.

* * * *

"I told you to go the 460 way but nooooooooooooooooooooo," Bix said for the tenth time within the last hour.

Gray kept his hands tightly gripped to the steering wheel. If he let them go, they would have surely gone around Bix's skinny little neck.

They had been stuck on Interstate 64 for the last three hours and they were still at least an hour away from the Richmond Coliseum. Being trapped in Bix's compact Mini Cooper while she whined about traffic, women and her split ends had to have been his punishment for not working things out with Tommie earlier.

"Try your phone again," Gray said, exhaustion tapping the energy from his voice.

"I told you. The phone is dead. I forgot to charge it last night. See." She held up the phone that had a brief display that said 'Low battery' before immediately shutting off.

"And you don't have a phone jack in your tuna-can car?"

Bix smirked. "Don't make fun. It's fuel efficient and it matches all of my outfits."

"Ralph Nader will be pleased by your thoughtful decision."

"Whatever. No, I don't have a jack. I had too many other things to put in my glove box. It wouldn't fit."

"Like what?" Gray had to see what she was hiding in that space.

Bix opened the compartment. She pulled out a box of facial tissue, individually wrapped tampons just thrown in the small compact space, fragrant body spray, body lotion, a bag of corn chips and a romance novel by a woman with three male names. Bobbie Scott Thomas or Alex Kennedy William or something like that. Bix droned on about how she loved everything the author printed but his mind was elsewhere. The contents of the glove box amazed him.

After opening the bag of chips, Bix held it up to him. "Want some?"

Her level of immaturity astounded him. "You're trying to tell me that instead of having an essential emergency tool like your cell phone jack, you instead carry a romance novel and corn chips?"

Bix slowed her chewing and looked pensive before she answered. "Yeah, I guess so."

Gray rubbed the heels of his hands in his eyes.

"But it's like so rare that I forget to charge my phone. Tommie and I were up so late talking about the show and you that..." She stopped herself and shoved more chips into her mouth.

"And what did she say about me?" Gray asked.

With a full mouth, Bix hunched her shoulders and tried to fake a smile.

"Fine. Since you're being so tight-lipped I can tell you about this one time I performed an emergency tracheotomy using a fountain pen and a stick of chewing gum. You can't believe the amount of blood that comes out when you stick a person right in the--"

Bix cut him off. "Stop! I can't stand stuff like that. I've never been a fan of hospital shows." She shuddered.

Gray had never performed a stunt like that but he got the reaction he was looking for. Bix folded like a novice poker player.

She sighed. "Tommie really digs you."

"I hear a 'but' coming."

"She thinks you don't really want her. Dude, did you actually tell her that you would go back to the hospital and would see her whenever?"

"No. Not really." He slammed his hand on the steering wheel. "I just don't want to ruin that special part of her, that independent, strong part of her that I fell in lo--" He stopped himself before the words came out but Bix caught the small part and she was running with it.

"Were you going to say love?"

He turned his head away from her. Damn. If he only had some gum or Twinkies or something shiny and noisy he could have distracted Bix. As it was she found the soft spot in his flesh and she was sinking her teeth in like a shark.

"Were you? Huh? You were, weren't you?" Bix wiggled in her seat. "You love my friend. You love my friend."

Oh yes. This was Hell and Satan's secretary had a horrible singing voice.

"I didn't say it."

"But you were going to." She clasped her hands together. "I knew it! I told her that any man willing to finger a woman the first time out had to be head over heels for her."

His hand slipped down to the car horn and out of shock he accidentally pressed it, honking the horn at the still traffic. "Is there anything she kept secret?"

"Yeah. Your size, if you know what I mean."

No woman had ever made Gray blush as much as she had. If she wasn't a lesbian, she would have been perfect for Danny Boy.

"I have to get to Tommie. Damn it! What the hell is going on up there?"

When people started getting out of their cars to walk around he knew that was a bad sign.

Bix turned on the radio. She found a station that had a traffic report. A tanker truck turned over on the interstate, stopping traffic for miles due to clean up. The DJ said the police believe the spill and truck should be cleaned up in a couple of hours.

Gray cursed again.

Bix put her hand on his shoulder. When he looked at her she had a calm expression on her face with eyes full of thoughtfulness. It was the first time during the trip that she actually looked like an adult.

"Don't worry," she began. "Everything is going to turn out okay. I can feel it. If I know my best friend, she'll be waiting in her hotel room excited to see you."

He smiled in response. He hoped she was right. He did love her. It took a traffic jam, bad singing and embarrassing stories about his sexual performance for him to realize that he wanted to be a part of Tommie's world.

Gray peered at Bix and smiled. "I do love your best friend."

Bix smiled knowingly. "I know."

"Maybe now that she's selling UEW, me going back to the hospital won't be such a strain on our relation--"

"She's what?" Bix dropped her remaining bag of chips on the floor. "She can't sell. Why didn't she tell me about this?"

"I found out a couple of days ago. I thought she would have told you."

"We have to get to her. You need to get your woman and I need to keep my job!"

* * * *

Even without Junior and Gray, the show went off well. The crowd eventually got into the wrestlers and the performance. As Tommie predicted, the choreographed riot at the end with all of the wrestlers brought the house down, especially since a woman remained the last one standing. That was the way Tommie liked to see this end. A woman on top.

As she packed up her things, she noticed Hobby creeping up to her.

"Hobby, I know I gave you a hard time about Dr. Hanbury but I appreciate you bailing me out of another sticky situation. Those agents were about to shut the show down and fine me without a doctor here."

Hobby smiled but didn't say anything.

"Did you already pay him?" Tommie asked as she closed and locked her briefcase.

He nodded. Now that was strange for Hobby. He had a worried expression on his face that concerned her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"The show."

"I know. We started off kind of shaky. But the technical guys said that we transmitted fine. The initial feedback from the audience has been great. The wrestlers even had a good time. I know we weren't gangbusters but I think we did a hell of a job despite the fact that Junior and Mo weren't here."

"I can tell you where they were." Hobby's voice cracked.

"What do you mean, they?"

"Slamtastics had a show tonight in Hampton. Their headlining match was between Mo and Junior. Junior made his official start with them tonight."

Tommie tried hard to fight back tears. How could Junior do this to her? No. How could her *father* do this to her? He was the man that was supposed to make things better for her. Protect her. Shield her from bad things.

"Our only saving grace was that their show wasn't televised yet. It was taped for a future broadcast so none of our fans know yet," Hobby said trying to put a positive spin on Junior's betrayal. "But you know Slamtastics has their pay-per-view tomorrow."

"Does the crew know yet?" Tommie kept her gaze from her assistant.

"I don't think so. But you know how word gets around. It won't take long to--"

"Keep this under wraps as long as you can." She grabbed her suitcase and laptop. She headed to the parking garage.

No Bix, no Gray, no Junior. What a way to cap off a great night. What she needed was a break. Time off from all of this madness. Selling the business would give her that well needed break and allow her to rethink her priorities.

When she got into her car, her cell phone chimed the theme to *Carmen*. She liked changing up her regular routine no matter how small.

Even though she could tell who was calling her, she answered the phone anyway.

"Hey, baby girl," Junior began. "We need to talk."

Chapter Twenty-three

Tommie decided to let her traitorous father sit and stew for a while before meeting him. She'd kept the phone conversation short, only telling him that she would meet with him before another appointment she had arranged for that morning. She'd left out the fact that the meeting was with his new boss, Hayes Hamilton. One thing she won't leave out of her conversation with her father was her true feelings about him, about her upbringing, about the business.

After driving to the closest Holiday Inn directly after the pay-per-view show, Tommie had thought about what had happened to Bix. Tommie had left her about five voicemail messages on her cell phone. Gray's disappearance at one of the biggest shows of her career spoke volumes to her, too. He cared about her as much as her father had.

She didn't want to believe that Gray would let her down but he had. If he was hurt by her secret about Junior, then she was doubly hurt by his no-show appearance at *Home Invasion*. So much for two-weeks notice.

So much for love.

Tommie walked into the Denny's in Chesapeake by her old high school. Memories. It was the same place her father had taken her every time he rolled into town. She was sure he was trying to sway her with this venue but she wasn't about to crumble. She would show him that too. Even in the place that held many great memories, she would be hard and cold to Junior.

She stepped into the waiting area for the restaurant. It was empty. She would have thought Junior would at least been civil enough to get there early. She strolled over to an area by the cash register to get a peek at the diners. Scanning the crowd, she didn't see his worn out baseball cap or his telltale bushy beard.

A young waitress walked back to the register. "Just one?" She retrieved a vinyl covered menu from the side of the register.

"No. I don't see the person I'm supposed to meet here." Tommie turned to leave and ran right into Junior's barreled chest. She stumbled back, keeping a good distance between them.

"Sorry I'm late." He signaled to the waitress to get them a booth. As they followed her to the back of the restaurant, a few of the diners recognized Junior. Some stopped him to ask for his autograph. He quickly obliged but met Tommie at the table.

He sat across from her but she couldn't look into his eyes. If she did, she would have wept right there and then.

"It's been a long time since we've done this," Junior said, a sheepish tone resonating in his voice. Tommie nodded in response but kept her eyes on the menu although she wasn't hungry.

"I remember we used to sit right over there by the window so that you could see the cars zooming down the street. You remember that?" He pointed to a table by the front window. She didn't break her gaze. Her gaze fixed on the Gram Slam breakfast special. Her thoughts went immediately to Gray, another sore spot with her right now.

She closed the menu. "Where's the waitress? I want to get this over with." This time she stared at her father. Her harsh tone struck a soft spot in him. He broke his gaze from her and leaned back in the booth.

"You're mad, aren't you?"

She couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or naïve. Before she could answer, the waitress showed up with their utensils.

"I'll have coffee, grits, wheat toast, fruit plate and turkey bacon." He looked at Tommie and must have caught her surprised expression. "I'm trying to diet."

"What will you have, Miss?" The waitress turned her attention to Tommie. Before she could speak, Junior cut her off.

"If I were a betting man, I'd say a tall glass of milk and a slice of cherry pie." Junior winked at her.

The waitress was going to write down the order when Tommie stopped her.

She glared at Junior. "Don't make that bet." Then returned her gaze to the waitress. "Just coffee."

The waitress walked away, leaving the quiet table.

After a long pause, Junior finally spoke. "I'm sorry, Tommie."

She blinked. "What are you sorry for? Sorry you didn't see me grow up? Sorry you missed my high school and college graduations? Sorry you ducked out on me last night at the pay-per-view." She snapped her fingers. "I know. You're sorry that you didn't get to see me cry about it on the way home last night."

He reached his hand across the table to take hers but she moved it away. "You pissed me off when you took that doctor's side over mine. You made me feel old."

"So instead of talking about it with me you go over to work for the competition. I can see how that's equitable. I'm concerned for your life. You're concerned for your self." She cleared her throat. "I shouldn't have expected anything less from you. You've never been there for me. It's always been about you."

"That's not true. I love you, baby girl. You know that." He took off his cap and set it on the seat next to him.

"You certainly know how to express your love to me."

By this point, the waitress had come back and poured them two cups of coffee. Junior took his black. Tommie would have normally made up her coffee with two creams and one sugar packet but she wasn't in the mood for coffee either.

"What do you want from me, Tommie? I tried to be a good father. I tried to be there for you. But I'm not going to do it at the expense of you taking away my dignity."

Her eyes widened. "Your dignity? You have the nerve to wonder why I never mentioned to people that you're my father. Telling you that it was so the other wrestlers wouldn't think you would get preferential treatment was a great way to cover up the truth."

"Put yourself in my place. The first pay-per-view show for UEW. You're the headliner and my father and you don't even show. How do you think that made me feel?"

Junior opened his mouth to respond but she kept going. She had her father as a captive audience. No way was she going to let him go.

"I'll tell you how it made me feel. Like I was seven years old again and I had to

realize one day that you weren't coming back home. Since then I have done everything to bring you back into my life, including starting this business."

Junior set his coffee cup down with a thud. The dark liquid sloshed out of his cup and onto the table.

Tommie felt tears forming. She hated that she kept her feelings about her parents' split bottled up inside so much that it ruined her chances for a normal relationship, a normal life.

"But thanks to your typical reaction of running when things get hard for you, I realized last night that I can't do for our relationship as a boss what I couldn't do as your daughter, which is to keep you with me and keep you loyal. Your loyalty is to yourself." She pulled out a couple of napkins from the dispenser and dabbed her eyes.

"I had no idea that you felt this way. You have to know that I would rather rip out my own heart before I crush yours." He leaned in over the table.

"Then why did you do what you did last night? I understood why Mo left. He's young. He wants the fast money and fame. But you? I did everything I could to jumpstart your career again and you repay me by leaving."

"I'm going to tell you something, darling. I don't want you living your life for me."

"I don't."

"You did. Everything you've said and done tells me you think you have to put on a show to get my attention. I may not have been there for the most important parts of your life, but I've always been proud of you. You could have been a garbage collector and I still would have been proud. As long as you're honest with your work and happy, I'm happy for you."

"Don't you get it, Dad? Had you been there for those important moments I wouldn't have felt the need to seek out your approval all of the time."

The waitress came back with Junior's breakfast. She set the plates down in front of him then walked off.

"You are right about one thing. I'm going to stop living for you and other people and start living for me. I can only make one person happy and that's me. And right now I'm miserable."

Junior reached across the table again for Tommie's hand. This time she didn't pull away. "What's it going to take to make you happy?"

She took in a deep breath, inhaling in all the smells of syrup, eggs, pancakes and coffee that wafted in the air. She exhaled and stared into her father's steely eyes. "Had I known you were going to defect to Slamtastics, I would have told you to wait a day."

Junior scrunched his fuzzy eyebrows together. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm selling UEW to Hayes Hamilton today."

Junior squeezed her hand and lowered his head. "Had I known you would have reacted this way, I would have--"

She pulled her hand away. "Don't. I don't want to hear about what you would or wouldn't have done. This is my decision. I'll miss the people and the business. But I'm missing out on my life. That's more important to me than anything."

"And you're missing out on that nice, young doctor." Junior hitched up a smile at the corner of his mouth as he shook pepper on his grits.

"What are you talking about? He didn't show up last night either. What kind of a loser am I to get ditched by two guys on the same night?"

"You're not a loser. He is if he gave you up."

Tommie felt a little comforted that Junior took up for her like a father. He had love for her. He just had a strange way of showing it.

"You're right about one thing, baby girl. You need to live your life. I saw the way that Red guy looked at you the other day."

"His name is Gray." She struggled to hold in her laughter.

"Whatever. I can see it in his eyes. He cares about you. Now, you're no eighteen-year old girl just starting life. You're a grown, smart woman. That UEW business would make a great nest egg for you and this guy."

"He's going back to work at the hospital. I won't have him or the business."

"But you got me." He held up his hand. "As God as my witness, I will never disappoint you again. I know exactly how to prove it to you. A deal that'll make us both happy."

Tommie didn't know what was up Junior's sleeve but she was interested in seeing what her father had in store for her. From his mischievous smile, she knew it had to be something big.

* * * *

On his way back to Gray's house, Bix woke up.

"The sun is out." She rubbed her eyes. Bix pulled her seat erect. Stretching her arms over her head, she squealed.

"You slept most of the way back home." Gray drummed his fingertips on the steering wheel.

"Are we stopping to get breakfast?"

Bix must have spied the chain of fast food restaurants Gray passed.

"No." He didn't plan on stopping. He wanted to get home and get Bix on her way.

"Geez, can you at least go by Tommie's and see if she'll make me--"

"She's not home."

She craned her head around to catch his expression but he kept his eyes on the road. "Oh."

Gray pulled up to the outside of his condo. "I wish I could say that this was a fun trip. It was different."

"Can I at least use your phone and bathroom?" Bix took off her seatbelt.

"You don't mean at the same time?" Gray opened his door.

"It depends on how fast you push me out of your place." She jumped out of the car, slamming the door behind herself. He sighed, too tired to fight with Bix.

She was already planted at his front door by the time he got to it. He showed her to the bathroom when they got inside. Gray ran up to his bedroom. He played the messages on his answering machine hoping one would be from Tommie. No such luck.

One message was from Danny Boy requesting that they go out to celebrate the case being thrown out. Just another reason for Danny Boy to drink and pick up women. The second message was from Ian apologizing for the fight. He also invited Gray and, he hoped, Tommie up to Pennsylvania. Gray erased the messages. He had to get showered

and changed. He had a meeting with destiny.

As soon as he headed into his bathroom, a scream from downstairs startled him. Gray flew down the stairs, his feet barely touching the steps. He found Bix in his kitchen holding the phone away from her ear. Her facial expression was a split between shock, excitement and horror.

“What?” Gray asked when he got to her.

Bix’s hands trembled. He’d never seen her this out of control. Childish, yes.

“You need to get packed then listen to this message. You won’t believe this.”

* * * *

Tommie peeked out of the window when she heard the rush of another car going by. When it didn’t stop, she continued pacing. Her eyes scanned over her former world sitting in a row on her coffee table. Pager, cell phone, two-way pager, laptop. All of them turned off. She wouldn’t need them where she was going. All her father’s idea.

She did at least want to call Bix again since she hadn’t actually spoken to her all morning or the night before. She wasn’t even sure Bix had gotten her message she’d left on her home answering machine.

Tommie marched by her front window again, nearly tripping over her four large suitcases. Wouldn’t be good to get an injury right before her big trip. She picked up her phone and dialed Bix’s home number first. It barely had a chance to finish the first ring when Bix answered it.

“Why haven’t you answered your phone?” Bix asked. “I called you like a million times and I keep getting your voicemail.”

“I had the ringer off and set the voicemail to one ring. The business line I forwarded to Dad.”

“Dad? Not Junior?”

Tommie smiled. The long talk at Denny’s repaired a lot of the hurt and pain Tommie had been carrying around with her since childhood. She hadn’t sat across from a disgruntled employee. She sat across from her father, a misunderstood man who was as stubborn as she was. Thank goodness the man refused to take no for an answer otherwise she wouldn’t be going on this trip at all.

“Dad and I had a long talk. It’s not all better but it’s getting there. Speaking of getting there, where were you last night?” She opened her refrigerator door to make certain for the tenth time that day that she didn’t have anything in it that would spoil in two weeks. No milk. No eggs. Why did she need to worry? Bix never really gave up her house key. Tommie knew she would be by on a regular basis to eat and check up on her house.

“It’s not our fault. We tried to make it to the show but traffic was backed up for miles. We got there after you left.”

“We?” Tommie’s heart started its frantic rhythm. Pills. She didn’t want to forget her pills just in case. A relaxing vacation was exactly what she needed. It was a shame that she had to do it alone.

“Didn’t you listen to any of your messages?” Bix huffed on the other end. “Gray and I have been driving all night long to get to you. Why weren’t you at home?”

“I stopped off in Williamsburg to get a hotel. I was tired. Why was Gray with you?”

"You know why. Don't act like you don't know."

Tommie smiled. Did Gray truly care about her? If he spent any amount of time in a car with Bix, the man must be an angel.

"Has he gotten there yet?" Bix asked.

"Who? The cab driver?" Tommie looked at her watch. The cab was late. No tip for him. She wanted to be at the airport early to check in all her bags. There was no use for her hanging around the house.

The doorbell chimed.

"Speak of the devil." Tommie went to the door.

"I'm not talking about the cab."

Tommie opened the door and nearly dropped the phone.

Bix continued. "I'm talking about--"

"Gray," Tommie said in a whispered breath.

"Yeah. Why are you whispering?"

"I have to go, Bix. I'll send you a postcard."

"Wait! Is he there? Tell him I said--"

Tommie disconnected the call. She eyed him from the top of his ruffled hair to his piercing hazel eyes, one with a noticeable bruise under it, to his t-shirt with the UEW logo emblazoned across his chest, down his gray sweat shorts to his sculpted legs.

She fought the urge to smile. Even though it sounded like he'd tried to move heaven and earth to get to her, Tommie wanted to hear it from him.

"What are you doing here?" Tommie asked, still standing guard in the doorway.

"Several reasons. May I come inside?" He stepped closer to her. His musky scent enraptured her until she felt powerless to do anything against his will but she stood her ground. She didn't want him to see her suitcases and ask more questions.

"No." She held her hand up, mere inches from his chest. As her hand hovered over his chest, Gray took another step closer so that she touched him. She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sensation.

"Fine. I'll tell you here." He licked his tongue over his lips. "I'm sorry for the way I reacted when I heard about you and Junior. I think it'll take me the rest of my life to make it up to you."

"You were a jerk." She brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his shirt and crossed her arms over her chest.

"And you didn't trust me. I'll accept some of the blame but you have to accept some of it too."

She opened her mouth but he put his finger over her lips. Ordinarily, she would have been annoyed at being shushed by a man and probably would have bit his finger. Now she wanted to catch every word this man uttered.

"Second. I'm sorry I missed the show last night. Bix and I got caught up in traffic on 64 that lasted for hours." He took one of her hands. "I wanted to be there."

She saw the sincerity in his eyes. Her heart melted. This time she didn't hide the smile.

"We found someone to replace you," she said.

Gray raised his eyebrows. "You did? Did you ask him to take off his pants too?"

Tommie laughed. "No. There's no way you could mistake that guy for a

wrestler.”

Gray laughed with her.

“Usually these lists have a third point.” She wanted him to hurry along before her cab got there. Each point he was making got better and better.

“Okay. Here’s three. I was a fool to think I could live my life with you in it part time. I want you to be with me always.”

“But what about the job at the hospital?”

“Believe it or not, even after all of this, they offered me the position. I turned them down though.” He smoothed his hand over his shirt.

“Why?”

“I found this prime piece of real estate right next to your gym. With a little seed money from Danny Boy, I’m finally starting my clinic. Baby, it’s all happening for me, for us.”

Tommie took a step back into her house, luring Gray inside. “There’s a problem with that for a couple of reasons.”

He stepped closer until he now stood in the doorway.

“One.”

“Because these things come in lists,” he said sarcastically.

“Of course. One, I’m glad you finally got your dream clinic. You more than deserve it, and you should definitely put all of your concentration into making that venture work.”

“Fair enough. And your second point.”

“If you stay on as UEW’s company doctor, I don’t think you’ll like the new boss.”

Gray’s smile dropped. “You did sell UEW? How could you? I thought--”

She held up her hand. “Don’t worry. I didn’t sell the business to that slimeball, Hayes Hamilton. He was that guy in the parking garage that one night.”

“If not him, then who?”

“You may know him. Goes by the name of Junior Vickers but I like to call him Dad.”

The smile returned. “You sold the business to your father.”

She nodded. “Actually I just sold him my share since he was still part owner. It just made sense. He loves the business. He still wants to be involved in it. He should find the talent and run it the way it should be run. Besides, I learned the hard way that you should never agree to do a job or give up a part of yourself to please another person.” She put her hand to the side of his face. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to quit your job and stay with me. You wouldn’t have been happy and I would have been miserable to see you so unhappy.”

He turned his head and kissed the palm of her hand.

“And he made me a really great offer.”

“So that’s where you got the money.” He nodded his head.

“What do you mean?”

“A little bird told me about your trip to Hawaii. Two weeks. You weren’t even going to say goodbye, were you?” He was now in the house and his hands were planted on her hips pulling her in close to him.

Getting Bix to squeal was part of the reason why Tommie had left the message for her. She knew Bix couldn't keep her mouth closed.

She dipped down to set the cordless phone receiver on her coffee table.

"I had assumed you didn't want anything more to do with me." She moved in closer to Gray.

"Oh, honey, I want everything to do with you. I want to make a life with you."

"What are you saying?"

Gray placed his hands to the sides of her face and drew her in. He planted a soft kiss on her lips. Her body shook. His kiss summoned every bit of passion, love, excitement and fear into her lips making her kiss him harder, passionately.

When he pulled back, he had a smile on his face that brought tears to her eyes. "I love you, Tommie Balford. I want you on by my side. I want to be there for you."

"I love you too, Dr. Gray Kennebeck."

"Good. That makes this next thing easier to do."

She ruttled her eyebrows.

Gray let Tommie go and took a step back. "Reach into my pocket."

She cocked her head. This was kinky even for Gray.

"Come on. Don't tell me you're scared. The same woman who practically ripped my pants down off me before knowing my name."

She moved closer to him. "Very funny." She reached into his one side pocket, rooting around until she brushed against his shaft.

Gray flinched. "Whoa. Not that pocket. Guess I should have told you."

"Gee, I wonder why you waited until the last minute." She dove into his other pocket. Her fingers brushed against something soft and square. She peered into Gray's eyes. He smiled at her. Her hand wrapped around the velvety box as she pulled it from his pocket.

With one hand over her gaping mouth, she stared at the box in her other hand. Before she could react, Gray cracked it open.

"I know now after being with you, that you are one hell of a strong person. My fear of marriage has nothing to do with you and everything to do with my own insecurities. I know that you won't change and I love that about you. Tommie," he held her hand, "will you marry me?"

It was almost how she dreamed this moment. The man was right. The situation was wrong. Something was missing. She stayed silent, splitting her attention from Gray to the gorgeous ring with a large heart-shaped diamond on top and black and clear diamonds going around the band.

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't have a job right now."

"I know you. You won't be resting on your laurels for very long. But even if you become a bikini-clad beach bum, I would still love you. By the way, if that's your choice, I want to see you in a white thong bikini."

She laughed. "I don't know what to say."

"Then let me repeat the question."

This time Gray got down on one knee. This was the missing element. The fairy tale. Tommie bounced on the balls of her feet in excitement.

"Thomasina Balford, will you marry me?"

Her throat closed up so tightly she couldn't verbally respond. She nodded emphatically until it seemed like her head was going to pop off of her neck. Gray slid the ring onto her finger then kissed the back of her hand.

He stood and kissed her again just as the doorbell rang.

"Oh no! I forgot to cancel the cab." She put her hand to her head. "There's no way I'm going to Hawaii without you."

"I think you should go." Gray turned to answer the door.

"What?" He couldn't mean that. He couldn't just ask her to marry him then allow her to go to Hawaii for two weeks without him.

"I also should have told you that Bix played me your message about you going to Maui. So as I packed, she ordered my tickets on-line. She may have ordered some other things on-line using my credit card number. I thought I heard her squealing something about new designer stilettos but I'm not sure." He opened the door to let in the cab driver.

Tommie pointed to the bags on the floor. When the driver walked out with the first haul, Tommie meandered to her fiancé.

"You seemed to have everything planned out." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "But what if I said no?"

"Then it would have been really awkward bumping into you on the plane and on the island." He put his hands on her waist. He shook his head. "How did I get so lucky?"

"You haven't gotten lucky yet." She winked. "Wait until we get on the plane."

The End