

Touch Me



Beverly Rae

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Dedication

When I hit a crossroads in my life at the glorious age of forty-eight, my best friend, my confidant, and my lover—who all happen to reside in the person I'm so very grateful to call my husband—suggested I do the one thing I'd been promising I would do in the future: write a book. *Touch Me* is the result of his supportive, yet gentle kick in my rear.

Chapter One

“You’re what?” Sloan Janson stared into the face of his boyhood companion, Rob Dillon.

Undisturbed by Sloan’s response, Rob grinned. “I’m married. I know it’s the last thing you ever thought you’d hear me say. Heck, it’s the last thing *I* ever thought I’d say, but here I am. Married.” Rob held up his left hand to show off the simple gold band on his ring finger.

Sloan regarded his friend for a moment, staring at the large smile covering Rob’s face while he tried to absorb the news. Was this a joke? Flicking his hand once, Sloan acknowledged the waiter who placed their lunches before them.

The shock of Rob’s words clogged his cognitive abilities and, for a few seconds, he grappled for the right words. “B—but how in the world do you go off on a fishing trip and come home married? You’re supposed to bring back fish, not a wife.”

He paused long enough to take a swig of his beer. “Where did you meet this girl, anyway? I thought fishing was supposed to be a solitary sport. You know, the whole getting-away-from-it-all routine? The only catch you were supposed to make was for large-mouthed bass.” Sloan waited for a logical answer and, even though his pounding pulse reverberated through his head, couldn’t resist a humorous nudge, hoping against hope this whole conversation was one of Rob’s lousy practical jokes. “Is it too late to throw her back?”

“Ha, ha, man. Very funny.” Rob scowled first and then morphed the scowl into a smile in typical, easy-going Rob style.

“But for God’s sake, why’d you get married? Not to mention so fast? Whatever happened to dating? You know, the part where you get to know each other first? Have some harmless lust-filled sex? Remember the good stuff?”

Sloan jabbed his fork into the tablecloth, punching a hole in the fabric. “Then if, God forbid, you still want her around, you meet her mother so you can see what she’s going to look like after three kids and twenty years of marital mayhem.” Astonished he could find any humor in the situation, Sloan continued to stare at Rob and hoped his friend would notice the seriousness behind the joke.

“I know, I know. But things went so fast. Actually, it’s a helluva story.” Rob bit a chunk out of his burger before continuing. “I was out on the dock at Lawson’s Lake when this girl in a thong swimsuit waved at me as she zipped by in a speedboat. Of course, I waved back.”

Sloan shrugged. Well, sure. What red-blooded male wouldn’t wave back to a girl barely sporting a bikini? Especially one zipping by in a fast boat. As his imagination grew, so did his shaft. His mind wandered away with the image of a fast woman driving an equally fast machine until Rob’s words penetrated the vision.

“When, to my surprise, she turned the boat around and headed straight for me.”

Rob continued his story between chews, but Sloan left his lunch untouched. He couldn’t choke any food past the enormous clump in his throat. His dick and the clog in his throat put him in between a rock and a logjam.

“She came right up to me and introduced herself. Really a knockout, you know? Long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a body made to order for *Sports Illustrated*’s swimsuit issue.”

Trying his best to let the story sink in, Sloan again searched for some sort of sense behind Rob’s actions. “Okay, buddy, I can see how you might become infatuated with a great-looking girl because—”

“Because that’s not the type of girl I usually get? Because what gorgeous babe would want an average-looking guy with a lousy physique and half a head of hair?” Rob frowned at him. “Right?”

Sloan started to protest, but Rob continued, “No, don’t. It’s okay. I know I’ve never been the dream man all the women think you are. You’re right. I never could get a knockout before this. But that’s part of what’s so amazing. Yeah, man, believe it. *She* came after *me*!”

Sloan leaned forward, his mind racing with wild thoughts. “So, she came on to you?” He attempted to envision a hot babe crawling all over Rob, but couldn’t get the image to cooperate. At Rob’s nod, he fell back against his seat. When the idea struck, both anger and trepidation filled him and he struggled to remain calm. “Don’t you see, Rob? She probably found out about you and your family. I’m sorry to say it, pal, but maybe she was actually after the inheritance instead of the man.”

Okay, so his words had come out harsher than he’d wanted. Maybe he could have laid it out in a more tactful way. Or maybe not. He hated like crazy to see the sparkle in Rob’s eyes dim, but he had to get through to him. With every nerve in his body, Sloan knew Rob had returned from this trip with more stinking than just the fish he’d caught.

Although both of them came from families with money and position, neither man flaunted his wealth or expected any special consideration because of his family’s status in the Dallas community. Since their early years together, they’d always avoided getting involved with people who were only interested in their public credentials. But Rob had always been too trusting, and now his naiveté had gotten him into real trouble.

Rob’s face screwed up, eyebrows pulling together to form the V Sloan knew so well. Knowing this signaled disagreement, he readied himself.

“Listen, this was a new place I went to. I’ve never been to Lawson’s Lake or the town of Lawson before last week. In fact, I used my mother’s maiden name to rent the cabin, and I paid cash for everything. There’s no way Lisa could have suspected who I was.”

Sloan started to speak but Rob’s hand flew up, stopping him cold.

“Wait a sec. There’s something more you need to know. Lisa came looking for me because she knew I was her soul mate. So you see, we were meant for each other. We’re talking about fate here. It’s destiny. The matchmaker, Cally Mathews, touched her and told her so.”

The air around Sloan thickened with a clinging depression making simple breathing more difficult. Stunned, he watched Rob gulp down the last of his hamburger. *How can the guy eat when his life is in a leaky boat headed downstream without a lifejacket?*

“Who told her you’re her soul mate? A matchmaker? Because she *touched* her? You’re joking, right?” Sloan forced out a chuckle he didn’t feel, but the look on Rob’s face made him squelch his laughter fast enough. “Oh, man. You’re serious?”

“I’m deadly serious. Cally can touch people and tell them who they belong with and who their soul mate is. I know, it sounds nuts. Hey, at first, even I didn’t believe it. But now I do.”

Sloan swiveled his head around, searching for anyone who might have overheard them. “Just stay calm, Rob, and listen to me. Do not, I reiterate, do not go around repeating that story to anyone else, okay?”

Glancing at the couple at the next table, Sloan wondered if they’d listened in on Rob’s crazy story. Had anyone else overheard him? To be safe, Sloan lowered his voice another notch. “Everything’s going to be okay because I’m going to take care of this. I’ll find the best doctors available to treat your, uh, psychosis, or whatever the hell your problem is. You’ll be as sane as anyone else in a few days. Or maybe months. However long your recovery takes, you can count on me to stand by your side, man. But until then, let’s try and keep this story between the two of us, okay?”

Rob glared at him, a large frown dragging his cheerful features downward. “What?” He took a sip of his drink and shook his head. “Not cool, man. I’m not crazy, so don’t go treating me like some mental misfit. I’m telling you the absolute, unvarnished facts. Try opening up your mind for a second and maybe, just maybe, something new might seep into that cement block you call your head.”

Stabbing pain reverberated in Sloan's left temple, heralding the crushing headache to come. *Cement block, I wish.* "All right, take it easy. Let's go with the assumption that you're mentally sound." Even though he spoke the words out loud, part of him wasn't ready to dismiss the temporary insanity theory. "But do you hear yourself? Come on, Rob. Tell the truth. This is one of your stupid jokes, right? Tell me I'm right." He plastered a fake grin on his face and hoped for the best.

Instead, Rob's expression deepened, and Sloan rushed on. "Or, if not, then admit maybe you got drunk one night, met a girl by the lake, and ended up married before you could sober up. Hey, it wouldn't be the first time a nice, unassuming guy got plastered and screwed up. That's it, isn't it? Come on, man, knock off the act and 'fess up."

"I'm telling you what happened." His answer came through gritted teeth. "If you can't handle the truth, then screw you."

"But a matchmaker? Shit, I feel like we're stuck in some woman's magazine or in one of those tear-jerk chick flicks. Besides, matchmakers today use computers and personality profiles. Not a set-up during a fishing vacation. And not by simply touching someone."

The whirl of mixed emotions running through him caused an equally turbulent riot in his stomach. Fear wrapped around his gut and crushed his insides into an angry ball. He hated the idea of Rob getting conned.

"Hell, why not give some psychic hotline a call, for God's sake? That'd make as much sense as using a matchmaker. At least you'd have some fun wasting the money instead of giving half your assets away during the inevitable divorce."

He stared at the earnest expression on Rob's face, and renewed his efforts to grasp the situation. Had his friend really lost his mind? Or was Rob determined to play out this sick joke to the bitter, not to mention, unfunny end? No. He had to believe Rob would spill the truth soon and let him off this weird roller coaster.

Maybe Rob had been set up. Taking a swig of his drink, he considered the possibility and felt the spark of hope the thought gave

him. Some friend he was. Here he sat, hoping his best friend was the victim of a scam. Yet being scammed was better than being crazy, right?

He fidgeted in his chair, barely controlling his eagerness for his friend's sake, and eased into his theory. "This person, this so-called matchmaker, is she a relative of Laurie's?"

Rob frowned at him. "Crap, Sloan. As a reporter, you'd think you'd be better with names. Her name's Lisa and no, they're not related, although they are good friends. But that's got nothing to do with our marriage. Trust me."

"But how do you know they didn't plan all this? Come on. For God's sake, the next thing you'll tell me is that her mother's name is Endora and you have a little girl who does magical things when she wiggles her nose."

Instead of getting incensed, Rob laughed good-naturedly. "Yeah and a warlock father-in-law, right? Relax, man. I haven't gone off the deep end."

Frustration flowed through every pore of Sloan's body. Raising his glass to his mouth, he downed the drink in one gulp and tried again, hoping this one last attempt would bring Rob to his right mind. "Okay, let's give this situation some thought. We can fix this. It's a helluva problem and it might take some time and money to unwind, but we can get you out of this mess."

Exasperation stole the pleasant look from Rob's face as he placed both hands on the table in front of him, pulled himself forward, and brought his face closer to Sloan's. "Okay, enough is enough. You're determined to get this all wrong. Lisa was very up front from the minute I met her. She climbed out of the boat, asked me my name, smiled this knowing smile, and kissed me. Then, as I reeled from the best kiss I've ever had, she told me all about Cally, the town's matchmaker. Besides, man, you're not listening to me. I don't want out."

Sloan ran his fingers through his hair and signaled the waiter for another beer. He closed his eyes in an effort to block out all the noise around him, and tried to organize his thoughts. Sure, Rob was the

gullible type, but not stupid. Nobody could trap him so easily. Maybe this was about drugs? Could this woman have drugged Rob? No, not likely. And Rob wouldn't have taken anything on his own either because Rob hated drugs to the point of grumbling when he took an aspirin for a toothache. No, drugs were out. And he'd said he hadn't been drunk. What had happened to get his levelheaded friend to do something as outrageous as marry a girl he'd just met?

He scrutinized Rob's face, praying to find an answer, but all he saw was a very happy man. At this point, he'd take almost any other reason than the one Rob wanted him to buy. Damn, a situation was pretty awful when you found yourself hoping your best friend was a victim of a con.

"Sloan, the whole thing is absolutely amazing. There's this girl, born and raised in Lawson, who has this uncanny knack—she calls it her gift—for matching people with their perfect partner. The whole town knows her and everyone I met believes in her. Lisa introduced me to several couples Cally's matched."

Rob paused, but when Sloan opened his mouth to speak, Rob quickly continued, stopping him before he could get the first word out. "I know it's hard to swallow, but I'm telling you, as soon as Lisa kissed me I was a goner."

Sloan's mouth opened a couple of times, but the words lost their way from his head to his mouth.

Rob, taking his silence for acceptance, continued his sales pitch. "Look, I know this sounds like one of those sappy made-for-T.V. movies, but I've waited for her all my life. On top of that, I need her to be with me. I mean, down in the gut, big time, aching-to-be-with-her in every possible way. And she's the same way about me. Three days after we met, we went to the local justice of the peace." Rob's grin grew even wider. "Friggin' amazing!"

"Where is that drink?" Sloan scanned the room for their waiter. Not finding the neglectful attendant, he snatched a drink off the tray of a different waiter. Sending the surprised man a threatening look, he chugged the drink in one swift motion. The unknown liquid burned a

fiery path all the way to his stomach. “And you honestly believe this? A girl who hooks up people with their perfect match just by touching them? Rob, I’m sorry, but this is too much. I’m not buying any of this.”

“Okay, so don’t believe me.” Rob’s tone echoed the disappointment showing on his face.

A tense silence filled the distance between them and Sloan tried to think of something to say. Anything to get Rob’s head on straight again. Instead, he watched Rob stare into space. Then Rob’s features took on an expression he recognized all too well. Sitting up straighter, he prepared for Rob’s challenge.

“All right, Sloan, here’s an idea. You’re the investigative reporter, so you go to Lawson and find out for yourself. At best, you prove me and a whole town wrong. At worst, you get an incredible story. As for me? I’m a believer no matter what you say. Lisa and I are so happy it’s—”

“Yeah, I know. ‘Friggin’ amazing’.”

Sloan slumped down in his chair and stared at Rob’s jubilant face. How’d this happened? Hadn’t Rob learned anything from helping Sloan when his own impetuous marriage crumbled after only a few hellish months? Was Rob an unwitting dupe in some con game? Well, if Rob wouldn’t listen to reason, he’d have to take him up on his dare and dig up the truth.

* * *

Streams of morning light filtered through the drapes to rest on her back, warming a rectangular patch of her skin. The two cups of herbal tea she’d prepared sat untouched while the sweet fragrance of raspberry drifted upward on the steam. Sitting next to her friend on the sofa, Cally could almost touch the expectancy in the room. Only the *tick, tick* of the clock’s second hand marked the passage of time.

The warm, tingling vibration seeped from Sara’s skin into Cally’s fingers, spreading bit by bit into her hand, snaking little trails up her arm until stopping at her shoulder. Cally rolled her shoulders and neck

around, preparing for the next step. Closing her eyes, she waited, letting her measured breaths soothe her. After a minute, she forgot about her breathing and willed herself to concentrate on the sensations.

“Anything yet?” asked the tall, slender brunette, eagerness putting an edge to her whispered words.

Cally shook her head, keeping her eyes closed, and tried to relax. When she relaxed, the words would come. In a slow arc, she moved her head around, trying to loosen the tension creeping into her neck. Yet, all the while, she kept her hand resting on Sara’s arm. Taking long, deep breaths, Cally willed her body into acceptance. Slowly, the second wave of vibrations began flooding into her hand.

That’s it. The words are coming.

She heard Sara’s sigh and knew the young woman’s impatience grew, but she could not, would not, rush the process. After a small stop in its course, the prickly movement started flowing quicker, gliding along Cally’s shoulder to the base of her neck. Cally could sense the answers’ approach and wanted to tell Sara, but dared not speak.

Without warning, the silhouette of a face entered her mind and emerald eyes blocked out all other thoughts. Surprised, Cally forced the image away, bringing her concentration back to the words waiting to burst forth. With her focus returned, the words tumbled from her mouth.

“His name is Michael Rogers. People call him Big Dog, although I don’t know why.” She wondered at the reason for the nickname, but pushed her curiosity aside and continued before the words could get away. “He’s a kind man with a good heart. His hair and eyes are brown and he’s tall. He’s about the height of your brother. His smile is more like a goofy grin. Football is his passion—”

“Oh, no.”

She bit her bottom lip at Sara’s distress and choked back a giggle before she went on. “And he enjoys watching as well as playing the game. He’s receptive and ready for love now, so he’ll be open to your heart and words.”

And you'll need to be open to the pungent aroma of sweat-drenched jerseys. A tiny smile brushed Cally's lips before she gained control again.

Another image of Sara's future mate emerged. A very enticing image. An image explaining how he'd gained his nickname. Big Dog stood naked in her vision, with his exceptionally long shaft sticking straight out, as hard and thick as a jousting pole. A wickedly sensual smile spread his mouth and he ran his lips over his teeth, an obvious request to taste the juices of a woman as a thirsty canine might lap up a cool drink of water. "Uh, I understand why he's called Big Dog now. You'll find out soon enough, you lucky girl."

Cally's eyelids attempted to flutter open, but she managed to keep her eyes closed. She knew she would lose the connection if she opened them. Yet as hard as she struggled to stay focused, she couldn't stop the dark face that floated across her mind. The startling, moss-colored orbs stared unblinking at her. Intuitively, she knew such intelligent eyes didn't belong to Big Dog. After all, she sensed his name was Big Dog, not Big Smart Dog, for a reason.

"Fortunately, he's near Lawson, but he'll return to his home in a few days. You'll find him at the campgrounds near the lake. Go to him and let go of your inhibitions. Take him as you've always dreamed of taking the man you love. But be prepared to leave your home soon and go with him. *If* that's your choice."

With the words out, Cally allowed her body to relax and the tense feeling dissipated in rippling waves. She opened her eyes and wasn't surprised to find Sara crying, tears streaming down her joyful face.

"You're sure? He's the one for me?"

"I'm sure. And you'll be sure once you've met him." She knew Sara didn't doubt her ability. Everyone in Lawson trusted her gift. Still, she understood why the anxious girl needed reassurance.

Sara gathered her purse and reached into the bag to pull out a stick of licorice and bite off a piece. She chewed rapidly, excitement radiating off her. "Can I please pay you something? Anything?"

Accepting the sincere gesture behind the request, Cally knew Sara already had the answer to her question. "You know I don't take money. Shoot, if I wanted to make money matching people, I'd get in touch with Sylvia Browne's agent." She flashed her teeth at Sara as she envisioned the scene. "Imagine. Fame and fortune."

She put on an air of mystery and quipped, "You may call me Madam Cally from now on." She sat up straighter while her hands ran over a pretend magic ball resting in front of her. Chanting in a low, measured manner, she closed her eyes and kept up the fantasy. "Oh, Mystical Crystal Ball. Oh, Great Magical Orb. Tell me the answer to my riddle." Sneaking a peek at Sara, she brought home the punch line. "Will Sara learn to throw a pigskin?"

Cally joined Sara in a giggle over the gag before bringing up her request. She never took money for using her ability. Instead, she asked her clients to pass on the favor, thus letting more people benefit from her gift. "Maybe you can do something for me. Do you think you could lend Missy a hand and help her pick out her dress for her birthday party? She's throwing her first teenage party and wants to look perfect like you always do." Grinning, she rolled her eyes at Sara. "God knows why, but she thinks you're wonderful."

Sara responded with her usual modesty, missing Cally's joke. "Beats me where she got such an idea. I'm certainly no one to admire."

Having a beautiful personality to match her gorgeous exterior, Sara was unaware of her effect on people of both sexes. Which, of course, made her all the more special in Cally's opinion.

She laughed and added another good-natured barb. "Yeah, right. What's to admire? Just great looks, intelligence, and a sunny personality. I don't get what Missy sees in you. But she thinks you must be the coolest person she's ever known and she's way too shy to ask you for help. I remember her saying so when she picked up her little sister from my classroom on the last day of school. And since you're practically next-door neighbors..." Letting her words slide, she waited for Sara's response.

“That’s all? Sure, I’ll help her. It’ll be like having a little sister to have fun with.” Sara’s face lit up, showing her pleasure at the request. “But couldn’t I do something for you?”

Rising from the sofa, Cally tried to keep up as Sara’s long legs carried her toward the door. “No, thanks. However, if you’ll help Missy, I’ll consider it payment enough for me.”

“Oh, Madam Cally, I can’t thank you enough.” Sara gave her a playful grin and a peck on the cheek.

Cally waited for the lump in her throat to slide down before she tried to talk again. She hid her overwhelming emotions with a poor imitation of Dr. Phil. “And what else would I do for a fellow Texan? You be sure to remember you two still have to work at marriage. You either contaminate or contribute to the relationship. See how that works for you.” Switching back to her normal voice, she added, “And don’t forget, just because you’ve been matched doesn’t mean life is all roses and champagne. But if it is, remember I drink nothing less than *Dom Perignon* and I adore white roses.”

Laughing together, they joined hands and walked to the front door. After a hug and another kiss, Sara hurried down the driveway.

With Sara watching her, Cally fixed a smile on her face and waved gaily as the little white car started down the road. Once the car was out of sight, she allowed the forced smile to transform into a frown while she rubbed the tight muscles in her neck.

What was the problem? Why couldn’t she shake the image popping up in her mind? This was the second time the darkened face with the startling eyes had interrupted a reading. The first time had happened during Lisa Callow’s session when she’d matched Lisa to the fisherman from Dallas. But what did this mean?

Nothing else differed from any other reading, yet she knew in her heart these strange visions would somehow change her life. The question was...would they change her life for the better or for the worse?

Chapter Two

Sloan stepped out of his car, beeped on the alarm system, and walked into the combination gas station and convenience store. The bell at the top of the door signaled his entrance, and a teenage girl looked up from the *National Enquirer* magazine. He stopped to survey his surroundings and the only other occupant.

The small room bulged with racks of items ranging from cat food to shaving lotion. Four rows ran parallel from one end to the other, leaving a narrow space between each row. Unlike the chain convenience stores, no icy drinks, or hot dogs rotating on a wheel, enticed customers. Off to the side, an ancient cash register rested on an old wooden counter.

Raising a hand in greeting, Sloan walked toward the counter where the young girl sat. "Hi there. Sure is hot, huh?"

Miss Teenage Enquiring Mind slid her attention to him and continued to chew her gum. Taking the express route, she ran her gaze over his body as if he were no more interesting than a bump on a log. Her expression betrayed nothing, though she nodded once in agreement. "You want some gas, mister?"

"No, thanks. Actually, I thought maybe you could help me with some information. I'm Sloan." Flashing a winning smile, he offered his hand for shaking. "And you're...?"

The stringy-haired girl blinked at his hand and answered with boredom reeking from her pores. "I'm Millie Jo." She popped a bubble and Sloan noticed the kernel of an idea light up her face. "You here to do some huntin' or fishin'? 'Cause if you are, my daddy can sell you a license and some bait."

Sloan shot her another of his prize-winning grins, thankful he'd packed some fishing gear as part of his vacationing fisherman cover story. "Yeah, I'll need some bait a little later on, after I find a place to sleep. I thought about renting one of those cabins out by Lawson's Lake, but I think maybe I'd like to stay in town instead. Maybe some place really nice? Money's not a problem." He hoped she'd notice the emphasis he'd placed on the word *money*. After all, dropping the bait as much as possible might stir up the real fish he wanted to catch. And something told him this girl couldn't keep a secret if her ruby lipstick depended on it. Hopefully, she'd share the news with one self-proclaimed matchmaker.

Her attention intensified like a bull seeing red. Running one hand through the strand of bleached locks falling over one eye, she flipped back her hair and dipped her head up to gaze at him in a sad attempt at flirtation. "Fishin'? What kind of fishin' you planning on doin'? Would you be doing some regular type fishin'? Or would you like to try and catch something else?" Eyelashes soaked in black mascara leading to eyelids buried under purple eye shadow fluttered up at him, sending a silent invitation.

Shit. Maybe I shouldn't have tossed out the bait here. No telling what I might "catch" from her. Sloan watched the imaginary words *Jail Bait Baby* scroll across her forehead.

Swallowing, he ignored her overture. "Um, do you know of any place I could rent? Like a boarding house or room?" Gazing through the dirty windows behind Millie Jo, he searched the area for any signs of available housing. "Is this the whole town?"

Sloan could tell by her smile—a smile offering more than the store would ever have in inventory—that she'd warmed up to him and was getting overheated at an alarming speed.

"Yep, all two main streets of it. The only real buildings, besides houses and this place, are the hunting lodge, the Legion Hall, Mabel's Beauty Box, Jimmy's Diner, and the school. But Mr. Dobbs fixed up some rooms in the old lodge. Nothing fancy and there's only one shower for all the men..." she paused to run her tongue over her top lip, "...but

most hunters and fishermen like it good enough.” She rested her elbows on the counter, giving him an eyeful of her generous cleavage.

Okay, maybe not such a little girl.

“Would you like me to call Mr. Dobbs for you?”

Sloan stepped away in a gut reaction to the teen’s blatant come-on. If he didn’t watch her, she’d have him up against a wall with his dick in her mouth. Right before the town sheriff popped out of the back room and declared them engaged. “Uh, no. That’s okay. I have my cell phone. Can you give me his number?”

Millie Jo flashed him a look of disappointment mixed with last chance hope. “It’s no trouble at all. Hey, I could even take you there myself. Maybe even show you one of the rooms personally. You know. Give you a real small town welcome.” The pink tongue slipped over crimson lips again. “Would you like me to show you?”

Hell, no. I don’t want any show-and-tell from Little Miss Horny.

“Now, Millie Jo, put your tail back on the stool or I’m going to tell your mama you’ve been flirting and carrying on with a stranger. She’ll be meaner than a hornet on a honey-dipped bear when she hears you’re throwing yourself at another full-grown man.”

Sloan turned around to face the speaker. Standing within a foot of him was a squat, barrel-chested man with a graying, unkempt beard and mustache.

“I’m Luke Dobbs. You looking for a place to stay?”

Sloan’s extended hand was accepted in a grip nearly costing him the use of his fingers. He tried to cover his wince at the pain by turning it into a smile. And failed.

“Yes, sir. I’d like a room at the lodge if you’ve one available.”

“Are you here for hunting or fishing?”

Inwardly, Sloan cringed. The word *fishing* would never have the same meaning it once had thanks to Millie Jo.

“Just a little, uh, fishing. Vacation, you know. Time away from the old grind.” Sloan wriggled his fingers and the blood crept back into them.

Wow, what was with this town? First he meets the local Lolita and now Grizzly Adams. But if he had a chance of helping Rob, he'd confront all the offbeat characters Lawson could throw at him.

"The room is fifty dollars a night, paid in advance each day or by the week." Luke's mouth moved in what Sloan assumed was a smile. Seemed old Luke never spent much money on a good dentist what with all the missing teeth.

"That'll be fine. Can I get in this afternoon?"

Luke flipped his cap onto his bald head and lumbered for the door. "You can get in right now. Follow me on down to the lodge and I'll open it up for you. Millie Jo, you better mind yourself before you get into trouble like you did the last time."

The last time? For once in his adult life, Sloan experienced a real sense of relief in putting distance between him and a female. Especially after she called a disappointed "By-ee" and blew him a kiss.

He wasted no time in following the box-shaped man out of the grocery. "By the way, a friend of mine wanted me to look up an acquaintance of his. Her name's Cally Mathews. Do you know her?"

Luke stopped short, causing Sloan to bump into the other's massive torso. Within seconds, friendly Grizzly Adams transformed into one menacing Big Foot. With one eye squinted shut, Luke moved his other eye slowly up and down, measuring every inch of Sloan. Now Sloan knew what a chicken must feel like when it was about to have its neck wrung.

Damn. Between learning a new meaning for the word *fishing* and his sudden empathy for chickens, he'd eat a lot more red meat in the days to come.

"Everybody round here knows Miss Cally." Luke's inspection hardened and his tobacco-laden breath assaulted Sloan's nose, hurtling a gargantuan dose of secondhand stench straight into his nostrils. If he developed lung cancer later, he'd hold old Luke responsible. "You say you're a friend of a friend?"

Sloan tried hard not to squirm before the older man's piercing gaze. Somehow he imagined this guy wouldn't appreciate his real reason for

finding Cally. “Sort of. She matched my friend to a woman from here. Her name is, or was, Lisa Callow.”

Relief flooded him when another transformation returned Luke’s wide, yellow smile to greet his explanation. He blew out pent-up air, letting the worry of getting his ass kicked seep from his body.

“Oh, sure. Lisa got hitched up with some city boy from Dallas. He’s your friend?” At Sloan’s nod, Luke continued, “Well, won’t take you long to find Miss Cally. Wouldn’t take long to find anyone in this little town. Shoot, I think if a person stood in one spot for a bit, why, he’d most likely meet up with the person he’s looking for in no time at all.”

As if on cue, an early model red Honda Accord pulled in beside the one gas pump. A trim brunette slipped out of the car, pulled the gas cap off, and started filling the tank. Coppery highlights glinted in the sun, catching and holding Sloan’s attention.

Luke’s smile grew warmer when he saw the young woman and he turned to greet her. “Miss Cally, you enjoying your summer vacation?”

Cally looked up from the pump and her heart-shaped face lit up in recognition. “Oh, hi, Mr. Dobbs. I’m relaxing, but I miss my students. And how are you and Lena? Are the kids—?”

Noticing Sloan, she stopped in mid-sentence, eyebrows jumping up, emphasizing the brilliant blue orbs beneath them. Her next words came haltingly out of her mouth, as if they traveled through water to reach his ears. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were with someone.”

Sloan’s gaze locked with hers and an electric shock ran through his body. Heat scorched through him, stunning his brain into inaction for several minutes. She jumped when he did and he knew she’d felt a similar jolt. Transfixed, he stared into her startled eyes, unable and unwilling to let go of their tenuous hold.

He knew her. Yes, he definitely knew her. Or was she someone he should know?

Puzzlement rippled through him, causing the words forming in his mind to jumble together. But how could he know her? He’d never visited Lawson before today. Even more alarming was the knowledge that he

wanted her, though not only in a sexual way—damn, how he'd love to lie between her legs, right now, right here—but in his gut, in his spirit. Rob's words came back to him and he realized he needed to be with her.

Troubled by these strange ideas, he willed his tongue to speak, fighting to ignore the odd impressions. He had to keep his thoughts trained on his main goal. After a couple of failed attempts, he forced what he hoped was an affable expression on his face, and stretched out his hand to her. "H-hello. I'm Sloan Janson."

Without a sound, without an acknowledgement of any kind, Cally whipped around, pulled out the gas pump and slammed it into its holder before jumping into her car. Sloan gaped as her car squealed out of the parking lot, leaving behind gas fumes and dust. What had happened? He'd never gotten a reaction like that from anyone before.

Simultaneous emotions of nervousness, excitement, and elation rushed through him, socking him in the gut. Basking in the warmth continuing to course through his body, he turned to Luke, hoping for an explanation. But judging from the older man's expression, he couldn't expect much help.

Luke scratched his chin with a perplexed expression on his face. "Well, ain't that something? I ain't never seen Miss Cally act so strange before."

Chapter Three

Cally sat in a treasured spot in her garden, letting the sun's warmth soak through her skin and into her bones. Houdini, her black cat, lounged nearby, lazily swatting at a fly pestering his ear.

Closing her eyes to concentrate, she thought about the stranger at the gas station and brought his face into her thoughts. And for the hundredth time, she relived the scene.

Without wanting to, she gripped him with her stare, unsure if she fought with or against his magnetic attraction. The current flowing from him—from her?—struck with such power she grabbed the car door to stay upright. The hair on her arms stood up and her stomach tightened in recoil from the onslaught of emotions. Yet, most surprising was the searing heat flaring up from her crotch until she wondered if she might burst into flames.

She'd never felt anything that intense before. The awareness of being drawn to him, of wanting to touch him, needing to be with him, had made her physically dizzy with its power. At first, she'd accepted those reactions, but the instinctive trust she'd experienced quickly dissolved into a fear so strong she'd immediately left instead of risking any further attraction. Now, hours after the meeting, moisture flooded both her armpits and the crevice between her legs at the mere thought of him.

Who was he? Where'd he come from? And most important of all, what had he wanted with her? She remembered searching his eyes, seeing her own shock and amazement reflected in his bottle green depths, yet finding no answers. Even now she could almost sense those smoky eyes staring into her soul. The same eyes she'd seen during her readings.

“Hi, there. You’re Cally Mathews, right?”

Cally jerked at the sound of sensual velvet, and jolted upright in her seat. Poor Houdini soared into an immediate, high-flying, hissing-spitting spin. Trying to regain her composure, Cally looked up to find the man of her thoughts leaning over the fence. A large smile plastered across his face while a shock of dark hair fell across his forehead, his expression altered to show concern. Almost as if he’d changed his expression on cue.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you or your cat. But you are Cally, right? The matchmaker? May I come through the gate?” He tossed his gaze back and forth between her and the still spitting Houdini. “Or will your vicious cat attack me?”

With her pulse throbbing in her ears, Cally nodded before she could think. Why had she agreed? She didn’t want him here. Although ideas raced through her mind, words flew out of her brain, bypassing her tongue, to ride the buzzing current running down her spine. Yet along with this current, another hotter sizzle zapped her nerve endings, bringing her nipples to attention and her clit clenching in anticipation.

He opened the latch on the gate and walked into her garden, picking a safe path around Houdini. “Nice garden you have here. I like all the various flowers and bushes. Not that I can tell the difference between a tulip and a gardenia, but I know enough to appreciate a real gardener’s handiwork. You’ve planted a lot of beautiful colors.” He sent her a playful, lopsided grin, an obvious attempt to distract her with pleasantries.

Placing his hand on the lawn chair adjacent to her lounge, he flipped the chair around and straddled the seat. His hands, hands that had performed hard work judging from the calluses on them, gripped the top of the chair. “May I sit down?” His lips stretched even wider when his arms folded on the back of the chair and he settled down with the appearance of staying awhile.

Cally squirmed as his magnetism compelled her to focus on him. Without knowing the reason, she fought to hold back the rising current

of emotions building inside her. The strange flow of hot energy began again, making her light-headed. She shook her head, determined to force the mental fog away.

How could he have found her? Had her own thoughts brought him to her? Yet why would she even think such an idea? Her heart tightened, panic seeking a foothold inside, prompting her to quickly dismiss the last idea. She knew only soul mates could claim such a close connection.

“Let me introduce myself again. I’m Sloan Janson. We met at the gas station earlier today. Well, we sort of met. Anyway, I’m a friend of Rob Dillon.”

Fighting to hide the turmoil within her, Cally tried to place the name, but couldn’t. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know any Rob Dillon.” Her gaze slid from his piercing eyes down to the pair of dimples dancing at the sides of his mouth. She’d always found dimples appealing. The warm glow grew wider, spreading into her abdomen. She forced her mind back to the conversation. “And how did you know where to find me, Mr. Janson?”

“Oh, sure you do. I’m sure you know Rob.”

Would she call his twist of the mouth a smirk or a sly smile? Either way, Cally didn’t like the look on his face. In fact, the way he smiled at her made her think he suspected her of something. Or perhaps he imagined he knew what she’d say. But he couldn’t know the turbulent sensations running wild inside her. Could he?

“You know, the way I found you was a bit strange. I was driving around, getting the lay of the land, when I saw this house and I knew you lived here. I don’t know how I knew, but I did. In fact, I couldn’t help but stop and come to the rear of the house.”

Sloan dropped his head, an expression of curiosity flickering across his features. Then he shook his head and brought the radiant smile back to his lips. “Probably just one of those inexplicable tricks the mind plays, I guess.”

Sloan’s description, eerily close to her own, unsettled Cally and she struggled to keep her face composed. Had she pulled him to her with her thoughts? Something about this man stirred her emotions in a very

familiar yet uncomfortable way, making her at once intrigued by and leery of him. “Yeah, I guess. But, I’m sorry. I still don’t recognize the name.”

“Huh. I guess I just figured you’d remember Lisa Callow’s new hubby.”

A slow recognition flowed through her. “Oh yes, the visiting fisherman Lisa met at the lake. Of course. I recall Rob now.” Cally’s heart skipped a beat. “Is anything wrong? Is Lisa all right?”

“No, no, they’re *both* fine, living the high life in Dallas. But I couldn’t resist talking to the lady who’d fixed them up. And now that I’ve found you, I’m glad I did.”

He flashed his glorious smile again, and her stomach made a weird somersault. Why did this man unnerve her so much? One minute she wanted him gone and the next, she wanted him to stay. Stay, like right between her legs. Because of his great smile? Because he’d flattered her a little? Yet even before the ideas finished echoing in her mind, another, louder voice rejected them.

Sloan’s smile wavered a little and then came back even stronger. “To be honest, I wanted to get a reading. You made Rob an absolute believer in your abilities.”

Something about the way he said those last words gave Cally a momentary flash of awareness. He didn’t believe Rob. Maybe he wasn’t really a friend of Rob’s. Taking a few slow breaths to steady her nerves, she tried to size up the man before her.

“Mr. Janson—”

“Please, call me Sloan.”

The too-many-teeth smile stretched across his face again. Who did he think he was? A candidate for President of the United States?

“Mr. Janson, I don’t do readings for people I just met. I try to restrict my help to people I know.” She started to rise from her lounge chair. “So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be asking you to please—”

Sloan placed his hand on her arm in an effort to help her rise. In the second their skin touched, an enormous rush of heat flew up Cally’s arm

from the spot where Sloan's hand tightly gripped her. She struggled to stay on her feet while the image of the garden wavered in her view. The world grew fuzzy and even the ground beneath her seemed unstable. Vaguely, as if from a place far away, she heard Houdini's fearful howl.

Minutes, hours could have passed, yet all she sensed was an urgent need to lean closer to Sloan. A pleasurable ache rushed through her abdomen, spreading down between her legs. She closed her eyes, as much to enjoy the sensations spreading through her entire body as to block out the swirling world around her. His face burst into the darkness behind her eyelids. Wetness flooded her panties while the desire she couldn't contain whipped small spasms into longer, stronger ones.

She moaned and reached out for him, wanting him, needing him. *Take me!* Running her tongue over her lips, she lapped up the sweat forming on her skin. She had to have him. More than food. More than air. More than life.

A vision of his tongue skimming over her tits, teasing her nipples into hard pebbles, leapt into her mind and she moaned her frustration. His hands ran over her body, exploring the lush curves, delighting in the swell of her. In her trance, she reached out for his pulsing shaft to lead it to her, inside her.

Yet, even when her body swayed in his direction hoping to match the vision to reality, the familiar voice in her head screamed the words she knew so well. Warning her of danger. Warning her to beware. Warning her of him.

No, Cally! Stay away. The price is too high.

And, as she had all her life, she obeyed.

With quiet determination, she calmed her breathing, and stability returned, allowing her to stand on her own. Once her vision cleared, she looked down at the place where Sloan still clutched her arm, almost expecting to see smoke and scorched skin.

"Cally, are you okay?" She heard the excitement and tension in his tone. "Did you feel that?"

She glanced up to find him peering at her, worry creases fracturing his perfect features. Her body trembled and she yanked her arm from his grasp. "I'm fine. I guess I stood up too quickly after being out in the sun too long." Edginess snaked through her, and she avoided looking at him, knowing he would question her answer. Why couldn't he just leave? "I think I'd better get out of the sun and lie down for awhile. So excuse me, I'm going inside."

Turning toward the cottage, she felt him grab her arm once more. A less turbulent shock registered, but this time she managed to keep her equilibrium. Confronting him, she glared into his frowning face.

"I said, 'Excuse me'!"

When he didn't release her, she jerked away, causing him to pull her arm. "Ouch. You're hurting me. Let me go!"

"I'm sorry, Cally, but if you'll give me a minute—"

"Hey! Whoever you are, let go of her right now!"

Swiveling in sync with Sloan, Cally turned to see a young man, roughly the size of a small gorilla, wearing a scowl and eating up the ground as he sped toward them. A diminutive brunette woman came right behind him, racing to keep up.

* * *

"Billy, baby, she's all right now. You go on home, and I'll be there in a bit. Remember, you've got a town council meeting tonight, Mr. Mayor. Better run on home and get the beer and chips ready. You know how upset those boys get if you don't have their favorite beer iced up and ready by the time the meeting starts." Susie Wiggins patted his generous belly before planting a kiss on his unshaven cheek.

Susie often told everyone she loved the fact that her live-in boyfriend was the mayor, even if the job consisted of meeting the four other members of the town council once every other month to shoot the breeze and play poker. Heaven forbid they discuss town business without the aid of a few brews to soothe their parched throats.

Billy glanced at her and Cally smiled back, trying to convince him. The six-foot-four-inch man had the body of a NFL linebacker, but the tender heart of a cuddly puppy. Still, she wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of a bite from that particular puppy. His height along with his width next to the petite, four-foot-six-inch Susie made them the perfect odd couple.

"Well, okay. If you're sure."

Cally nodded along with Susie. As soon as Billy's frame cleared the front door, Susie dropped the unconcerned expression and started questioning her. "So talk. Who was that guy? And why did he hurt you?"

Cally knew she'd gotten her mouth open, but failed to get a sound out before Susie moved on. "He's the man Luke said asked after you, I bet. Well, don't just sit there waiting for the grass to grow, tell me what happened. Lord, getting information out of you is like giving a cat a bath. Come on, girl, what did he want?"

"If you'll slow down and let me get a word in edgewise, I'll tell you. Just let me catch my breath. You and Billy hurried me into the house so fast, I didn't have time to breathe, much less think!"

Cally rose, crossed to the refrigerator, opened the door and searched through the items on the top shelf. She picked up a pitcher of lemonade, turned and slammed the door closed. After placing the pitcher on the table, she scooped a couple of glasses off the counter and poured their drinks. Then, buying a little time for her nerves to settle, she threw Susie a face full of disappointment and pointed to the cigarette in Susie's hand. Using her best teacher-voice, she admonished her friend, "I thought you quit those nasty things."

Susie hastily stubbed out the cigarette by grinding it in the ashtray. "I have quit, I promise. But when I get excited I have to have one. One every once in awhile is okay, right?" She squinted at Cally. "Hey, no changing the subject."

Thank God for Susie Marie Wiggins. Watching Susie pace back and forth in her tiny kitchen, Cally knew she had a great friend. They'd become inseparable buddies from the first day in high school when

they'd both snuck into the girls' restroom and tried on eye shadow. Years later, Cally presented Susie with an enormous box of eye shadow at Susie's seventeenth birthday party, six months to the day after matching Susie and Billy.

"Okay, here goes. He says his name is Sloan Janson and he's a friend of Rob Dillon. You remember. Lisa's new husband? Well, supposedly, he wants me to match him." Reaching for her cup of lemonade, Cally noted her trembling hand. She dropped it onto her lap and scooted her chair under the table. Better to hide the results of the emotional current zapping through her body than to get Susie more upset and excited.

Susie plopped down on the chair next to her. "What do you mean, supposedly? Don't you believe him? I mean, since he's a friend of a friend, he's okay, isn't he? Did you say yes to matching him?"

Cally glanced away, knowing she needed more time to sort through all the strange emotions she'd experienced since meeting Sloan. If she didn't understand, how could she relate any of her feelings to Susie? Keeping silent, she tried to avoid her friend's intense scrutiny. Of course, she should've known avoidance wouldn't stop Susie.

Susie tried probing more. "What's going on, Cal? What bothers you about this guy? Do you think he's some sort of creep or something? Did you say no to matching him or what? Come on, I can see something else is going on here."

Cally regarded her friend, wondering how she might react to her next words. "No, he's not a creep. And I didn't say yes or no." She reached out to take Susie's hand. "Suz, something peculiar happened when he touched me. I had the strongest reaction. Kind of like the feeling I get when I match someone, but much more powerful and fierce." Meeting her friend's gaze, she admitted what bothered her the most. "And the feeling? Let's just say it's very, and I do mean *very* sexual. Hell, I had an orgasm just looking at him. And several more when he touched me."

Susie let out a long, low whistle. "No way! Just by looking at him? Whoa. Talk about a physical attraction."

"And I've met him before. Kind of."

Cally waited for Susie to respond, but when she didn't, she continued, "I had a similar reaction when I saw him at the gas station earlier today. At first, I was drawn to him, in every way you can think of, but then it all changed and I was terrified of him. I swear I couldn't get away from there fast enough. To top it off, he showed up here at the same moment when my thoughts were centered on him. Sort of how you and Billy are sometimes. Like when you sense Billy needs you and you know exactly where to find him."

Susie snorted. "Yeah, well, finding him in Lawson isn't a big deal. He's a big boy in a small town. Besides, everyone knows where everyone is in this fishbowl."

"Yeah, but you know you have a special connection. Don't try to make light of it for my benefit." Stopping to take another drink, Cally studied her friend's enraptured face before she spoke again. "I'm worried."

"Worried? Worried how? Did these reactions, or whatever they are, hurt you?" Susie's face radiated curiosity tempered with concern. "Sounds to me like they're pretty damn good reactions. Or is your reaction the reason you're worried?"

Cally mulled over Susie's question. Had Susie tapped into the truth? Had she enjoyed her interaction with Sloan? At least, a little bit? "Before I explain, you've got to promise not to repeat any of this. Not even to Billy." Since Susie and Billy were not only lovers but also friends, she knew this was a major request.

"Come on, Cal. You know you can trust me. But I don't keep secrets from Billy."

Cally sighed. She'd assumed getting Susie to keep a secret from Billy wouldn't happen. Making her decision, she bit her lip and jumped in feet first. "Yes, I do trust you and Billy, too. But I also know how much you love to gossip. So promise. No one else except Billy will hear of this."

"Sure. Whatever you say. You've got my word. Nobody else except Billy."

Rolling her shoulders to lessen the knotted cord of tension in them, Cally explained as best she could. "I don't know how to describe this. No, the sensation didn't cause any pain. At least, not like you mean it. More like being twirled round and round until you get dizzy. Plus, the heat rushing through my whole body seemed so hot it should have burned me. And it hit so fast and so hard I almost fell over from the blow. But the heat didn't burn or hurt me in any way. Oh, I don't know how to explain what happened. I don't understand myself." Tears welled up in her eyes as she lowered her head, hoping to calm the wild currents swirling inside her.

Susie touched Cally's arm and squeezed. "So if these things don't hurt, why are you so bothered by them? Why are you frightened of this man? Listen, Cally, if you think you're in any danger, we can make certain he doesn't come near you again."

"No. I don't think he's here to hurt me." Cally paused to reflect on her statement. "But I don't believe he wants to get matched, either. Something else is going on." Unease wormed its way into her thoughts, making her decide to voice her real concern. "I don't think I should trust him."

"Gee, Cally, that's not much help. You don't think you can trust any man if he shows the slightest interest in you."

"You know it's more than a simple matter of trust. I'm a matchmaker. That's my purpose in life and I won't give up my gift for any man." Cally glared at Susie. Who was she to judge her? "Besides, what about you? When are you going to give in to Billy and marry the poor guy? You know he's ready to start having a kid."

"Hey, we're not discussing my love life. I'll put on a wedding ring when I'm damn good and ready. But shoot, Cal, I don't see why you can't have a little happiness in your life, too."

Cally started to protest when Susie threw her own words back at her. "Yeah, I know, I know. I've heard you say the same old spiel a million times. 'Relationships are fine for everyone else, but matchmakers live to match other people. To love is to lose the gift.' But Cal, just because the

matchmakers in your family ended up powerless and alone doesn't mean the same will happen to you. Why should you have to choose between loving someone and matching people? Not all men are like your dad. He left your mother, not you."

He left both of us, but my getting the gift was what finally sent him out the door. Cally started to object, but decided not to try. Echoes of harsh words and slamming doors reverberated through her mind. Even if she could believe her father had left her mother and not her too, didn't his desertion prove matchmakers shouldn't want love and marriage? Losing the gift wasn't worth the chance at a relationship. Especially since the relationship was doomed to disintegrate later. Yet trying to convince Susie was as easy as fighting a pig for an ear of corn.

"Hey, girl, look at me." Mischief sparked in Susie's eyes. "Listen to me before you start objecting, all right? Try to put aside everything your mom told you and open up your mind to some possibilities. Try to let some light in through your hard head."

Susie paused as though waiting for her to argue. But, despite the urge to do so, she kept her retorts to herself. Instead, she nodded her cooperation so Susie would continue. The sooner she let her speak, the sooner the speech would end.

"Do you think maybe it's possible you're attracted to this man?"

"Well, duh." Who wouldn't be attracted to him?

"I mean more than sexually. Consider my idea for a minute. Maybe these intense emotions and reactions you're experiencing are signs you've met *your* soul's match? After all, you said yourself you might have a mental connection with him. Like Billy's and mine." Susie's mouth twitched as she tried not to smile but, in the end, she couldn't resist sporting a know-it-all grin.

Disbelief registered through Cally's body. Susie's ideas came too close to her own earlier thoughts. But she wouldn't accept the possibility of a mental link with Sloan. The ramifications of such a connection would be enormous, and could threaten all she held dear.

“No way, Susie. I got turned on by a sexy man. Nothing more. We are not connected. Even if this man is my soul mate, which, I reiterate, could not happen, why would his presence make me so upset and nervous?”

“I don’t know, Cal. Seems to me—”

“A more likely explanation of his showing up is because he asked around and found out where I lived. He must have tracked me down. And I don’t like that idea at all.”

“Okay, don’t get all riled up. And stop scowling at me.” Susie paused to sip her drink. “You know, we could give your Aunt Miriam a call. Since she’s a matchmaker, too, she might be able to help, don’t you think? After all, she’s the one who taught your mom about the gift. Now that your mom’s gone, she’s the only other matchmaker alive, right? So who knows? Maybe she’ll know what these reactions are. Heck, at the very least, she’d like getting out of Houston to come visit you.”

Cally shook her head and explained. “No, Susie. I’m certain there isn’t a connection between the two of us. So let’s not bother Aunt Miriam. I’m making a lot of fuss over nothing and I’ll probably never see him again. Right?”

An ache cut through her at the thought of never seeing him again. Never getting to hold his shaft in her hand. Never experiencing his body next to hers. She shook it off, preferring to believe the pain came from her ruffled nerves. Hoping to lighten the mood, she grinned and brought up an old argument. “Besides, Houdini didn’t like him at all.”

“Oh, cripes, Cally. Don’t go using that walking roadkill for an excuse again. Houdini’s never liked any man when they’re around you. Personally, I think he’s a jealous lover from a previous lifetime reincarnated to protect you.”

“A reincarnated lover? Cool.” Cally scooped up the grumbling cat rubbing against her leg, flipped him on his back, and started scratching his stomach. The snarls vanished and turned into purrs of satisfaction. “Are you protecting me, you sweet little putty?”

Cally's mind turned back to Sloan, wiping the contented smile from her face. Susie, too, appeared to be deep in thought again. Several minutes passed until she broke the silence between them.

"Okay, here's the situation. You've got two choices. You can give him his reading and send him along his merry way. Or you can try to stay out of his path until he gives up and goes home, which won't be easy to do in a small place like Lawson." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "So, Cal, what's it going to be?"

Chapter Four

Sloan knew when to stay and, more important, when to leave. Seeing the thunderous look on the Gorilla-man barreling toward him, he'd released Cally's arm and moved quickly—all right, admittedly, it was more like a run—back to his car, which he'd parked in front of her home. From there he'd made a hasty retreat to the lodge.

Stretched out on the cot-like bed in the room he'd rented, he took time to reflect on the situation. How he'd managed to stay calm after his hand had touched her arm, he would never know. Talk about vibrations! The instantaneous burst of heat he'd felt from Cally had left him dazed, which was perhaps the reason he'd clung to her arm with such ferocity. He'd felt as if his flesh had been soldered to her skin. The question was whether he hadn't let go because he couldn't or because he wouldn't. Surely this was some sort of powerful animal attraction, right? The type of attraction he wouldn't have thought possible. And Cally had to have felt something too. For a few seconds, she'd leaned toward him, possibly for a kiss, then stiffened up and pulled away. What did all that mean?

Sloan envisioned Cally Mathews' frightened eyes—deep and blue like the Mediterranean Sea. A man could set sail in those eyes and never come back. He remembered wanting to reach out and touch the cute little freckles racing across her nose. And thinking about her full, rosy lips made his stomach tighten into a hard knot.

Sloan licked his own lips and wished he could taste her tempting mouth. Better yet, he'd love to taste her lips between her legs. He bet sweet nectar wouldn't taste as good. Then he could drown in the sweetness of her juices while he watched those incredible eyes cloud over in desire.

Was he crazy? This was no time to get involved in a fling. Especially with someone he intended to investigate. Besides, he had a hunch that if he ever allowed himself to get tangled up with this lady, he'd never break free. And, worse, he had an even stronger feeling that he wouldn't want to try.

Reluctantly, Sloan dragged his mind back to reality. He was here to get the story and expose the plan of a couple of small town gold diggers. Since Rob had been hitched for only a short time, the courts might give him an annulment, making the end of the marriage happen almost as quickly as the marriage had. If he could spare his friend the results of a hasty union and a long painful divorce to follow, he'd have returned the favor Rob had done for him. When Gloria, his now ex-wife, left him after only a few tumultuous months, Rob had helped pick up the pieces of Sloan's smashed heart and deflated pride.

He'd get Rob out of this quickie marriage somehow. But Sloan's mind wouldn't stay focused on a plan. Instead, his mouth began to water and hunger grumbled in his stomach. Leaning over the side of the bed, he rifled through the sack on the floor containing some assorted snacks and drinks he'd picked up earlier in the day. But he didn't see the food he wanted. *Damn.* What he wanted was pork rinds.

Pork rinds? Since when had he ever wanted that junk? But the taste, the smell of the snack would not leave his thoughts. How did he know how pork rinds smelled or what they tasted like when he'd never eaten them before? Good grief, could staying in a hick town turn him into a pork-rind-eating goober? Where was this strange craving coming from? Not waiting to come up with answers to his questions, he raced out of the lodge and jumped into his car, his mind set on quenching his strange urge.

* * *

Sloan inspected the convenience store, stuffed to the walls with large racks and their offerings. Now where were those blasted snacks? And not just any snack would do. He had to have some pork rinds. And he had to

have them now. Even if he had to risk facing Teenage Nymphet, Millie Jo. Fortunately, she'd had her head immersed in a magazine, sucking on a Popsicle, when he'd walked in and she hadn't looked up yet.

Spotting several bags of chips and other munchies sitting on top of the third shelf, Sloan moved as quietly as possible toward them. Although he tried to understand this sudden desire, he couldn't figure out why the need was so intense. Why couldn't he suppress this crazy craving? And why did Cally's face keep popping up in his mind? What did she have to do with this junk food? He just hoped once he'd eaten some, he'd be able to get his mind back on business.

Sloan strode over to the chip aisle and scanned the selections. Where in the world were the pork rinds? Almost frantic in his quest, he zeroed in on the shelves and, at first, didn't notice a body squatting down in front of the rack. He gritted his teeth, barely managing to suppress a nearly overwhelming primal urge to push this human obstacle away from the shelf and grab his prey.

Move. Whoever you are, get out of my way.

Desperately, he kept looking, craning his neck to see around the shapely frame blocking his view. Yet even while he focused on the figure in front of him, he noticed the odd prickly sensation cascading warmth throughout his body, from the dryness in his throat straight to his dick. In fact, his shaft was a compass pointing directly at the nice, round bottom in front of him. *Thank God for strong jeans!* Forcing away the strange sensation, he continued his search.

Ah, ha! He saw the bag. The one remaining bag of pork rinds left in the store. However, he also saw someone else's hand solidly fixed on the sack.

"Miss, wait a second. I know this will sound strange, but I have this incredible craving for some of those, um, things you're holding." Sloan's accompanying laugh sounded tight and brittle. "You'd think I was pregnant or something, which, of course, I'm not. I mean, I've never tasted them before and now, all of a sudden, I have to have them? Weird, huh?"

He paused to see if his words would generate a response. But none came. "And on top of that, I'm not quite sure what they are. I mean, are they a chip or what? God knows what the stuff's made out of. But whatever they are, I have got to have some. So have a heart, lady, and pass me the pork." Hoping his speech had convinced the woman in front of him, he readied his most engaging smile, willing the person to turn around and hand over the snack.

"Oh, hi-ee. Are you doing all right at the lodge?"

Sloan swiveled, struggled to hide a grimace, and found Millie Jo leaning over the counter with her generous bounty once more on full display. She leered at him and his ever-ready shaft wilted in one quick drop. "You're not getting lonely all by yourself in that big old lodge, are you? 'Cause if you are, I could come over and visit awhile. Maybe with a little something to whet your appetite?" Slowly, sensually, she slid her tongue over the blue Popsicle.

Why did everything this girl say have a double meaning? From the way she looked at him, he felt like the special catch of the day. Sloan's flesh crawled at the thought.

"Millie Jo, you're asking for trouble."

He whipped around at the sound of the lilting voice, and clamped his hands onto the pair holding the chip bag. She looked down at his hands covering hers then back up at him. He stood still, staring into the brilliant sapphires locked onto him, and let his gaze wander to the full lips uttering the softest of whispers.

"You again."

Sloan's delighted surprise at seeing Cally standing before him was offset by the astonished look on her face. "Uh, hi, Cally." She was the reason for the tingling ripples running up and down his arms. A rush of heat burst into his groin, renewing the growth of his manhood.

Cally jerked her hands away from his and held the bag in a possessive death grip. "You want pork rinds? I didn't think anyone from the big city ate this kind of food. Strictly for country folk, right?"

“Like I said, I got this incredible urge for pork rinds. So I figured I could pick up some here.”

With her eyebrows shooting downward, Cally’s distrustful expression rammed into his gut. “Right. You just happened to have a craving for something you’ve never, ever tasted before? And you expect me to believe such a bald face lie?” Cally tossed her hair, allowing the sunlight filtering through the dusty windows to pick out the copper in her locks and send reddish tints to catch his attention. At that second, he sensed, more than saw, a sizzle crackle through the air between them. Again, his dick jerked in response and he swallowed, trying to dislodge the knot of lust forming in his throat. What wouldn’t he give to throw her on the floor and bang her brains out right now? Answer? He’d give almost anything.

Unnerved by the enchanting sight and his intense reaction, Sloan pulled himself out of his reverie, and attempted to keep the pleasant appearance on his face. What would she do if she knew his thoughts? Hell, what would she do if she noticed his bulge? He hurried on, hoping to keep her gaze above his waist. “I know my reason sounds lame, but I’m telling you the truth.” Why hadn’t he noticed before how sexy her hair was? Or how her eyes sparkled when she scowled at him? She was the type of woman a man would enjoy getting angry.

They stood motionless, staring at each other. Still trying to clear his head, he wondered at the sound of music filtering into his awareness. Finally, realizing the tones for what they were, he hid his embarrassment, reached for his cell phone and flipped it open. “Sloan here.”

“Hey, it’s me.”

Rob’s voice filtered through his lust-induced haze and into his mind. “Yeah, Rob. What’s up?”

At the mention of Rob’s name, Cally’s head jerked up, surprise and curiosity filling her features. A look of irritation replaced the first expression, and she turned to leave.

Why’d he go and say Rob’s name? Obviously, hearing Rob’s name had sent warning alarms blaring through her mind. “Wait, Cally.”

When she faced him, he raised a finger, hoping to convince her to give him some time. “Cally, hang on a minute, okay? Please.” Not giving her a chance to say no, he renewed his phone conversation. “Go on.”

Rob’s laughter echoed through the line. “Cally’s right there? So you actually took me up on the challenge, didn’t you? I can’t believe you did. You’re in Lawson to see if she’s the real deal, aren’t you? Of course, I knew that from the call I got. So tell me what you think. Is she real or a fake?”

Trying not to give away any of their conversation, Sloan answered Rob the only way he could think of without saying something to incriminate himself. “The jury’s still out.”

“Okay, but I know she’ll convince you in short order so you can drop all these stupid accusations and haul your ass back here. To grovel in apology at my bride’s feet, of course. Don’t worry, bro. I won’t make you suffer too much. Not after you buy me the biggest steak in Dallas.”

“Yeah, right. Don’t plan on buying any steak sauce, man.”

Rob chuckled before he continued. “Hey, I’m calling because I got a call from Susie Wiggins. She’s Cally’s best friend.”

Again, Cally moved toward the counter. And again, Sloan raised his finger to stop her. But this time, he added more effort to his request by placing his hand over his heart in a gesture of pleading and mouthing the word “please”.

She stopped and threw him a hard look. Then, moving with exaggerated movements, she held out the bag of pork rinds, raised one eyebrow as if to say “Watch this” and gently pulled the bag from both sides. The bag split open and the smell of spicy heaven wafted into his nostrils. He fought against the urge to run his tongue over his upper lip, and lost.

Cally adopted an evil smirk and, reaching in with two fingers, picked out one single rind and placed it on her tongue. An expression of ecstasy filled her features while she rolled the chip around in her mouth.

Oh, shit. Sloan watched in fascination as both of his desires came together. The pork rind he craved played on her enticing, talented

tongue. *Sweet, holy shit.* What would he give for her to use her tongue on him? Answer again? Almost anything.

“Sloan, you there? Yo, Sloan?”

Again, he forced his attention back to the conversation. “Yeah, sorry, I’m here. What did you say about a call?”

“I thought I’d lost the signal for a minute. But it seems you scared Cally when you showed up at her home. What’d you do, man?”

Once more, he watched, mesmerized as she delicately placed another rind on the tip of her tongue. Putting Millie Jo’s Popsicle show to shame, she mocked him as she closed her eyes in bliss. Right now, he wasn’t sure which sight intoxicated him more: the object of his craving being savored by another, or the sight of her sensually sucking the salt from her fingers. Of course, the latter vision created a craving of a totally different kind. One he knew he wouldn’t satisfy any time soon.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to keep all the sensations roaring inside him from seeping into his tone. “Nothing. I didn’t do anything. The uh, subject is very skittish around me for some reason.” Sloan didn’t want to confide in Rob about the unusual occurrences with Cally; especially with Cally standing right in front of him, toying with him. Instead, he barked, “So what did you tell her?”

She continued to nibble at the snack while he fought to keep his attention with Rob. Adding to his initial vexation was the sight of a devilish smile playing at the corners of her mouth each time she popped another treat inside. And with each disappearing chip, his dick tightened his jeans a little more. The only question was how much more stress his jeans could take.

A hesitation floated in the air before Rob answered. “Calm down. I decided not to blow your cover, although I think Lisa would have my head if she knew I’d lied to her friend. Without giving too much information, I told Susie you’re an old pal of mine and you want to see what Cally can do for you. I said you want to settle down, but you’re having a hard time finding the right woman. Pretty funny, huh? You, having a hard time with finding a woman! Or should I have said you’d

like to have a hard time with a woman.” Rob’s laughter echoed in his ears and he waited a few seconds before Rob gradually became silent.

Damn, if his buddy only knew how true his joke was.

“Sloan, are you sure you don’t have some kind of problem? You sound kind of strange.”

“Naw, I’m fine. No problems here, but I do need to hang up. I’ll check in with you later.” Sloan ended the call by flipping closed his phone.

Cally feigned an expression of contrition yet managed to make her true feelings very apparent. “Oh, please. Don’t let my standing here waiting for you cause you to hang up on your old pal. I’ll be happy to hang around for your convenience. After all, that’s what a good ‘subject’, even a skittish one, would do. Right?”

Sloan mumbled a few choice words under his breath. Then, straightening to his full height, he renewed their previous conversation, ignoring the direct reference to his phone call. “Sorry for the interruption. Now, for the matter at hand. How about at least sharing some of those pork rinds? Before you eat them all.”

Not a smart thing to say from the expression on her face.

“Nope. Not a chance. I’ve got a craving for these little babies, too. And since I got here first, they’re mine. But maybe you could ask Millie Jo to check in the back. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind helping you.”

More like helping herself to me.

Cally turned on her heel and started for the counter where Millie Jo sat, observing and, judging by the width of her smile, enjoying the whole interaction. Halfway there, however, she turned around and once again scrutinized him.

“Mr. Janson, you wouldn’t be following me, would you?” An expression of worry crept over her face as she peered at Sloan. “I mean, this is twice you’ve shown up some place where I was. Quite a coincidence, wouldn’t you say?” The worried expression morphed into a suspicious one. “Or not.”

Following her? Man, where did she get these ideas? Sloan controlled his tone of voice, not allowing his indignation to filter through. “No, of

course not. Although I'd still like to talk to you about doing a reading for me."

Sloan inched closer to her. Cally reacted by stepping back from him, a look of alarm flickering across her face. His stomach dropped to the ground. What did she think he'd do? Attack her? Anger grabbed him, adding to his frustration, and he abruptly changed his mind about the snack.

"You know what? Never mind about the pork rinds. I don't want them anymore."

Sloan turned to the counter where Millie Jo sat grinning in her ringside seat, and slapped a ten-dollar bill down in front of the teen. Rounding back to Cally, he fought to keep his temper, but a bit of his anger slipped through anyway. "Please, take the pork rinds. My treat. I'll give you a call in a day or so, after you've had time to realize all I want from you is one lousy matching."

He wheeled around and headed to the door, eager to put distance between the exasperating woman and him. "Millie Jo, keep the change."

* * *

Cally sat on the bank of the pond, tearing up slices of bread and tossing them bit by bit to the geese clamoring around her. "Henry, don't be such a pig, for heaven's sake. Deedee wants some, too, and she has little babies to take care of."

The large gander cocked his head to the side as if he'd understood her words. While he was distracted, the smaller goose snatched the last piece of bread lying next to Henry's webbed feet.

"Good for you, Deedee." Cally stuck out her tongue at the angry Henry who honked his displeasure at being robbed. "Serves you right, Henry, for being such a hog." She laughed at the thought. "Imagine you, part gander and part hog. Now that really would be a sight to see. Which would you be? A honking hog or an oinking goose? Either way you're liable to end up on someone's holiday table."

Henry ruffled his feathers at her and stomped his feet. He charged her, his honks strident and fierce, but Cally stayed where she sat. "Oh, hush up, you old bird. You know I'm just kidding. Sheesh, sometimes I think you really do understand what I say. Don't you, Horrible Henry?"

Shaking the plastic bag upside down, she gave the geese the bad news first. "I'm sorry, everyone, but the bread's all gone. But don't be too sad because you know I'll be back next week. Same time, same place."

I wonder what he's doing right now.

She grunted in frustration. "Why can't I stop thinking about him? I've got to remember the reason why I came out here." *To take my mind off that man. Yeah, that pushy, overbearing, hyena-grinning, gorgeous, make-my-mouth-water man. Argh!* "I can't let him creep back into my thoughts even if I have to keep talking to myself to keep him out." She bumped her head with her palm as if trying to knock him out of her mind.

Cally gathered up her blanket and marched over the grassy knoll rising between the pond and her car. Reaching the top of the hill, she stared in disbelief at her vehicle before dashing to the side of the road.

"Oh, no! Not now. Not here." Hard realization sank in to rest like a ton of bricks on her shoulders as she ran her hand over the top of the tire. "Jeez-Louise, the damn tire finally went flat." How'd she let this happen? Roddy, the garage mechanic, had warned her about the tire, spelling out the dangers of a slow leak. He'd cautioned her about getting too far from home and getting stuck in the middle of nowhere. She'd meant to return to Roddy's Garage before her luck ran out, but something else always seemed more urgent. And now her good fortune had packed up and skedaddled out of town, leaving her stranded.

Hearing a loud squawking sound, Cally turned in the direction of the pond and found Henry a few yards away, flapping his wings at her while waddling back and forth. Squinting at the gander, she'd have sworn his beak molded into something resembling a smirk. "Watch out, Henry. Don't smile at my bad luck or you'll get hit with bad karma. And hunting season isn't far off." She flicked the blanket gently at the bird, sending him screeching back to the water's edge. "Go on now, you old gander."

“Honk.”

Cally jumped at the loud sound emanating from behind her. Whipping around, she saw a dark blue Lexus parked in front of her Honda Accord. She squinted and tried to see through the tinted windows, but couldn't see anything. Apprehension seeped into her, making her wonder whether she should seek safety in her car, or turn and run in the other direction. She was about to take flight when Sloan's head appeared above the top of the Lexus. His smile caught her, holding her in its brilliance and washing away her anxiety in the warmth flowing over her. In its place, an unsettling, yet pleasant anticipation grew.

“Cally, are you all right? You seem frightened. Did I startle you?”

She noted the concern on Sloan's face and wondered if it was sincere. Or had he meant to spook her? She swallowed, determined not to show any fear and narrowed her eyes at him. Her anxious mind ran wild with questions. How had he known where she was yet again? Could he be stalking her? She followed his movements as he walked around his car and saw the flat tire on hers.

“You've got some trouble, haven't you? Guess it's a good thing I came along when I did. I don't suppose you have a spare, do you?”

Sloan's smile remained steady even when she motioned toward the trunk of her car. She could get used to his smile. Maybe even grow to like it a bit. Maybe a lot. After all, he did have a handsome face to go along with that flashing grin of his. And if the way his muscles moved under his shirt were any indication of his brawn, she could get used to his body, too. *Crap, Cally, don't go there.*

“You do? And I'm supposed to understand from your silence that it's in your trunk?”

A flicker of irritation rose at his patronizing tone. Well, where else would she keep a spare tire? But instead of voicing her retort, she shot him an oh-you-are-just-so-funny look, and placed her hands on her hips. *Forget the fantastic smile and bod and remember his sarcastic mouth.*

“Not planning on talking, huh? Or is this some sort of new game we're playing?”

“Very cute, Mr. Janson.” Cally dropped her blanket and sack, and moved forward to the trunk, annoyance now replacing her initial trepidation. Maybe if she stayed mad at him, her attraction to him would die out, too. With the trunk opened, she placed one hand on a hip and waved the other in a flourish to indicate the tire.

Obliging her, he leaned over to inspect the spare. “Ah, good. But I don’t suppose you have a jack or a tire iron hidden somewhere else, do you? I sure don’t see either one of those in here.”

Cally felt her cheeks redden as she realized she didn’t have the necessary tools to change a tire. She’d taken those out last week to make room for the clothing she’d donated to the church thrift shop.

“Well, don’t worry. I’ve got one of each in my trunk. They do come in handy sometimes.” With a quick wink, he walked to the trunk of the Lexus, opened it, and brought out a jack and tire iron in rapid succession.

Cally remained where she was, not wanting to get any closer to Sloan than she had to. She was in no hurry to have any reoccurrences of the big electrical storm like the one she’d experienced in her garden. Instead, she stood her ground and decided to voice the questions running through her head.

“How is it, Mr. Janson, you happened out this way? I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but I find it strange that you would be the one person who comes along to find me. Especially since this road isn’t exactly a direct route to the lodge. In fact, only a few locals know about this little pond and how to get here. Yet, you found it. Or should I say, you found me?” She fought to keep her face devoid of any emotion, especially any that might betray her doubts about him. Nonetheless, she couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her tone.

Working with sure, easy movements, Sloan loosened the lug nuts and elevated the vehicle to remove the flattened tire. Hearing her question, he turned to study her, his green eyes setting off flecks of gold flashing in the sunlight. “To tell the truth, I don’t know why I came out here. In fact, I stopped by your house and, since you weren’t home, I went around

town trying to find you. Then, for no reason at all, I decided to drive out into the country. I admit I was thinking of you—you know, about getting a reading from you—when something inside me told me to turn down the gravel road and head this way. Before I knew it, I spotted your car.” A thoughtful, quizzical expression crossed his face.

Cally groaned. *Could this be another indication of a mental connection? No, I refuse to believe we’re linked in any way.*

Irritation flooded her body, stiffening her neck. Could he have followed her? Was he some sort of nutcase out to do her bodily harm? A slight shudder shook her at the thought and she could tell he’d noticed.

His warm smile slid across his features again. “Relax, Cally. I’m no madman or anything. You’re perfectly safe with me, even without your two bodyguards, Gorilla-man and his sidekick, Powerful Polly Petite.”

She bit her lip to keep from grinning at his joke. Instead, she studied his strong hand as he passed his fingers through his unruly hair. At the same moment, Cally’s hand itched to do the same. Her mind wandered, envisioning how one touch would feel. *I bet his hair is soft and thick. Like running my fingers through—*

“Cally? Yo, Cally? I asked you a question.”

She jerked her attention back to the present to find Sloan snapping his fingers at her.

“I lost you for a minute. Where did you go?” No concern was evident in his tone or on his face this time. Instead, he appeared unconcerned, perhaps even amused by her.

“Uh, nowhere. I mean, I guess in the heat and all, I sort of daydreamed for a second.”

“Yeah, seems so. But anyway, I asked you if you’d been out here for long.” Without hesitating for her answer, Sloan grabbed the bottom of his shirt and whipped it over his head. “Whew. This heat is really nasty.”

Caught off guard by his disrobing, Cally forgot to answer his question. Instead, all she could do was focus on the man before her. And struggle to breathe.

Sloan revealed a well-toned torso, tanned and powerful looking. His physique left no doubt he knew the importance of keeping himself in shape. And she was a woman who appreciated a man who did.

Cally released a small *puh* of air before she could contain her reaction, and blushed at her lapse of control. Yet she forgot about her embarrassment when he turned back to his work, treating her to a sight any woman would sigh over. Strong muscles moved whenever his arms worked on the task at hand. She watched, almost in envy, as a trickle of sweat ran a torturously delightful path down his shoulder blades. Without warning, the air seemed thicker, hotter than seconds before, and she knew something more than the weather had caused the change.

Nobody who looked that good without a shirt could possibly be dangerous, right? Or at least not dangerous in a bad way, right? Because he was definitely one honey of a hunk.

Right, Cal. All homicidal rapists are skinny with horrible bodies.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder what those arms would feel like wrapped around her. Heaven knows how she'd love to run her hands down his back, feeling ripple after masculine ripple of toned muscles. And once she reached his lower back, she'd slide her hand around to the front, down his pants and straight over the throbbing bulge.

Hmm, I think I'll reach out and—

Get a grip, girl.

In response to her own mental berating, Cally grabbed the blanket, calling out to Sloan as she whirled and headed back to the pond. "Uh, I really appreciate your assistance, but since I'm not any help, I'll wait at the pond."

Even facing a grumpy Henry will be safer than watching Sloan's virile body— Urgh! Stop it, right now, Cally.

Once back at the pond, she flopped down on the grass, ignoring the need to lay the blanket down first.

* * *

"All finished. Your carriage awaits, my queen." The rest of Sloan's flippant words caught in his throat when he came over the low hill and saw the most beautiful sight he'd ever hoped to see. Stopping in his tracks, he whistled a low, appreciative sound as he gazed upon Cally's curvaceous form. She sat next to a pond, her hair dancing across her shoulders with the breeze, the curve of her neck giving new meaning to the word *touchable*. Raising both arms, she tunneled her fingers through her hair, arched her back, and lifted her face toward the warmth of the sun.

Slowly, she turned around to look at him. With a soft smile playing over her lips, she rose and swayed toward him. *Wow. She really could be royalty.*

Her smile grew and he sucked in a gasp at the explosion surging through his body. Once again, the odd sensation traveled from his fingertips to his toes and he used all his effort just to stay on his feet. "Cally, did you—"

She wobbled, breaking her stride, almost as if bumped by an unseen force. Frowning, she questioned him. "What were you going to say?"

Intuition told him not to ask the question he desperately wanted to ask. Had she experienced the same reaction? "Nothing. Never mind."

An expression of relief slipped over her face and she continued toward him. Watching her, he noticed a stiffness overtake her walk. Was she still nervous about him? He knew if he had any chance of getting a reading from her, he'd have to get her to trust him.

"Ready?" Cally's long fingers reached up to flip a lock of hair away from her forehead. For a minute, he wished those elegant fingers would reach out and touch his face while her other hand touched his shaft. At the thought, his dick twitched, ready to play.

Shit. This woman had an uncanny way of putting his body on high alert.

What'd she just asked? Ready? Hell, yes, he was ready. He doubted any man had ever been as ready.

"My tire's changed? Oh, good." She offered him a small smile for all his efforts. A smile he'd gladly change ten tires to see.

The sun started its downward crawl, illuminating her from behind, and throwing a golden background around her softly curved body. Even when the light started to dim, the brilliance of the scene before him captured all other words from his mind, rendering him speechless.

"Mr. Janson?"

Finally, he managed to mutter a response. "Um, right. Your car's ready."

"Thank you so much for your help. You saved me from taking a really long hike." Cally's smile faltered, but then grew brighter, making her blue eyes dance with silvery highlights.

His brain activity stalled while the activity between his legs kicked into high gear. "Uh, sure. No problem. I'm glad I could help. Besides, this gave me a chance to practice my knight-in-shining-armor routine."

Mustering all the stamina he could find, he forced his thoughts back to reality and the job at hand. "But since I did help you, I'm hoping you might think more favorably toward doing a reading for me? Maybe I should've mentioned this before, but I'm willing to pay a substantial fee for your services. Like Rob, money's not a problem for me." He scrutinized her face for a reaction, yet didn't see even a flicker of greed. "When would be a good time for you?" He returned her smile with one of his own. But while he waited for an answer, he took note of her many physical distractions. His gaze roamed from her face, sliding down her full breasts and, after a pause to imagine how heavy they'd feel in his hands, kept on going to the cleft between her legs. He gulped with the sudden urge to push her on top of the car and ram his throbbing cock deep inside her.

Yeah, like that would ever happen. Such animalistic, albeit fantastic actions would only prove her rotten assumptions about him. How could a beautiful woman like this seem so unapproachable? He wondered how her lips would feel if he took a little nip of one. Would she nibble back? Would she nibble lower? How would she taste if he brushed his tongue

along that strong chin she was jutting out? Or the ripe nub he knew lay between her legs? He felt his attention lower to her chest again and the vortex churning throughout his body started to swirl faster.

“Mr. Janson? Mr. Janson, would you mind keeping your eyes on my face?”

He pulled his stare up to her face. The fire in her expression doubled the effect she had on his body, even though he was well aware her intention was not to inflame him. At least, not in the way it was doing. Or at least, he didn't think so.

“I'm just admiring the package.” His statement garnered the response he thought it would. The sizzling embers burning in her eyes erupted into flames and he felt an odd sort of delight in her anger. Not the smartest thing to say to a woman, but he'd couldn't resist seeing the beauty of her rage.

“Gee, thanks. My heart's all a-flutter. And as for obtaining a reading, you don't do yourself any favors with rude remarks like that.” Thrusting out her chin, Cally marched to the side of her car, throwing the rest of her retort over her shoulder. “And I don't care about your money, Mr. Janson. Didn't Rob and Lisa tell you? I don't charge for readings.”

Perhaps because she's going for the bigger payoff in the divorce settlement of her victims? Sloan knew his next words might rankle her more, but the little devil inside him couldn't keep his mouth shut. “Well, Cally, I hate to bring this up, but you do owe me a favor. Now don't you?” Inwardly he cringed at his own poor behavior while he struggled to keep his face unreadable. *Ball's in your court, babe.*

She yanked open her car door and threw the blanket over the driver's seat and into the back. Whirling around to face him, she glared at him, her gaze searing through him. “Is that why you've been following me? Showing up everywhere I go? Playing white knight to my damsel in distress?”

His mouth fell open in disbelief. “What are you talking about? Are you accusing me of following you? Are you delusional, lady?” The ire in him boiled over, sending tremors through his body. Fighting against the

urge to yell, he controlled his voice, hoping to bring some sanity back into the conversation. “Look, Cally. I don’t know where you get these ideas of yours. Every time we’ve run into each other, I had a strange inclination—a compulsion, really—to go to that place. For instance, I really wanted pork rinds the other day. And today, I felt I had to go down this road. Which, by the way, saved your sorry butt.”

Striding to where she stood by her car, he leaned against the hood, placing his hands on either side of her. He pressed forward, bringing his face inches from hers, and caught the smell of her perfume. “Call it coincidence or whatever, but don’t accuse me of following you again. Maybe we’re tied to each other in some weird psychic way? After all, you’re the supposed expert in all this, so you should know. That load of crap makes as much sense as anything else does right now.”

He could see the shock inside her as she trembled. At the same time, fear spread over her face, and an invisible wall went up around her. Something about his last words had hit home. And whatever it was frightened her more than he knew she’d ever admit.

Trying to understand her reaction to his words, he was only vaguely aware of her pushing him back and away from her car. Without another word, she slid into her car and slammed the door. Glaring at him once more, she turned the ignition, threw the lever into drive, and stomped on the gas.

Sloan watched the red car speed down the road, spewing gravel out behind the wheels. “Okay, Cally, run. But I’m going to find out why you’re so afraid of me.”

Chapter Five

“You know, dear, sometimes I think your Aunt Miriam must have gotten her wires crossed the day she matched Willard and me.”

Cally looked up from her work in the garden to see her neighbor leaning on the fence separating their two yards. Mrs. Perkins waved at her, fingers wiggling in the air.

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Perkins. What’s Mr. Perkins done now?” Cally rose, dusted off her jeans, and joined the elderly woman at the fence.

“Oh, the stubborn old toot! He’s refusing to budge from that horrid chair of his. I want to attend the flower show in Dallas, but will he take me? *Humph!* ‘Too far. Too hot. Too much trouble,’ he says.” Mrs. Perkins waved her hands in the air, flicking them outward with every “too” she said.

Cally giggled at the expression on the older woman’s face. “Now, Mrs. Perkins, tell the truth. You know you’d be lost without him. I mean, you couldn’t have stayed together for fifty years if you were incompatible.” For emphasis, Cally patted the older lady’s hands.

“I expect you’re right. Cally, you’re such a sweetie. You always see the good in that old fart.” Mrs. Perkins shook her head while Cally laughed.

“Mrs. Perkins! You better watch your language.”

“Oh, pish, posh. You’ve heard worse and I’ll bet you’ve said worse, too. Now what was I going to tell you? Oh, now I remember. I wanted to tell you about a young gentleman who came by the other day and asked after you. A nice-looking man. Very polite too. If only I could remember his name.”

Cally felt the color drain from her face. “Was his name Sloan Janson?”

Mrs. Perkins’ face lit up with delight at her question, missing Cally’s obvious dismay. “Why yes. Is he a new fellow in your life? Although I suspect you two must not know each other too well for him to be asking all those questions.”

What was Sloan doing back here? “What—what kind of questions did he ask?”

Still unaware of Cally’s uneasiness, Mrs. Perkins touched the end of her nose, again trying to make her memory respond. “Well, let’s see. Seems to me a lot of his questions were about your matchmaking. I told him about your Aunt Miriam matching Willard and me. Of course, I also let him know you’ve done your fair share of putting people together, too. But you know what? He didn’t seem too pleased when he found out how many folks around here owe their happiness to you.”

Mrs. Perkins glanced around the yard as if looking for anyone who might be eavesdropping. Even though no one was around, she lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Since he appeared disturbed by your matchmaking successes, I decided I’d better tell your young gentleman what a delightful neighbor and wonderful teacher you are. Which is, of course, all true. I told him I couldn’t imagine how you keep so trim and fit with all the delicious dishes you cook.” She dipped her head and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Mrs. Perkins, you know I’m a horrible cook. Why would you lie to him?”

The crafty expression on her face told Cally everything. “Sweetie, I didn’t lie. Not exactly. Sometimes one has to embellish the truth a bit to keep a man interested. Just be sure you don’t cook for him until he’s already sold on all your other assets. You know—”

In the rush of thoughts cascading through her mind, Cally failed to hear the rest of what Mrs. Perkins said until Susie called to them.

“Hi, Cal. Good morning, Mrs. Perkins.” Susie strolled up to the fence, waving to the older lady until she stood beside her.

"Hello there, Susie. How's that handsome man of yours?" asked Mrs. Perkins.

"Oh, he's as ornery as ever. But I think I've about got him trained." Susie shared a good-natured chuckle with the older woman.

"Good for you, honey. But don't go thinking you can get them in line in a few short years." Tipping her head to view Susie over the top of her bifocals, she asked the same question she always asked. "Young lady, when are you two getting hitched and giving your mamma some grandchildren?"

Cally grimaced, knowing Susie struggled to answer politely. Mrs. Perkins was one of the few people who could ask Susie the *M* question without getting blasted by Susie's fiery temper. "Now, Mrs. Perkins, you know what I think about marriage. We Wiggins women don't like to get tied down. At least, not legally speaking." The innocent expression Susie threw Cally left no doubt about the sexual innuendo behind her words.

"Pish, tosh. Don't give me that load of hooey. I know you're scared stiff at the thought of ending up divorced three times over like your mamma. But Billy's a good man, and you'd better jump on his offer before he decides to bust loose and go hunting for some other little thing. Am I understood?"

"Yes, ma'am. You're understood." Susie lowered her head and mumbled to her chest. "Still doesn't mean I'm getting married just 'cause you and my mamma say so."

Knowing the elderly woman was hard of hearing, Cally was certain she hadn't heard Susie's quiet mumble. She kept her cheerful smile in place and tried to ignore the looks Susie kept tossing her way.

"Good. Well, I'll leave you young ladies to your visit while I try to rouse that old coot of mine out of his chair." With a quick nod of her head, Mrs. Perkins turned toward her house.

Watching Mrs. Perkins shuffle away, Cally swatted her friend's arm and whispered, "One of these days she's going to wear her hearing aid and then you'll get caught in one of your sassy remarks."

"So what, Cal? I don't say anything she doesn't already know."

“Never mind. I need to talk to you. He’s been here again.” She paused to let her words sink in. “He asked Mrs. Perkins questions about my matchmaking. And he’s followed me, too.” She related the events at the gas station and the pond, stressing how Sloan had appeared from out of nowhere each time.

Without a word in response, Susie opened the gate, grabbed her arm, and led her into the kitchen. She tugged Cally into a chair and fell into the seat opposite her. Susie slapped her hands on the table and bent toward her. “He’s followed you again? Now that is weird.” She stopped and chewed on the end of her nail. “Unless, of course, the link between you two is real and he’s drawn to you.”

Cally’s hand came down hard on the tabletop, causing the sugar bowl to rattle. “No! Will you please stop your accusations? There is absolutely nothing between that man and me. Stop trying to insinuate that there is.” But the uninvited thoughts crept in anyway.

Could there really be a connection? She cringed at the idea. *No, I will not accept the possibility. I won’t open myself up to heartache.*

But Susie wasn’t about to let the idea drop. “Just for the sake of curiosity, if this Janson guy was your soul mate, would you choose him over your gift?”

“Will you leave it alone? Besides, you know how much helping people means to me.” Sighing, she stared at the tabletop, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “I’m sorry I shouted at you, Suz. But can we please concentrate on what’s really going on?”

Holding up both hands in supplication, Susie tried calming her. “Okay, Cal, okay. Take it easy.” Yet the excited glow on her features wouldn’t fade.

Cally stared at Susie as the tension between them thickened the air. She loved Susie like a sister, but sometimes she wished she could kick some sense into her. Not that it would do any good. Once Susie got an idea in her head, a bulldozer couldn’t dig it out.

As expected, Susie continued voicing her thoughts. “Okay. Then if a psychic link isn’t the cause of all this mess with him, let’s go on the

assumption that he is following you. But if he is, then he obviously doesn't want to hurt you or he would have done so out by the pond, right?"

Cally nodded unwillingly, not wanting to give an inch to Susie's fantastic ideas. Why couldn't this guy just go away?

"And his story at least holds true according to Lisa's new hubby. I called her like I said I would, but I didn't talk to Lisa. Instead, I spoke with Rob. He said Sloan is his friend and that, supposedly, he wants help finding a wife. According to Rob, Sloan's having problems with women."

"Puh-leeze. It's too hard to believe someone with looks like his has a problem attracting the opposite sex. Damn, roadkill would have a harder time attracting flies."

"Ah, ha!" Susie stuck her finger out at her. "So you did notice how handsome he is! Girl, I know you think you can't have love, but I also know a woman would have to be stone cold dead inside not to notice that man. Just thinking about those gorgeous eyes and his magnificent body leads my poor mind into places it shouldn't go. Shoot, if I was the cook and he was the chicken, I'd eat up his drumstick in a flash. He is definitely one yummy piece of man."

At first, she started to deny the allegations but, deciding Susie knew her too well to be fooled, she nodded. "Yeah, you're right. He is amazingly handsome. Almost too good-looking, in fact. Which makes his story a little difficult to swallow, don't you think?"

A brief silence followed while Cally contemplated the possibility of Sloan having trouble with women. From the expression on her face, Susie examined the validity of his story, too.

But the quick-witted Susie offered an explanation. "Maybe there's something about him we don't know. Like maybe he's so weird women can't stand him once they get past the hunky appearance."

"Oh, uh-huh. Right. And I'm an alien with two heads."

"Well, okay. Maybe it's not probable, but you never know. Of course, the fact he's asked for a reading only reinforces his story."

“Yeah, I suppose so. I can’t think of any other explanation. Still, something doesn’t seem right.”

After a slight pause, Susie continued, “You know what? I think you should give your aunt a call. I mean, what harm could it do? Who knows? She might have the answers you need.” Cally opened her mouth to object when Susie held up a finger and jumped in. “Now don’t decide until you’ve given some thought to the idea first, okay?”

Cally exhaled, gave Suz an okay-I’ll-think-on-it-just-for-you look and mulled over the suggestion. Would Aunt Miriam be able to help? She imagined the dear old lady had never had anything like this happen to her, so she might end up worrying her for nothing. But then again, Aunt Miriam led a pretty active life, so who knows what her aunt might be able to tell her?

Deciding to take the risk, Cally held out her hand, palm up. “Well, what are you waiting for? Pass me the phone.”

Susie hooted, raised her arms in a triumphant pose and adopted an exultant expression. Quickly giving her the handset, Susie grabbed Cally’s personal address book and began flipping the pages.

Cally smiled weakly at her friend and took the book from her. “I hope we’re not going a bit overboard with all of this.” Concentrating on dialing, she continued to talk. “Now listen. I want you to understand that at the first sign we’re upsetting Aunt Miriam, I’m dropping the whole conversation. After all, she’s getting up there in years, you know. We really don’t know what’s going on with this Sloan Janson guy and— Oh, hi, Aunt Miriam. It’s me, your niece, Cally.”

Aunt Miriam’s voice boomed through the speaker, loud enough for Susie to hear the conversation. “Cally? Oh, I’m so glad to hear from you. We haven’t spoken in such a long time. Years even! We really should get together soon.”

Her aunt’s cheerful voice made the tension in her neck ease a bit. Flashbacks of Aunt Miriam rushed through her thoughts. Aunt Miriam’s constant laughter floating through the house. Her outlandish outfits and

decidedly offbeat hair colors. But what she remembered most of all was Aunt Miriam's unconditional acceptance of her and her gift.

Rising, Cally began to walk around the kitchen while she talked, twisting a strand of hair around one finger. "Yes, I know it's been a long time. Uh, huh. Oh, I agree, we really should get to—" Turning to face Susie, she made a gesture indicating Aunt Miriam's nonstop talking. Not fully paying attention to what her aunt said, she continued to pace the floor, managing to accent the conversation with an occasional "uh-huh" and a few one-syllable answers. Shrugging, she leaned against the counter and waited for her aunt to pause for a breath.

As she continued to half-heartedly listen, she watched Susie's impatience grow. But what could she do? Several times she attempted to interrupt her aunt, and failed. She was about to give up on the whole situation, when Susie jumped up and yanked the phone out of her hand.

Backing out of Cally's reach, Susie started talking, interrupting Aunt Miriam's monologue. "Excuse me. Hi, Aunt Miriam, this is Susie Wiggins, Cally's best friend. Thank you, and it's nice to speak with you, too. I don't mean to be rude, but could you stop talking for a minute? Cally has something important she needs to discuss with you. Thanks so much." Susie thrust the phone back into Cally's hand and gestured for her to start speaking.

Surprised and slightly annoyed at Susie's brusque manner, Cally hesitated before launching into the discussion. "Oh, um, Aunt Miriam, I needed to ask you some questions. You see, there's this man."

"Oh! Is this man your special one?"

Why had she used those words? "No, he's not." Fearing Aunt Miriam's mouth would start running at a clip again, she dismissed her thought and moved on. "Please, let me explain."

From the quiet on the other end, she assumed she had time to take a long, slow breath and organize her thoughts into words. "You see, he's down here from Dallas and wanting me to read him. Which would be okay except for the strange reactions I get when I'm near him."

"What sort of reactions are you talking about, honey?"

“Well,” Cally paused, trying to decide how to describe her experiences with Sloan Janson. After all, this was her aunt on the line, not Susie. She couldn’t get too graphic with the older lady. Could she? “I’m not sure how to relate them to you. They’re kind of, well, odd.”

“Odd how? Are they a nice feeling? I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to be a bit clearer about this if I’m to help you.”

Cally stopped in the midst of her pacing, irritated by her lack of descriptive powers. “Well, they’re very hard to describe. Sort of like the feelings I get when I’m doing a session, except—”

“More sexual?”

Now how had she known? Cally’s perception of her aging aunt might need updating. “Uh, I guess you could say so.”

“Do you want to throw him down and eat him alive?”

“Aunt Miriam!” Although her aunt was miles away and not able to see her reaction, Cally felt the warmth spreading up her neck and turned to face the wall, hiding the pink hue slipping over her cheeks.

“Oh, come on, honey. We’re both adults. And I know a pretty thing like you hasn’t wasted away without some male companionship by now. Don’t be so uptight. Sex wasn’t invented with MTV, you know.”

Cally struggled to find the words, her mouth working like a marionette’s, when a strong rapping sounded from the front door. Jumping at the noise, Cally’s body went rigid and all her nerves stood ready for whatever came next. Susie, in direct contrast, eyes wide with anticipation, sent her a questioning, expectant look.

Susie whispered, her tone urgent and excited. “Cal, are you expecting anyone today?”

“No, nobody.” Yet certain knowledge of who waited outside struck her with the force of a locomotive. Wishing she could keep quiet, but knowing she couldn’t, she whispered, “It’s Sloan Janson.”

Susie’s eyes grew even larger and her mouth fell open. “How do you know? This could be anyone in town dropping by for a visit.”

Mumbling her reply, Cally glanced toward the direction of the front door and shuddered. "Trust me. I know."

In the surprise of Sloan's arrival, she'd forgotten about her aunt, who now called loudly enough for her to hear her voice without holding the earpiece close.

"Cally, honey, are you all right? Cally? Cally, answer me."

Shaken, Cally's voice quivered when she answered. "Y-yes, I'm fine. But I need to go now. I'm sorry, but I'll call you later on, okay?" Without waiting for her aunt's answer, she placed the phone on the base.

An intrigued expression captured Susie's face and her lips stretched wider into a mischievous grin. "Wow. Are you two on the same wavelength or what? This is exactly like the time in the garden when you were thinking about him and he showed up. And we were just talking about him. Yep, it's got to be him."

Annoyed with Susie's continued assertions of a connection, Cally started to deny the allegations when the knocking suddenly grew louder. She jumped, both angry and nervous, and backed away from the door.

Susie grabbed her arm, swung her around to place them toe to toe. "Cal, I think you should do it. Match him, I mean. He's going to keep on bugging you to death, following you so you'll read for him. So if you want to get rid of him, the best thing to do is to give him what he wants. I mean, what else can you do?"

Before she could speak, Susie turned her around and pushed her through the swinging door of the kitchen and into the living room. "Go get 'em, girl, before he gets away. Uh, I mean, leaves. I'll sneak out the back way. But I want a full and detailed report later."

"Suz, wait." But Susie was already gone, the kitchen door swinging in her wake. Deciding to face the situation head-on, Cally drew in a deep breath and headed toward the sound. However, once she reached the entry hall, her resolve faltered and she paused with her hand on the knob to rethink her options.

She could ignore the knocking and hope he'd go away. But she knew she'd just delay the inevitable. On the other hand, she could face him

and demand he return to Dallas and leave her alone. *Ha!* She knew that outcome wasn't happening. No real alternative existed except to answer the door.

Reaching to grip the knob, Cally stopped her hand in mid-motion as an idea, crystal and clear in its implications, came to her. What would she do if they experienced another volatile explosion? Without Susie or Billy around to help her, could she restrain from throwing herself at Sloan? Could she control the untamed, primal urges breaking free within her every time he got close?

Even though a part of her feared the whirlpool of emotions that would erupt when she saw him again, another part of her yearned to taste the touch of the magnetic forces flowing between them. Dear God, what would she do if something happened? Dear God, what would she do if *nothing* happened? She bit her lip and acknowledged her last thought. Had she totally lost her mind? Did she want something to happen? Better a cyclone should hit her house. Exasperated for letting her imagination run crazy, she fisted her hands and shook her head to rid her mind of unwanted thoughts.

No more. Just get this over with.

Several big breaths gave her a small dose of mental stability. Praying she could handle any response she might have, she summoned all her courage and opened the door.

He stood in front of her, his expression indecipherable, giving her no clue what she could expect from him. As before, the mysterious force hit her, surprising her with its intensity. But this time she was prepared for the blast to her system and met the wave with quiet determination. His frank expression wavered and, unless her hunch was wrong, she'd swear the man rocked on his feet. They continued to stare at each other until he broke the invisible bond holding them in its clutches.

"Hi, Cally."

His deep voice resonated through her, sending her pulse racing. The struggle to maintain at least the appearance of composure shortened her

response, clipping her tone. "Mr. Janson, you are nothing if not persistent."

"True enough. And going along with my usual tenacity, I'm here to persuade you to give me a reading. Maybe even right now?" He treated her to a you're-so-wonderful smile, which made her think of how Houdini looked after he'd cornered a mouse. But maybe being a mouse cornered by this particular cat wouldn't be so bad. She caught the smile starting to form on her lips and morphed it into a frown.

"Normally I don't give readings to someone I don't know." She paused, reconsidered her decision, and decided to plunge ahead. "However, since you're a friend of Rob and Lisa's, I'll make an exception. But not because I think I owe you any favors." Turning, she made a gesture for him to follow her.

Cally led him inside the small cottage, all the while noticing how he surveyed her home. She rushed to sit on the couch, covered with colorful throw pillows, and tried to draw his attention away from her worn furnishings.

"Please sit down, Mr. Janson." Patting the cushion next to where she sat, she struggled to ignore the pleasing smell of his aftershave. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine." He stared pointedly at her, making his determination to speed things along quite evident. The skepticism in his tone could not be mistaken. "I'd like to get started, if you don't mind. Or do you have some sort of ritual you need to do first?"

She should have been offended and, truth be told, she was, but instead, laughter erupted from her throat before she had a chance to let her temper boil. The tension she'd bottled up inside her eased with each new giggle.

"Did I say something funny?"

She ended her laughter and shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. I was thinking of something else."

Certainly, no one could blame her for seizing the opportunity. After all, she never missed the chance to pull off a good-natured joke. Add that

to his sarcastic remark and he deserved an appropriate response. Sitting up a bit straighter, Cally adopted an attitude of mystery.

"You're right. You're very sensitive to recognize that the area around us must be cleansed before we get started. Sit tight while I get the atmosphere ready and call on friendly, helpful spirits to guide us in our quest. Once I've started, however, you must join with me in clearing away the negative air so the spirits will believe your search for true love is genuine."

Biting the inside of her lip to maintain her serious face, she placed her hands yoga-style on her knees, thumbs and first fingers together, and began chanting. Enunciating her words, she drew out each syllable of every phrase in a very dramatic, exaggerated manner, making the one last syllable stretch for an even longer time. "Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo. Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo."

Opening one eye, she peered at Sloan who sat quietly beside her, his face a mask of serious reflection. Continuing on with her chanting, she motioned for him to take part in her pretend ritual. "Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo. Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo."

His deep voice mixed with hers. At first softly, but then his tone grew stronger with each passage. Again, she peeked at him. And what she saw almost brought her to tears in the effort to hold back her laughter. Sloan mimicked her in both body language and words while his rich voice echoed hers.

"Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo. Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo-oo-oo."

For what seemed like minutes, Cally continued her performance. By now, however, her amusement had shifted, morphing into quiet embarrassment. How would she get herself out of this? After all, she'd played the joke as a way to extract a little revenge for his stupid remarks, but who knew he'd take her spoof so seriously? She'd thought he'd have caught on to the prank by now. Maybe he wasn't as bright as he had seemed?

Trying her best not to get caught spying, she glanced at him again. Maybe she should end the chant and keep up the pretense so he'd never

know about her joke? Anxiety swept all the humor from the situation. Could she continue without his catching on?

Cally continued chanting while she contemplated her problem and possible solutions. Yet, just as she was about to give in and confess all, Sloan stopped chanting. Slowly, she opened her eyes to find him glaring at her. She felt the color drain from her face, and she wished she could flee the room.

“Shoo-bee-doo-bee-doo, huh? Ha, ha. Very funny. And what spirits are helping us cleanse the air? Some fifties era pop group? Maybe Sha-Na-Na?”

Cally cringed, knowing she deserved his biting remarks. His eyes flashed green sparks at her and the heat of embarrassment coursed up her cheeks.

“I hope you’ve had fun at my expense.”

She tried to say something, yet when she opened her mouth to speak nothing came out.

“So, maybe now you’ll tell me all this matchmaking is a bunch of crap, right?”

The apology forming on her lips died. Say her matchmaking was a fake? Where did he get off saying something like that? Civility fought with her desire to take the lamp sitting next to her and break it over his head. Thankfully for him, civility won.

“All right, Mr. Janson, there’s no reason to be unpleasant. I apologize about the chanting trick, but you have no right to question my matching skills. My ability is real. I was a little ticked off by your comment about performing a ritual first.”

Sloan’s jaw muscles twitched, making his square jaw line even more appealing. She watched, transfixed by the movement, as he gritted his teeth. Yet instead of fearing his anger, she longed to reach out and run her hand along the stubbles of his muscular profile. What would it be like to have his teeth on her nipples?

His hard expression caught her and held fast as he waited for an explanation.

“You see, I have no rituals. So I was insulted by your comment. What did you think I’d do, light incense and chant some spells? Or grab my crystal ball from the closet? Maybe fire up the old cauldron and throw some eye of newt into the mix?”

She struggled to curtail her growing irritation and managed to form her features into a sly grin. “I hate to disappoint you, but my gift works in a very simple way. I need you to get comfortable and relax, that’s all. You appeared nervous before, so I thought maybe a little joke would loosen you up. I’m sorry if my little prank got out of hand.” She jutted out her chin in defiance of her lie. No way would she admit to wanting revenge.

He shifted in his seat; his face taking on a pale pink hue. Quickly, his intensity lessened and the hardness slid from his features. “Okay, no real harm done on either side. So let’s chalk this up to a misunderstanding and get on with the show.”

Cally cleared her throat and shot him a there-you-go-again sneer.

“Sorry. Poor choice of words. No slur intended.” At last, he cast his gaze downward, echoing his apology.

“Mr. Janson, are you all right? You seem a bit flustered.” Although Cally tried to show real concern, inside she nourished a small victory. *She* was now the cat who’d cornered the rat!

Clearing his throat, he shook his head. “No, I’m fine. I didn’t mean anything by my earlier question about rituals. I just thought you might do some sort of meditation or breathing exercises. But if you’re set to get things underway, then great, I’m ready when you are.”

She studied him, but couldn’t quite read him. Was he sincere this time? Could she ever trust what he said? “Maybe you should tell me why you want a reading. I mean, are you ready to find your true love? Are you sure you can accept whatever I say about your soul mate? Because if you’re not serious about finding your one special person, then this won’t work. You’ll be wasting my time and your own.” Searching his face, she was impressed with the grave expression he wore. But she still wondered if the features he displayed formed a mask to hide his true feelings.

“Cally, I’m ready. I’m more ready than you’ll ever know.” He paused, bowing his head before speaking again. “Granted, I don’t have too much trouble finding dates, but those relationships never last long. I need someone permanent in my life, not a weekend fling and not another one-nighter.”

He looked up at her and she scanned him for any hint of pretense. As if captured by an unseen force, her eyes locked with his, unable to look away. In a voice drenched with sincerity, he added, “I want someone who will love me. For being me. And not for my family’s money.”

Against her better judgment, Cally found herself wanting to believe him.

Their eyes remained connected and she heard her heart throbbing unsteadily. Hoping to hide the growing turmoil within her with a professional attitude, she worked hard to keep her words steady and clear. “Okay, let me explain how the reading works. To get a solid reading, you need to remain seated and relaxed. Please don’t say anything until I let you know I’m finished.”

How could she feel so drawn to him? Cally paused to reflect on the question, found no answer, and pulled her attention back to the words she knew as well as the sound of her own voice. Her voice grew stronger as she took comfort in the words she’d spoken many times before. “I’ll tell you all the information I receive. Most of the time that’s enough for you to find your match. But contacting her is up to you. I only give you the information. I don’t participate when you meet, nor do I explain anything to your soul mate.”

Cally stopped and waited for him to nod his understanding. She took a deep breath and began again. “Also, be prepared for the circumstances of her life, whatever they might be. For instance, many people marry before finding their true mate. So you may find out your life partner is already in a committed relationship. How you handle such a situation is your choice. Is all this clear so far?”

Despite getting his nonverbal agreement, she paused once more to scrutinize him, attempted to interpret his silence, and sought to pick out any sign of disbelief. Not finding anything, she resumed her explanation.

“Very rarely, a reading won’t work out as we wish it would, and I won’t get enough facts about a soul mate to locate her. Most of the time I know why but, sometimes, I don’t. This could mean one of several circumstances has intervened. One possibility is that your soul mate isn’t ready to accept you into her life. For whatever reason, and sometimes the reason may never be known, she simply doesn’t want a partner in her life. Another remote possibility is that she may not be of adult age, in which case you’ll have to wait until she’s old enough to make her own decision.”

He raised his eyebrows, but she decided not to question the gesture. “Yet another possibility is that she’s deceased. It’s rare, but it does happen. Should any of these situations occur, you may have to wait a few months, years, or even another lifetime before joining her.”

Cally sank back into the cushions, thankful the explanation was over. She wanted to ask him for his thoughts, but decided to remain silent, knowing he needed time to think. Instead, she watched him, trying to notice any clue to his feelings or thoughts, but all he did was rub his hands together, obviously contemplating her words.

“That’s a lot of things to think about. Some of which wouldn’t have dawned on me. But I understand.” His smile widened, showing his teeth strikingly white in his tanned face. “Shall we begin?”

“You’re sure you want to do this?” She took a breath, giving him one last opportunity to change his mind.

“I’m sure. Can we get started now?” His frustrated expression signaled his impatience, and something about his insistence made her wonder if she should postpone the reading. His earlier remarks had seemed sincere enough, but now she wasn’t so certain. An uneasy thought kept nagging at her brain. Something, or someone, just didn’t seem right. But although her intuition shouted at her to stop the reading, her curiosity drove her to go on. Who would be his match? And

why did that question make her uneasy? After all, finding his match would prove that he—they—weren't connected.

Shaking off her apprehension, Cally began. "All right. Get comfortable and remember to stay quiet." Starting the process as she always did, she closed her eyes and inhaled slowly to steady her nerves. She reached her hand out to touch his arm, resting her fingers in the bend of his elbow.

Immediately, a burst of energy surged upward from the tips of her fingers, racing through her arm and ricocheting into the rest of her body. Her eyes flew open and found his startled eyes piercing hers with vibrant intensity. By the stunned expression on his face, he'd felt the same shock of electricity. Cally smelled the faint scent of smoke in the electrified air around them, and struggled to find the breath she needed to push the words out. Yet even then, all she could manage was a whisper.

"Oh, God."

With her hand still resting on his arm, her body grew warmer. A deep, burning heat leapt into flames, making her ache in unseen places. Her heart danced with excitement and threatened to burst out of her chest. The smoldering need she saw in him scared her, but she found she couldn't pull her gaze from his. Desire ran the length of her body, torched higher with the exhilaration of her reaction, and she wanted nothing more than to fling herself into his searing blaze.

"Cally."

Sloan's throaty utterance sent another shockwave through her and set off a pulsing sensation in her abdomen. His body leaned toward her, sending a passionate message of urgent craving. She moved to him, unable to resist her own body's answering call. Hard lips crushed against hers while his tongue probed its hungry way into her mouth. His tongue played with hers, dominating hers, enslaving hers with his. She moaned as he sucked her lower lip inside, and bit into the soft flesh.

She was both surprised and thrilled at her eager response to his explorations, and a sigh slipped from deep inside her when his hands

caressed her back. Forsaking all rational thought, she pushed closer to his muscular frame, hoping for more, begging for more.

He gripped her, pressing his chest to her breasts, and she welcomed his rough hands pushing her backward onto the cushions. With his fingers working their way under the silky material of her blouse, her mind echoed the same mantra over and over.

Now. Now.

His thumb found her nipple, rubbing it to a peak. Arching, she begged him to nip her bud, and he replaced his hand with his teeth. To her delight, he swept his tongue over her tit and pulled it into his mouth as he moaned with his yearning.

A warm flood soaked her panties and she spread her legs to welcome the hand he slid under her skirt to place between them. While his tongue slipped into her mouth again, his fingers pushed aside the lacy material of her thong and plunged into her awaiting treasure. His thumb attacked her clit, driving a whirlwind of lust through her abdomen. Panting with anticipation and desire, she fought the voice sounding alarms in her mind. She wanted him, needed him, hungered for him.

She thrust her body against his, aching to feel his skin next to hers when, without warning, he yelped and jerked upward, breaking her embrace, leaving her cold and alone.

His face scrunched together as he hurried away from the couch. "Damn! What the hell?"

Chapter Six

Cally hurried into Jimmy's Diner, hastily greeting several townspeople, including one couple she'd matched the previous month. Within seconds of settling into a booth, she glanced up to see Susie breeze through the door, wave at several friends, and slip into the seat opposite her.

Words gushed forth as soon as Susie sat. "Well? So? Give, girl. When you called and asked me to meet you here, you sounded urgent." Susie bounced up and down on the seat, barely controlling her enthusiasm.

Cally took a deep breath, trying to gain an attitude of quiet confidence. Yet, somehow, Susie's anticipation rattled her nerves, adding to her already frazzled state. How could she explain what had happened with Sloan? Hell, she didn't understand it herself. Speaking with deliberation and hoping she sounded calmer than she felt, she described the encounter while Susie listened, interjecting every so often with a soft gasp or exclamation.

"...all of a sudden, he jolts up, yelling his head off like something had attacked him. Which, unfortunately, was exactly what had happened. I think maybe Houdini was jealous or thought I was being hurt or something, because there he was, clinging onto his leg, biting, scratching and hissing away like a small feline Tasmanian devil."

Cally peered at her friend, letting silence fill the void while she waited for a response. A myriad of expressions flitted across Susie's face, some recognizable, some not. At last, breaking out into a nearly hysterical-sounding tone, her voice escalating higher and higher in pitch, Susie exclaimed, "I know, I know. That was the funniest sight I have ever seen."

Between laughs, Susie clawed the air with both hands, making hissing sounds in a perfect imitation of Houdini.

Dumbfounded, Cally stared at Susie. "What do you mean, you know? How could you know? Unless—"

Susie, still unable to control her giggles, could only nod while she continued to hiss and scratch in the air. "*Hiss! Hiss!*"

"Susie Wiggins, you stayed in the kitchen and peeked through the swinging door, didn't you? You never left. Instead, you spied on me the whole time? You sneak!"

Gasping for air, Susie protested in between giggles. "Oh, come on, Cal. What's the big deal? You would've told me everything anyway. In fact, you just did."

Cally continued to scowl, trying to absorb the fact that her best friend had secretly witnessed the encounter with Sloan. How could she have been so deceptive? *Her best friend.*

Susie, on the other hand, grinned at her and offered a reason for her actions. "Hey, I needed to make sure you'd be safe with this guy. I mean, after the way he scared you in the garden, I didn't dare risk leaving you alone with him."

Finding it difficult to argue against the logic of her explanation, Cally reluctantly relented. "Okay, okay. That's a good point. But let's not go spreading the story around. This time not even to Billy, all right?"

Sheepishly, Susie tucked her head to her chin. "Well, he already knows but—"

"What? You told Billy? Good grief, Suz, why don't you get yourself a bullhorn and drive through town blasting out the news? Or have you already scheduled a town meeting instead?"

Susie moved her hands, palms down, up and down in the air, in a gesture to quiet her. "Shush, girl. How was I to know you'd take three hours to call me after you threw the man out of your house? I'd have burst if I hadn't told someone. But relax. I swore Billy to secrecy."

Cally breathed deeply, trying to soothe her frayed nerves. "Okay. But make sure both of you keep your lips shut tight about this."

They sat quietly, Susie with a small smirk playing on her lips, and Cally trying to let the tension between them dissolve.

Right as she was starting to feel better about her friend's spying escapade, she noticed a suspicious gleam in Susie's eyes. Now what was her friend up to? Recognizing what that kind of look could mean, she was almost afraid to find out. "Oh, no. You have that she's-not-going-to-like-this-but-I'm-going-to-ask-anyway look. What? Just spit it out and tell me what you're thinking."

With the mischievous glow brightening, Susie queried, "Now don't get mad, Cal, but I'm dying to find out. Did lightning strike when you locked lips with Mr. Hottie? Is he as good as he looks?"

Without warning, the nickname sent visual, even tactile, reminders of their brief physical encounter. She could almost feel his steel arms gripping her again while his hard chest muscles flexed, straining against her breasts. And, oh, how she remembered the musky smell of him. Mr. Hottie? Oh, man, if Susie only knew.

Her emotions must have landed straight on her face because Susie took one glance at her and blew a low whistle of amazement and admiration. In trepidation, she watched an ear-to-ear grin travel across Susie's features. What would Susie say now? "Wow! Talk about getting lucky. When you cut loose, you really cut loose."

Cally reached across the table to grasp Susie's hand. Checking around to see if any other people had overheard Susie's remarks, she slanted forward to whisper in a stern voice, "Jeez, Suz. Could you keep your voice down? And frankly, I'm not going to answer your question."

Much to her irritation, instead of getting Susie to quiet down, the petite brunette let loose with another loud chuckle causing several of the diner's patrons to turn and gawk at them. "You don't have to answer, Cal. Everything I wanted to know is written all over your face. Oh, baby!"

With her embarrassment warping into full-fledged humiliation, Cally turned sideways to place her back to the onlookers. She hissed at Susie between clenched teeth. "Glad to amuse you, girlfriend, but I hoped you'd be a bit more comforting. Could you at least keep your voice down?"

Susie's laughter dropped to lower decibels as she scrunched down in her seat to give the appearance of repentance. "Sorry, Cal, but I am totally blown away. You've gotta admit what happened doesn't even remotely fit with your men-aren't-for-me image. Holy crap, if your mother could see you now."

Susie beamed a smile packed with undertones. "Seems to me you've met your match, if you get what I mean."

Wishing she'd never let Sloan Janson into her house, Cally scowled at her friend. "Your idea is absolutely ridiculous. Are you crazy?" She raised her chin higher to show her determination to set Susie straight. "No chance is that man a match for me in any way, shape, or form. Don't make a big deal out of a tiny lapse of restraint on my part and his. That reading, or lack of one, was a huge mistake. Obviously, I must have been out of my mind to let him into my home, much less agreeing to help him. Something, by the way, you convinced me to do."

"Yeah, sure, Cally. Go ahead. You can blame me for the make-out session. And thank me for it, too."

"Are you kidding? Thanks a lot, but from now on, I'm listening to my instincts instead of my so-called best friend."

Susie raised her hands in a gesture of supplication. "Oh, damn, take it easy, Cal. I'm just making an observation." However, her grin remained pasted on her face. "But if what you say is true, then all the fireworks you two create are a little hard to explain."

Cally vigorously shook her head, frustration mounting inside her gut. Yet instead of trying again to deny Susie's observations—some of which got harder and harder to protest—she settled on a different approach. "Come on, Suz. Knock it off. I need your support. Something doesn't seem right about this whole situation. Aside from the fact that he upsets me, I still get the impression he's hiding things."

She tore at the paper napkin on her lap, while her jittery nerves played percussion inside her body. Across the table, Susie appeared to be deep in thought, her eyebrows darting toward her nose.

“Hi, girls. Here’s your usual.” Beatrice Scoggins, waitress and owner of the diner, placed two glasses of lemonade in front of them. Tugging on the tight blouse stretched across her enormous bosom, Beatrice chirped on. “Couldn’t help but notice Miss Cally seems a bit upset. Anything I can do?”

Yeah, right. Anything you can do to dig up a little gossip. Cally sipped the cool drink through a straw, keeping her words unspoken.

Beatrice’s loud voice boomed around the room causing a couple of elderly men seated on barstools at the counter to swivel around and peer curiously at her. Glancing around at the rest of the diner’s customers, Cally noticed all eyes fixed squarely on her. Since she didn’t welcome their unwanted attention, she pretended not to notice them, and hoped everyone would return to their meals and forget about her.

Cally looked up at the older lady and wished Beatrice away. “No thanks. I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong.” Pulling herself straighter in her seat, she adopted a reassuring expression.

“Well, okee-doke. But you let me know if I can do anything for you. After all, if it weren’t for you, I’d probably never have met Mr. Scoggins.”

With a wink at her, Beatrice turned and walked over to a small group seated at a nearby table. Leaning over to Mrs. Perkins seated in the closest chair, Beatrice nodded pointedly at Cally. “Must be man trouble,” she declared in her megaphone voice. “And it’s about time.” Beatrice and Mrs. Perkins chuckled together and Cally’s stomach tightened into a hard knot.

Fighting the urge to get up and leave, she turned her attention back to Susie. “I’m serious, Suz, you’ve got to quit talking like that. Stop hinting at a romance, a connection that doesn’t, that can’t, exist.” The sizzling sensation ran down her spine, making her nerve endings heighten and jump to attention. What was this about?

Although Susie bobbed her head in agreement, her tone gave the impression her fingers were hidden and crossed. “Sure, girl. I’ll stop buggin’ you. If that’s what you really want. But don’t you...”

Without completing her sentence, her voice trailed off and she quickly averted her attention away from Cally to focus on something—or someone—standing behind the booth. “But maybe you should tell him that.”

“Tell me what? Cally, we need to talk about what happened at your place.”

Recognizing the voice, she swallowed hard and whipped around, wanting to believe she was wrong about who the speaker was. Yet instead of getting her wish, she found herself staring straight into Sloan Janson’s flashing green eyes.

Entranced, her mind wandered to forbidden places. How could she feel cold when thousands of nerve endings raced upward from her neck? Immediately, the shivers she’d noticed earlier cascaded through her, erupting until she was sure her whole body would disintegrate. Her heart thudded against her chest while giant butterflies flapped in her stomach.

An image of Sloan, naked, standing in her shower assailed her senses. She could hear the water running, taste the mist in the air, and see the suds traveling down his broad back. But oh, when the image turned to face her, and his manhood stood cocked and ready for pleasure, she moaned. In her dream, she shed her clothes and stood naked, letting him feast on the sight. Swaying to unheard music, she moved to the shower, opened the door and stepped inside with him. While her gaze held his attention, her hand slipped around his...

“Cally? Are you listening to me?” Sloan’s stern voice whipped her out of her fantasy.

“Oh, Sloan. Yes. I mean no. I don’t think we have anything to discuss, Mr. Janson.” Surprised at how strong her voice sounded even though a lump had lodged in her throat, she pushed her luck. “Why don’t you get out of Lawson and go back to Dallas? I want you to leave me alone. For good.”

Praying for a miracle, she turned back to the table, and found Susie still staring up at him, as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

"Here, Mr. Hot, um, Janson. Take a load off." Susie shifted to the right on her seat, leaving an empty space beside her.

Torn between chastising Susie and objecting to Sloan, Cally remained silent while she watched him slide next to Susie. In seconds, the air became supercharged with energy and, by the expression on Susie's face, Cally wasn't the only one who'd noticed the change in the atmosphere.

"I think we have a helluva lot to discuss." He frowned at her, and she fought against the urge to lower her gaze from his. She wouldn't let him browbeat her. "And we're going to do it right now."

Cally flinched at his grim tone. Why couldn't he just go away? She returned his scowl, determined not to let him see how much he rattled her. "Now wait a minute, Mr. Janson—"

"The name is Sloan. I think after what happened at your house we can be on a first name basis, don't you?"

The harsh noise of metal being scraped across linoleum turned their heads toward the sound and put them in the awkward position of seeing at least a dozen people transfixed on their little threesome. Again, Cally was acutely aware she was the center of attention for everyone in the diner. From the corner of her eye, she noted Beatrice and the two men at the counter swivel to gawk at the scene playing out before them. Softly, she groaned. This story would be around Lawson within the hour. Even without Susie's help.

A wide grin broke across Sloan's face, although she thought the gesture lacked any true warmth. But even while she frowned at him, she was aware of her own heartbeat pounding in an unsteady rhythm. Why hadn't she noticed before now how his dimples made his lips seem more sensual? Or how they somehow intensified the strength exuding from his rigidly set jawline while, at the same time, appearing to be so touchable and cute? Forcing the unwanted thoughts from her mind, she concentrated on making her next words sound more confident than she felt.

"Actually, *Mr.* Janson," she said, "I think what happened is precisely why we shouldn't be on a first name basis. I made a terrible mistake in

trying to read for you. To be honest, I only agreed to get you to quit pressuring me. So, let me suggest you try and find love on your own, and I'll try to forget this whole miserable event ever happened. Now if you'll excuse me..."

She attempted to rise from the booth but his hard voice stopped both her actions and thoughts.

"Cally, we do need to talk. Sit back down."

Surprised again by the intensity of his tone, she let her body fall onto the cushion.

Turning, he gave Susie a smile that could have melted a witch's heart. "Would you rather sit tight or leave?"

Mesmerized by how easily he exuded charm, Cally watched Susie snuggle down in her seat to bask in the warmth of his toothy glow. "Oh, I'm not going anywhere. I wouldn't miss this for a truckload of cold beer on a hot summer day."

A few badly smothered guffaws escaped the other spectators, reminding Cally of their presence. Knowing it was useless, but wanting desperately to be anywhere else, she, too, slid her body lower in the booth.

Sloan leaned back and pressed his hands, palms down, onto the table. "Listen. We need to figure out some things." He glanced around at the crowd and then back at her. "And I suggest we take this discussion back to your place for a little privacy. Or we could go to my room at the lodge."

"You're asking the wrong female, son. Millie Jo's the one men take to the lodge."

Hoots and hollers erupted from the audience, and a couple of farmers clapped each other on the back. But the only one in the booth who enjoyed the joke was Susie.

Refusing, Cally countered, "Uh-uh. No way on God's green earth will I let you into my home. And you can forget about my being alone with you ever again. I won't make the same mistake twice." She tossed her hair in an effort to show her determination, but the effect was diminished when

her own words brought about both exclamations and amused titters from their audience.

A chill went through her body when Sloan bent forward in one swift movement. But was the chill shuddering through her from fear or anticipation? She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

"Are you talking about our little tussle on the couch? If so, I seem to remember your tongue spent as much time in my mouth as mine did in yours. So you're not suggesting our interaction was all my doing, are you?"

A stunned silence filled the room as the spectators stopped and took in Sloan's remarks.

"Whoa there, son. Maybe you do have the right female."

The intense quiet in the diner shattered again when every observer broke into raucous laughter and howls of derision. With growing dismay, she noticed many of them slapping their knees or clapping their hands in outright delight. Even Susie laughed out loud, tears streaming down flushed cheeks. Throwing a desperate prayer heavenward, Cally wished with all her heart to sink through the linoleum floor right this minute, never to reappear again.

"No, of course not. I accept my responsibility for my, uh, participation. I'm just not giving it a chance in hell of happening again. Ever."

Summoning up what was left of her vanishing dignity, she clutched her purse to her side and addressed all those around her. "Okay, folks. Show's over. I hope everyone enjoyed themselves." She scanned the audience with a cold glare. "Even though it was at my expense." She savored a small bit of satisfaction when a few of her fellow townspeople bowed their heads to hide the guilty expressions on their faces and mumbled their apologies.

Confronting Sloan, she drew in a deep breath and quietly declared, "Mr. Janson, I intend to forget I ever met you. All I'm asking is for you to go away and leave me alone. Or is that too much to ask?"

Using her left arm to brace her body against the tabletop, Cally pushed her way out of the booth. She straightened up and let out a ragged sigh of relief.

“Cally, we’re going to talk whether you like it or not.” He spoke his words so softly she wasn’t certain he’d even said them.

Glancing at him, she waited, arrested by his irresistible tone, while he raised his head. His eyes, the depthless sea-green of them darkening with an indecipherable emotion, dived deep inside her. Minutes passed in the renewed quiet of the room, evoking a resolve in her, and she finally managed a reply to his demand. Slowly, she lifted her glass and took a small sip.

“Mr. Janson, our discussion is finished.”

In one smooth motion, she tipped the glass upside down and poured ice and lemonade down the front of Sloan’s slacks. Eating up the distance between the booth and the door, Cally made her way out of the restaurant to the accompaniment of howls of delight.

Cally rushed to her car and slid inside. Putting her foot to the gas, she raced along the back roads to the safety of her home. She whipped her car into her driveway and jerked the lever into *P* before dropping her arms and head wearily against the steering wheel. Ragged sobs tore at her body while the radio taunted her with a cheery love song.

Chapter Seven

“Oh, Miss Cally, I’m so excited. I’ve waited for this day my whole life.” Seventeen-year-old Brittany Hart sat next to Cally and bounced up and down on the sofa. Her eagerness to start the session was contagious and Cally couldn’t help but absorb some of her excitement.

Yet a blanket of despair pushed down her enthusiasm and she wondered why she wanted to try again. Her power hadn’t worked on the previous two people, so why should it work now? From the moment Sloan Janson had left town—an event witnessed by several people who’d rushed to tell her—she’d felt something go wrong in her body. Like a part of her had gotten misplaced. She didn’t understand what the problem was and she couldn’t find the words to describe the feeling. Yet she knew something was different. Still, she had to try.

“Brittany, do you remember everything I explained to you about soul mates, and what the possible conditions or consequences might be? And your parents still approve of my reading for you, correct?” She peered at Brittany, hoping to ward off any misunderstandings before they began the session.

Nodding, Brittany squirmed before putting on a serious expression. “I remember. But I’m totally sure Mark Fletcher’s the guy for me. We’re meant to be together like Romeo and Juliet. See? I remember your lesson about them two lovers way back in third grade.”

Cally squelched her internal teacher’s voice and resisted the urge to correct Brittany’s grammar. Now was not the time. Instead, she tried to bring a little reality into the young girl’s fantasy. “But you remember how they ended up, don’t you?”

“Oh, Miss Cally, you’re always making funny jokes. Mark and me won’t end up dead or nothing. He’s a wonderful person. And I know he’s going to be an amazing lover.” She squealed and clapped a hand over her mouth. “Miss Cally, you won’t tell my mother what I said, will you? I mean, Mark and me haven’t done it yet, but I can tell. You know?”

“No, I won’t tell her. What you say here, stays here.”

“Like L.A.?”

“L.A.? No, I think it’s Las Vegas.”

Brittany’s mouth dropped along with her eyebrows as she clasped her hands together in glee. “Huh? You mean we should run off to Las Vegas?”

“No, no. I didn’t mean that at all.” Brittany’s parents would have a fit if she and Mark eloped. “Don’t even think about getting married yet.”

“But why not? I ain’t getting any younger and I know Mark’s the man for me.”

Cally tried to think of the equally young and immature Mark as a man. She fervently hoped the reading would go as Joanna Hart wanted, with Cally telling Brittany a different person, and not her high school dropout boyfriend, was the young girl’s lifetime love.

“My mamma hasn’t changed her mind since you spoke with her, Miss Cally. She’s ready for me to find out, too.”

“Well, okay then. Let’s get started.” As she always did, Cally took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and relaxed her body. “Just remember to sit back, stay calm, and we’ll both know soon enough.” She gently placed her hand on Brittany’s arm and waited. And waited some more. Still surprised by the lack of any response, she opened her eyes to find a hopeful, yet questioning expression on Brittany’s face.

“Have you started, Miss Cally? Because I don’t feel nothin’ at all.”

“Um, give me a minute. Sometimes it takes a little longer to get going. And you shouldn’t feel anything, remember?” Cally squirmed in her seat, trying to get more comfortable. Then inhaling and exhaling slowly, she once more closed her eyes and placed her hand on the girl’s arm. And waited. And waited some more. And again, nothing happened.

Damn. Not again. What's going on? Why am I not getting any answers?

Attempting to keep her body loose and receptive, she rolled her shoulders and swiveled her head. But the tiny knot of tension growing at the base of her spine kept gathering strength and speed. The rigid sensation snaked up her back and into her neck. She could even feel a fine mist of sweat forming around her hairline, which did nothing except add to the pressure mounting inside her.

Cally took another breath and emptied her mind of all other thoughts. *Come on. I'm waiting.* But again, she was disappointed.

After several more failed attempts, all carefully hidden from Brittany, she couldn't deny the truth. Her shoulders sagged as she put her head down, and folded her hands to rest them limply in her lap. *Oh, my God. Can this really be happening?*

Cally glanced at Brittany, already sure of what she must think. Biting her nails, Brittany gave her a sad, but encouraging smile.

How do I tell her? I'm losing the gift. Hell, I think it's already gone.

With a slow dread filling her, Cally raised her head and found Brittany staring at her, worry making lines on the young face where none should be.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but I'm not getting anything. No answers at all."

The worried expression morphed into horror. "What do you mean you're not getting nothing? Are you saying I don't have a soul mate? Am I supposed to never get married? Am I going to be an old maid?"

Sheesh. Did this girl live in the fifties? "No one is an old maid any more, Brit. You can be and do anything you want with your life."

Cally's anguish intensified when Brittany started to cry. "Let's not get upset yet. I'm sure you'll find the right man. I-I can't explain right now, but we'll have to try this another day." Taking Brittany's hands in hers, she edged nearer, hoping her sincerity would make the teen believe her words. "But trust me. This has nothing to do with you."

Brittany wiped away her falling tears, trying to grasp the situation. "Are you sure you're getting nothing? Nothing at all?" Sniffing, she dabbed a tissue at her nose.

Cally saw her own misery reflected back to her in the bereft expression, and wished she could look anywhere other than into the forlorn face. "I don't know what's wrong. Maybe I'm too tired today, but I'm just not getting a reading." She knew what she'd said was a lie, and she felt the guilt wrap around her and squeeze, making her breath hitch in her throat.

Brittany continued to beg, clasping and unclasping her hands. "But, Miss Cally, I have to know who my soul mate is today. Can't you please try again, maybe a little harder this time? Please, Miss Cally?"

"No, I can't. If I thought it would do any good, I would. But I've already tried four times and nothing happened. Not one single bit of information came into my head." She coughed to clear the lump out of her throat before she could bring herself to say the words she only now started to accept as the truth. Plus, her conscience wouldn't allow her to lie again. "I'm so sorry, but I can't help you. For some unknown reason, I've lost my ability to match."

Cally rose, crossed to the window, and gazed out into the backyard where Houdini half-heartedly attempted to catch a sparrow. Even Houdini seemed affected by the scent of despair surrounding the house.

"But do you feel any different today? Maybe you're sick or something."

Pivoting to face Brittany, Cally hated to dash the girl's last hope. "Maybe. But I don't think so. I've never lost my ability before when I've been ill."

"But can't you try one last time? I've got to know if Mark is the man meant for me." The youthful forehead creased, misery evident in the way her body slumped. "You see, Mark wants tonight to be *the* night."

Brittany tucked her head down, looking like the shy teenager she was. "Do you know what I'm talking about? Tonight could be the night I give myself to Mark. I'd hate to think I might be having, um, making love,

to the wrong guy. I've saved myself for that special someone." Brittany glanced at her with a pleading expression, making her heart yearn to help her. "So you can see how important this reading is to me, can't you?"

Cally wished there was some way she could help, but until she could find a solution to her own problem she wouldn't be able to help anyone. Hating that Brittany had seen her cry, she wiped one last drop from her cheek before answering. "Even if Mark is your soul mate, you shouldn't be doing anything you really don't want to do. Don't do something just because Mark wants you to."

She moved to sit next to Brittany again. "I'd be telling you this same advice no matter how the reading had turned out. Listen to your own heart, Brit, and do what's right for you. Take all the time you need before making such an incredibly important decision. Because once the deed's done, there's no getting your virginity back."

Hoping her words made an impact, yet fearing the opposite, she kept going. "If you haven't already, go and talk to your mother about this. But decide what's right for you even if that means telling Mark you're not ready. Trust me. If he doesn't understand, then even without a reading, I'll bet he's not the right man for you. But at the very least, give yourself some time to think about everything first." They rose together, hugged and walked to the door.

"Okay, Miss Cally. I'll try. But I'm not promising nothing."

Wishing she'd done more for her, Cally studied the scowl on Brittany's face. From her sour expression, Cally wasn't surprised at the mixed tone of frustration and anger in her voice.

"So when can we try again? Maybe tomorrow?"

Cally fixed a hopeful look on her face while everything inside went numb. "Well, maybe not tomorrow. I'll give your mom a call when I'm feeling better. How about that?"

The response was not unexpected. "Yeah, okay, I guess. But please make it soon, okay?"

Cally watched Brittany skulk out to the waiting car and hop into the seat next to Mark. From the girl's emphatic gestures, she could tell Brittany wasn't going to be the only one disappointed in the change of plans for the upcoming night.

Cally turned away from the scene and closed the door while fresh tears slid their way down her cheeks. Despondent and alone, she slid onto the sofa and immediately curled into a ball.

What was wrong with her?

* * *

"Yes, Aunt Miriam, it's me, again." Cally sat on the couch and drew the pillows around her. "I wanted to continue our conversation."

"Cally? Can you hear me? Oh, I'm so glad you called back. But you've caught me at a very bad time. I've right this second parked in the airport long-term lot and I'm running late. My plane for Vegas is going to leave me behind if I don't get *my* behind moving. I might lose the connection, which isn't very good right now, but keep talking. Did everything go all right with your man?"

Her man? Taking a big breath, Cally tried to keep her voice steady. "Well, no, not really. I did a reading for him, but something happened and we never finished. You see—"

"What, honey? Tell me what happened."

The concern in her aunt's voice carried through the line causing her eyes to fill with tears. "Well, I guess you could say we were drawn to each other. And I mean, physically drawn to each other. Oh, I don't know how to tell you so I'll just blurt it out. Instead of my telling him about his soul mate, we ended up necking on the couch. Ugh! Those words sounded worse out loud than they did in my head. Nothing major happened, you understand, because Houdini, my cat, interrupted us."

A loud, boisterous laugh filled her ears. "Sounds like some session. I bet he wants another reading!"

She was glad her aunt couldn't see the crimson coloring her face. "I don't think so. I kind of ran him out of town. But there's so many questions I need to ask you." She swallowed the lump in her throat. Did she dare ask the question when she was afraid of the answer? "Auntie, have you ever lost your gift?"

Static crackled through the phone. Had the signal been severed? "Auntie? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. And yes, I have."

Cally's heart threatened to stop. Maybe here was the answer.

"When, Auntie? Tell me when. How did you lose it?" She strained to hear over the static of the phone.

"Hold on a sec. Let me stop to catch my breath. I'm too old to be running a race against time."

A crackling sound assaulted Cally's ear before she heard her aunt's voice again.

"I thought you knew, Cally, honey. I lost my power when I met a man named Leo. But once he was gone, my ability returned."

"You lost your gift because of a man, Aunt Miriam? How? Why? Can you tell me more? Please?"

"Oh, drat and double drat. I'm heading into the terminal now and the signal's getting worse. Honey, I'll have to call you back when I get home from Atlantic City."

"No! Please hang on, Auntie. I need to ask more questions." She started to say more, but a louder, more strident blast of static burst through the receiver. "Ow!"

"Oh, poo, this happens every time with this dang cheap cell—"

Cally stared across the room, as if attempting to see where Aunt Miriam was. But now she couldn't hear anything, not even the static. She shouted and tried to reach across the distance separating them. "Aunt Miriam? Are you there?"

After several more attempts to connect with her aunt, she finally gave up, punched the button to cancel the call and tossed the phone on the

sofa. "Great. Just great. I really need her help and she's off to Atlantic City. Or was it Las Vegas?"

Houdini raised his head to glare at her as if daring her to shout and disturb his nap again. She stared glumly back at him until he finally lowered his head to the floor.

* * *

"What's up with you, Cal?"

The sun beat down on her back, warming her skin, but not her spirit. She offered no response as Susie bent to pick up the pile of weeds Cally had dropped beside her feet. Susie turned to place the weeds in the small wheelbarrow resting in the middle of the lawn and continued, "I haven't seen you in a few days. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you're avoiding me. Then, out of the blue, you call me and command me to come straight over."

For the past week, Cally had spent most of her time in her garden. Whether actually gardening or just sitting on the lounge, she found the special place a steady source of comfort. Only when she was among her flowers were the worrisome thoughts kept at bay. However, now she couldn't ignore them any longer.

Cally sighed, straightened up, and removed the gardening gloves from her hands. She glanced at her friend and moved to sit on the lounge. Dark shadows under Susie's eyes drew Cally's mind away from her own troubles. "What's wrong with you? You look like hell, Suz."

Attempting a smile that didn't seem genuine, Susie glibly answered. "Gee, thanks, pal. You look good, too. But not to worry. It's nothing major. Billy and I were up late last night with the same old argument."

"Did he propose again? And more to the point, did you finally say yes?"

"Yes, he did and no, I didn't. I don't see why a piece of paper is so important to him. I can understand wanting kids, but we don't have to get married to have a few rug rats." She slid a hand along the nape of her

neck and arched her back, groaning with the movement. "But, please, let's drop the subject. Remember, you're the one who called me."

Knowing her friend's determined expression meant there was no use in pushing her, Cally shoved her worry for Susie out of her mind. "Suz, I can't do matches anymore." She kept her head averted, waiting for the mind-numbing sadness to envelop her again.

"What do you mean you can't do matches?" Susie plopped on the chair adjacent to where Cally rested.

Trying valiantly not to let the moisture in her eyes turn into another bout of sobbing, she bit the inside of her mouth and resolved to keep her composure. "That's exactly what I mean. I can't be a matchmaker any longer. My gift has left me."

She heard Susie gasp and grow silent. Keeping her head lowered, she waited for her friend to voice her thoughts.

"Look at me."

She did as her friend asked with anguish permeating her body, and searched Susie's face for any sign that might give her a fragment of hope.

"You think you can sit there and not explain a statement like that? Come on. Tell me what's going on. Where'd you get this crazy idea that you've lost the power to do matches?" Susie made a face of pure frustration; hardly the comforting expression Cally had wanted.

Having spent days exploring every idea she could think of to bring her power back, Cally had almost given up hope she would ever match again. Now, with mental fatigue drugging her mind and body, she fought to force out an answer to the question. "It's true, Suz. I've lost the ability to find people's soul mates. In the past week, I've done three readings, or should I say I've failed at readings, for three people."

Seeing Susie's mouth fall open in astonishment, she hurried on with the full story. "The final blow was my reading with Brittany Hart, Joanna's girl. I put my hand on her arm and I waited. And I waited and I waited. Suz, we must have sat there for at least thirty minutes and nothing came. Absolutely nothing at all. And hers was the third reading gone wrong. Even so, I was in shock when nothing happened."

Susie slapped her knees and let a scornful laugh escape. "Well, seems to me you did right by the little airhead, even without finishing the reading. The scoop around town is you kept the silly ninny from being a fool and sleeping with that worthless yahoo, Mark. So you shouldn't consider Brittany's reading a complete failure. You may have helped to avert a genetic disaster."

Waving a hand of dismissal at Susie's flippant remarks, Cally pushed on. "Suz, cut it out, okay? Please stay on the subject. Don't you understand? I sat there with all three of these people, resting my hand on their arm like I always do, waiting, and hoping for some sort of feeling to come. And I got nothing. Nada. Zippo. I could have been anyone sitting next to them instead of a matchmaker."

Susie's exuberance faded. "Sorry. Go on."

"Gertrude Rogers was before Brittany. Can you believe that? After all these years, she finally came to have me read for her. She was ready to trust me to find her love."

Susie's initial astonishment deteriorated into scoffing. "Gertrude Rogers? You mean, Old Lady Rogers? I can't believe that old biddy actually left her home for a change."

Cally preferred Susie's amazement at her predicament to her derision of the elderly spinster. "Susie, cut it out. Miss Rogers is a nice lady. Besides, that's not the point. The terrible fact is, after building up her courage all these years, she comes to me and I fail her."

Cally looked around her yard, taking in the narrow stone path running from the back of her home to the small bird feeder at the end of the garden, as if hoping to find an answer. "But even then, I still hoped the problem was temporary." She paused and sighed. "The first reading was for Jill Woodward and that's when this nothingness started."

Cally tracked a hand through her hair, the tightness in her chest growing stronger when she recalled the woman's sobs at her inability to locate her soul mate.

Throwing herself back against the lounge, Cally grabbed Susie's hands. "What am I going to do about this, Suz? I can't stand not being

able to help these people. If I can't match people, what good am I? I've tried getting hold of Aunt Miriam, but she's somewhere in Vegas, or Atlantic City, or God knows where, and I can't find her." She squeezed Susie's fingers, trying to convey her hopelessness through her touch.

Susie started to speak, but abruptly clamped her mouth tight. Cally saw real commiseration in her friend's eyes. In fact, she could almost visualize Susie's practical brain snapping into high gear.

"Cal, I know we can find the answer to your problem. We only have to examine the circumstances carefully. All we need to do is ask the right questions and the answers will lead us to the solution. Trust me. We'll get to the bottom of this."

She tried to return Susie's bold confidence and bright smile with her own, but couldn't buoy her spirit enough to do so.

Susie, however, didn't notice. "Let's attack this problem logically. First of all, we'll weed out everything we know isn't the cause of your problem.

"Okay, first question. Is it possible these three women don't have soul mates? I mean, come on. Miss Rogers is around seventy or eighty years old, right? Don't tell me she's out to find a boy toy! Talk about getting a late start in dating."

Despite her misery, a small giggle popped out. "Would you stop? This isn't a laughing matter." Leave it to Susie to make her laugh in the middle of a crisis.

"Hey, as long as I get a smile out of your pitiful-looking face, then I've fulfilled my duties as best friend." Her radiant grin perked up Cally's spirits another notch. "But back to Old Lady Rogers. Maybe her soul mate is dead and that's why you couldn't read her."

Cally scoffed at the suggestion. "You know darn well everyone has a single true love. And even when a person waits as long as Miss Rogers has and, even if her true love is dead, I should be able to tell her something about him. People need to know. That's part of what a matchmaker does. Without the help of a matchmaker, many people often never know about their life's love. Why do you think most people end up

hurt and divorced?” Downcast, she rested her head in the palms of her hands and waited for Susie’s speculations.

“Okay, okay. I understand. Hmm. I’m assuming you haven’t been sick, correct?”

She nodded at Susie, disappointment spreading through her, making her stomach queasy. “Besides, sickness has never interfered with my ability.” A coldness filled her, leaving her feeling empty and scared again.

“Right. Not sick.” Susie’s tone reflected a confidence Cally wished she could believe.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, giving Cally time to picture a new life without the gift. Would she ever again see the happiness of a special love written on another’s face? Could she live a normal life, with days filled with nothing more than daily routines? Since she couldn’t have her own soul mate, would she also be deprived of sharing someone else’s joy when she found their mate? Her mind refused to believe her life would be so cruel, so barren. More tears welled up in her eyes, forecasting another crying spell.

“All right, let me ask you this. Have any other matchmakers in your family ever lost their power?”

“Other than my mother? Aunt Miriam did. But she hung up on me before I could get the details. Besides, mother made the choice to marry my father so, of course, she knew she’d lose her power. She married him because she was pregnant with me. I know she loved him, but he never loved her. She gave up her gift for a man who later left her.”

Susie reached out and touched Cally’s shoulder. “Yeah, I know. We need to talk to Aunt Miriam as soon as possible. But until we can, we’ll try to figure it out on our own.”

“But, Suz, I haven’t made any such choice. So Mom’s circumstances wouldn’t apply to my situation.”

“Well, maybe not. But, then again, maybe so.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t even had a date in years, much less married anyone.”

“True. But matchmakers don’t have to marry for them to lose their power, do they? Just falling in love might be enough, right?”

Cally’s chest tightened in anticipation. “What do you mean? I haven’t fallen for anyone.” She grabbed the side of the lounge, her fingernails digging into the rough canvas.

“Before I tell you what I’m thinking, answer these questions.” Susie stabbed a finger toward her, striking a pose that reminded Cally of an attorney in court grilling a witness. “When was the first time you noticed your ability wasn’t working in the usual manner?”

Cally considered the question before replying. “I told you. Jill Woodward’s was the first reading to go wrong.”

Wearing her I’m-so-smart grin, Susie shook her head. “Uh-huh. Wrong. That was the first time you had *no* response in a reading. Now, think of the very first time when a reading was *different* from the usual. Which reading was it? I’ll bet that unusual reading was the one you did right before you attempted Jill’s session. Am I right?”

Cally concentrated, trying to remember any other strange or unusual readings. A different sort of reading? Minutes passed before realization dawned on her, causing her to jump up from her seat. She violently shook her head in disagreement.

Backing away from Susie, she felt the heat rising from her neck rush into her face. “Uh-uh. You’re dead wrong, Susie. His reading was weird, that’s all. You’re way off base. No, no, no, and quadruple no!” Yet Aunt Miriam’s words taunted her. *I thought you knew, Cally, honey. I lost my power when I met a man named Leo.*

Susie folded her arms across her chest, scrutinizing Cally’s demonstrations with one eyebrow raised in skeptical derision.

“Cal, his was the very first strange reading. And his reading was right before the readings when you started having problems.”

Cally fought to see the flaw in Susie’s hypothesis and felt a surge of relief when she found her answer. “But you forgot one major factor. I’m not in love with him. And I certainly never made the choice to give up my gift for him.”

"Maybe not, but something's happening between you two. I mean, there's no doubt you share some sort of connection, both physical and mental. Maybe you need to examine your feelings a little closer."

Cally glared at Susie, wiping the smile from her friend's face. "Where did you get your degree in psychology? *The Worldwide Web of Psycho Babble*? Or was it a mail order education from *Shrinks R Us*? I know exactly how I feel about him and it isn't love."

"Okay, okay. Calm down. Let's agree that what you say is true. But his presence could still explain your problem."

"How do you mean?"

"If you'll remember, you said you didn't get any information on his reading, either. Instead, you said your whole body reacted uncontrollably to him. Personally, I think he's the reason your power has gone haywire. I don't know why, but no other explanation fits. Think about it. Maybe the reaction between you two blew a fuse in your brain waves or whatever you use to read people. He's the cause of your problem and he's why you can't use your gift." She grinned like a woman who'd found a diamond bracelet under the Christmas tree.

Cally stared at Susie in horror as a trembling began in her arms. Susie wasn't right, was she?

"And what's more, if you want to fix your problem, I think you need to finish with him first. Once you've figured out why you react the way you do, I bet you'll be right as rain and ready to read."

The trembling moved throughout her entire body until she was forced to sit for fear her legs wouldn't hold her weight any longer. Could this awful explanation be real? Mixed emotions flew through her mind and she tried to decipher them with no luck.

"Look. You've told me a matchmaker has to make a choice. She can accept love and lose her gift for good. Or she can give up that love and all that goes with it, and keep her ability to match. So if that's the case, then you have to decide if the price is too high."

Cally shook her head, trying to stop the ringing in her ears. Gritting her teeth, she glared at her friend. "Love? Are you still trying to say I care for Sloan Janson?"

"Well, if I were you, I'd prefer my explanation to not knowing at all. Especially with Mr. Hottie. You could do a whole lot worse, you know."

"Are you nuts? You think having feelings for a persistent stalker-type would be a good thing? You think losing my gift would be hunky-dory?" She ran her fingers through her hair, resisting the urge to pull out a handful. "I can't believe you. Here's the woman who won't marry her live-in lover because she doesn't want to lose her independence, and she's telling me I should be happy about losing my power because it might mean I'm in love. Susie Wiggins, I am not this man's match. And to even think about a life without being able to match people, is impossible. You don't know what you're talking about."

Susie moved from her chair to sit next to Cally and placed one arm on her shoulders in a comforting gesture. However, she found Susie's next words anything but soothing.

"Cally, girlfriend, I do know one thing. Your problem began with Sloan Janson and your problem will end with Sloan Janson." Both arms encircled her, wrapping her with the comforting warmth of permission to release the sobs she could no longer keep in check. "So, Cal, the only real question now is this. What are you going to do about him?"

Chapter Eight

Sloan watched, hands tucked into his pockets, while Jim Haley, editor of the *Dallas Chronicle*, read his latest and, as far as he was concerned, his last revision of the column about Cally Mathews. The small round man had discarded his first six drafts for “containing material deemed libelous by any competent attorney”. Jim made it very clear the article should have a tongue-in-cheek attitude, and shouldn’t promote an all-out attack. Not exactly the hard-hitting exposé he’d wanted, but at this point, Sloan was ready to fight before he’d capitulate to working on an even more toned down version.

Jim eased back in his chair and surveyed him, his expression unreadable. Somehow the editor’s perusal reminded Sloan of the many times he’d stood before his elementary school principal, waiting for the man to dole out the consequence earned from the latest of his many schoolyard pranks.

“Now what, Jim? Still too close to the line? Not light enough? Come on, man, if I get any nicer than this, I’ll be writing for some women’s rag and not a metropolitan newspaper, for God’s sake.” Leaning over, he placed his hands flat on top of Jim’s desk. “That’s the article we’re running or I’m walking out the door for good.”

Jim glanced at him from above thick glasses balanced on the end of his slightly crooked nose. “Relax, Janson. This is closer to what I wanted. I realize you think I’ve taken all the bite out the article, but you’ve got to admit, you’re pretty low on real evidence against the lady. In fact, after what you’ve told me, I think you’ve got more evidence in her favor than the other way round.”

“What about the so-called reading she gave me?” Sloan failed to keep an aggressive tone out of his voice.

However, instead of getting defensive in return, Jim’s eyes twinkled with barely contained glee. “Seems to me you were a willing participant in the reading going—oh, how should I put this?—away from a professional demeanor on both your parts.”

Sloan remained motionless when Jim pulled forward and moved his stubble-covered face closer to his. Clenching his fists, Sloan resisted the urge to wipe the mock serious expression from his boss’s face.

“Janson, I’ve got one problem with the article.”

He reared back, amazed Jim could find anything wrong with this revision of the article, and lost his composure. Sloan’s booming voice echoed around the small office, eliciting curious looks from the many employees working in the larger newsroom next to the editor’s glassed-in office. “You just said the work was fine. What kind of problem could you have now?”

He felt the heat from his anger rushing up his neck into his head, knowing full well his face was red and he had started to grind his teeth. But before he could utter another word, he was cut short by Jim’s chuckle.

“Easy, boy, easy.” Jim cocked his head to one side, grinning at him, appeasement written on the larger man’s face. “The article is fine. My problem is understanding why a serious investigative reporter like you would want to fool with a fluff piece like this. Or why you’re so insistent we run the column as soon as possible.”

Brows knitting, Jim continued the questioning. “What’s in this for you? Do you want to ease up, take easier assignments from now on? Are you getting soft in your not-so-older years?”

Uncomfortable under the scrutiny, Sloan turned his back on his boss and looked out into the busy newsroom. He scowled at the onlookers who quickly found something else to occupy their attention. “No. You know what type of assignments I like to do. I told you. I’m trying to prove this woman is a fake and help out a friend. That’s why this is so

important. Once that goal is accomplished, I'll return to my usual brand of reporting."

Sloan rubbed the back of his neck to ease the tense feeling crawling upward from his shoulder blades. Just then, the voluptuous Victoria Ratlan, self-proclaimed sex goddess of the paper, walked by and waved, sending him an unmistakable message with her soft, promising eyes. Sloan returned her wave with a half-hearted one of his own.

Turning around, he saw Jim's face scrunched up in amused contemplation. "Hmm. Now I know something's up. Victoria gives you a baby-I'm-all-yours look and you hardly acknowledge her existence. Something's out of whack. Hell, *you're* out of whack. And you have been ever since you got back from wherever the hell you went."

"What? Are you serious? Because I'm not running in hot pursuit of Victoria, you're going to make a federal case out of it? I'm just not interested any longer." He paced in front of the desk, struggling hard to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Get to your point. Are you going to print the column in tomorrow's paper as is, or not?"

Again, Jim squinted at him in that inquiring way, at once causing his temper to mellow with a dose of caution coursing through his veins. Jim was thinking something, but what? Obliging, Jim told him.

"I simply have to wonder. Why would a man, who appreciates a gorgeous woman like Victoria, change from giving her blatant come-ons one day to barely noticing her a week later? And the telling words I heard you use were 'any longer'. Meaning you were attracted to her, like any heterosexual male would be, but now you're not."

What the hell did Jim mean? Under Jim's intense gaze, Sloan felt like he was butt-naked for the entire world to see. The odd sensation doubled with Jim's next declaration. "You know what, Janson, my friend? I think I just figured out the why. No man behaves the way you do without a female being the cause. I think this matchmaker gal got under your skin and you think you can break free of her by writing a trash-talk piece about her."

He stared at Jim, his mind racing with retorts. Most of which didn't ring true. "What in the world are you talking about? Breaking free of her? You think some little gal from a two-street town has somehow put a spell on me? And you think I'm trying to exorcize her by writing a column ridiculing her? That's off the wall, Jim. Besides, she's supposed to be a matchmaker, not a witch."

Jim swiveled in his chair and locked his hands together while a wide grin crept across his face. Chuckling, Jim continued to study Sloan and for once in Sloan's life, words failed him.

Laughing even louder, Jim continued, "Don't worry. We'll run the column tomorrow. But you may as well face the fact, buddy. You've been hooked, netted, gutted and fried up for Sunday supper. The only problem is you haven't realized it yet."

Sloan dropped his jaw in astonishment. Then came his turn to act amused. "Well, you should be the expert on knowing when someone's lovesick, shouldn't you? After all, you've had a thing for your assistant for what...five years now? Tell you what. When you finally get around to admitting you care for Dorris, then you can advise me about my love life. But until you do, keep your assumptions to yourself."

Jim's mouth opened and closed several times even though no sound came out. He managed to start sputtering when his attention locked onto something at the office door. Sloan turned to see what had made Jim's tongue useless.

"Are you two boys finished yelling at each other? Because if you are, the rest of us would like to get some work done. Or is there something I can do for either of you?" Dorris's pleasant face belied the aggravation in her voice.

Noting that Jim couldn't answer, Sloan stepped in. "Sorry about earlier. Everything's okay and I promise we'll hold the noise level down."

Sloan enjoyed the color deepening in Jim's cheeks when Jim's eyes locked onto Dorris's blue ones. Immediately, Sloan was swept back to Lawson and another woman's cerulean gaze. An image of Cally invaded

his thoughts, forcing everything else away and forgotten until Dorris's voice interrupted.

"Well, okay. You boys buzz me if I'm needed."

"Thanks, we will." Forcing a grin he didn't feel, Sloan turned back to Jim. "Boss, you have finally and completely lost it. This article will provide a public service while, at the same time, help free a friend of mine from a misguided marriage. Me? Hooked? Oh, man, senility hit you early."

Turning on his heel, he strode out of the office, letting a scowl replace the fake smile he'd put on display. But what if Jim was right?

* * *

"So, Cal, have you come to an answer? Are you going to figure out what's happening between you and Sloan?"

Susie's voice echoed in Cally's ears even while the confusion ran unchecked in her mind. Since their conversation in the garden almost a week before, she still wasn't sure what to do about her loss of power or Susie's shocking conclusions.

Bracing the phone against her shoulder, she forged ahead. "No, I haven't decided anything yet. Maybe I should simply be thankful for all the years I had the gift and the opportunity to help so many people. Maybe I should accept that the power is gone now, put the past behind me, and enjoy a nice, normal life. You know, like yours." Although she heard the words coming out of her mouth with as light a tone as she could muster, the dull ache inside her wouldn't let her believe them.

Susie's laughter filled her ears. "Oh, right. My life is perfectly normal. I spent the morning chasing a skunk out of Miss Dilly's kitchen only to find out her son brought it home as a pet. And then Billy decides to have another of his 'it's time to get hitched' talks. Right, my life is so normal."

"You know what I mean. Life without my power."

"Gee, Cal, could you really let it go without at least trying to get it back? I mean, the gift's been such a major part of you since you were a

young girl, and helping others find their love has always given you a lot of pleasure. I have difficulty imagining you without your primary purpose in life. Of course, if the gift was replaced with the love of your life, that would be different. Wouldn't it?"

A strained silence filled the space between them while Cally tried to envision her life without her special ability. "Suz, please, let's not go there again. A life without the gift would be empty, no matter what else might take its place. I don't know if I could stand living without it." She was about to explain further when a loud knocking on her front door interrupted her thoughts. "Hey, someone's at the door. I'll have to call you back." Not giving Susie time to protest, she hung up the phone and started toward the sound.

The rapping grew louder by the second. Who could this be? An exciting, slightly scary thought startled her and had her heart doing acrobatics in her chest. Could it be Sloan? Was he back to try another reading? And if so, would she dare open the door?

"Hold on a minute. I'm coming. Just give me a second, will you?" Taking long strides to reach the door, she paused a moment to check her reflection in the hallway mirror. Now why had she done that? Especially when she already knew Sloan wasn't behind the door. Cally swung open the door, annoyed for allowing her mind to think about him at all, much less to feel disappointment that the visitor wasn't him, and stared into the face of a stranger. Somewhat startled by the young woman's appearance, she struggled for thoughts to put into words. Going into automatic response, she managed to speak, albeit in a somewhat hesitant voice. "Yes? May I help you?"

The skinny young woman, dressed in tight jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt, fidgeted with excitement. "Hi, you're Cally Mathews, right? The lady who's a matchmaker? 'Cause the girl at the gas station told me where you lived. Can I get matched today? Maybe even right now? Man, I am so stoked about this."

Stunned, Cally tried again to understand. "I'm sorry, but what did you say?"

“Yeah, like I said, I came here to get matched. You know, like in the newspaper story.” Stopping her verbal barrage for a second, the girl spit out her gum and stuck the large blob on the frame of Cally’s door. Both amazed and disgusted, Cally stared at the gum wad affixed to her home.

“The name’s Scarlet. Well, sort of. That’s like my stage name, not my born-with name. But you don’t need to know any personal information before you read me, do you?” Scarlet popped another piece of gum into her mouth.

Abruptly, sticking a finger within millimeters of Cally’s nose, Scarlet’s friendly attitude dropped a hundred degrees and froze over. “And, hey, don’t try to hit me up for any money either, ’cause I know you don’t charge anything to put your special touch on your neighbors. Which means you shouldn’t charge other people just ’cause they’re from somewhere else like Dallas.” Scarlet crossed her arms, giving Cally the impression she should feel guilty about committing a terrible transgression.

Cally stood immobilized like a human ice sculpture. Finally, her brain clunked into working order, thoughts grew coherent, and she realized what the girl wanted. “Oh, uh, I’m sorry, but I don’t match people I don’t know. Besides, what story are you talking about?” She watched as an irritated look replaced the mistrustful expression on the young woman’s face.

“Oh, come on. Are you or are you not the matchmaker, Cally Mathews?”

Cally nodded, even though the idea to deny her identity and run away sounded like a good course of action right about now. But before she left town, she’d make a quick stop at the store. She owed Millie Jo a piece of her mind and she would delight in giving the young girl what she deserved.

Scarlet’s enthusiasm was back. “Well, all right then! You’re the one the column was about. The story said you were a young woman, living in this tiny dump of a town called Lawson. Oops, sorry. Well, maybe the story didn’t say the town was a dump, but you gotta admit, it ain’t no

Dallas.” As if to prove her assertions, Scarlet turned and surveyed the other houses lining the street with a measure of contempt.

As she followed Scarlet’s gaze, two more strangers approached from a car parked on the street. A middle-aged man gripped the hand of a conservatively dressed lady, pulling her along the walk to where they stood.

“Excuse me, Miss. Are you Cally Mathews?”

Now she really did have a compulsion to escape, but found her feet seemed super-glued to the floor. Forcing her body to move, she stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind her as if to guard her home from any unwanted intrusion. “Yes, that’s me.” What did they want? Even as the question ran through her head, Cally’s stomach dropped at the answer following close behind. They wanted a reading.

“Good. We found you.” Relief flooded his features, while his lady friend panted, trying to catch her breath. “I hate to bother you and we would have made an appointment first, but the article didn’t list any contact information. Lucky for us the teenager at your local Git-n-Go place provided your address. For a price, that is.”

Cally’s mind reeled with the implications of his words. “Do you mean Millie Jo is making money by giving people my personal information? You paid her?”

Scarlet squared away at the couple. “Ha! Well, I guess I got one on ya’ll ’cause she gave me the info for nothing.” Giggling, Scarlet continued, “And you two have to get in line ’cause I was here first.”

The man scowled at Scarlet, while questions pummeled Cally’s mind. Turning her attention back to the man, she tried to make her voice normal sounding, while the rest of her body felt anything but normal. Every instinct in her warned that something was off. Way off.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what everyone’s talking about. What story?” She glanced up to see yet another couple emerging from a red Toyota.

Oh, no. More people?

With aggravation clouding his face, the man thrust a newspaper toward her. "This story in the *Dallas Chronicle*. See? The one entitled 'Matchmaker, True Love by Touch or Just Plain Touched?'"

He swiveled around to look at an overweight young woman joining the Toyota couple on the path up to her porch, then turned back to confront her. "Ms. Mathews, I suppose this, uh, young lady has the right to get her matchmaking done first, but we're next in line, correct? I mean, we've driven all the way from the other side of Dallas for a session with you."

Perturbed, Cally raked a hand through her hair as she took the paper from him and glanced at the headline of the column. Sure enough, there was the title, just as the man had quoted to her. But instead of reading the rest of the article, she forced her attention back to the small crowd of people standing in front of her home.

"Please listen, everyone, and try to understand. I know nothing about this article or what's in it. But the fact of the matter is this. I don't match strangers. That means anyone I don't personally know, or who isn't a friend of a friend." Would they understand? Yet although each face in front of her held varying degrees of emotions ranging from bewilderment to barely controlled hostility, none of them held a look of understanding.

Deciding to concentrate on the confused expression of the overweight woman while ignoring the angrier ones, she tried to elaborate. "Please understand. Even if I tried to do what you're asking, nothing would happen." She paused, finding the revelation difficult to admit to herself, much less to a group of people seeking her help. "You see, I've lost my ability to match. I couldn't match you if I wanted to. I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave."

Exclamations of surprise, disappointment, and rage rose from the people standing before her. She flinched as the first man stepped nearer. So near she could feel the surge of anger radiating from his body. "Now wait a minute, lady. I took an entire day off from work so I could appease my fiancée here and have a matchmaker reading. She says she won't marry me until you tell her we're meant for each other. Time is money

and I'm not wasting another second on this superstitious hooley. Let's get this reading going."

Her body stiffened when he leaned close enough to whisper in her ear, "This is about cash, correct? So all you have to do is tell me how much you want and we can get this little sideshow on stage. Personally, I don't care if you're for real or not. I just want this over with quick like so she'll shut her yap and we can get married." A crooked sneer stretched his thin lips even wider. "I mean, take a gander at her. Would I go to all this trouble if the broad wasn't loaded?"

Cally tried to resist but she couldn't stop from sneaking a glimpse at the timid woman standing behind him. Meek and mousey were the first adjectives formulating in her mind. But as far as Cally was concerned, the lady would get the raw end of the deal in this marriage.

"See if you can hurry all this along a little faster. If you do, maybe they'll be a little something special added to your fee." Winking at her, he attempted to transform his hideous features into what she assumed was an inviting expression, and failed miserably.

Urgh! The only thing worse than the man's breath is his lack of common decency. I wish I could read for his fiancée because I'm sure she has someone better waiting for her.

Trying to keep her features from giving her away, Cally bent around the man so she could speak directly to Ms. Mouse. "I don't need a reading to tell you something you need to know. If you marry this jerk, you're going to regret it." The tears welling up in Ms. Mouse's eyes made Cally almost regret her harsh statements. Nonetheless, she knew the woman needed to hear the truth "But I can tell you this. He's not your soul mate. No soul mate would ever treat their love the way he treats you."

"Why, you bitch." The man's fury whipped across his face and reverberated in his voice. Cally started to go into more details, but the addition of more people to the crowd decided her next course of action. Reaching behind her to find the knob, she readied herself for a quick

retreat. "Look. I won't, I can't help you. Any of you. And money is not the issue. Get your money back from Millie Jo and leave me alone."

Moving as swiftly as she could, she yanked her door open and stepped inside her home. Slamming the door, she didn't give anyone an opportunity to react. Yet her actions weren't fast enough to keep her from seeing the gathering extend past her porch, down her steps, and halfway along the path to the street.

Flipping the deadbolt, Cally rested her back against the wood. She could hear the clamor from the other side of the door as her visitors expressed their outrage, but she didn't dare risk a peek. Taking deep breaths, she tried to calm her racing heart.

Cally rushed to the kitchen and grabbed her phone. Clutching the phone in one hand, she hurried to the back door and secured the locks. She leaned against the door and punched in Susie's number as she mumbled a quick prayer. *Please, let someone be home.* Thankfully, Billy picked up the line after two rings.

"Billy, you've got to help me. There's a mob of people in front of my house, and I'm afraid some of them might get riled up enough to do some damage. Or worse. Please, I need you over here right now." She fought to control the panic in her voice as she explained the recent events to the confused Billy. Finally, she heard the words she wanted to hear.

"Hang tight, Cal. I'll call a couple of men and we'll be there inside ten minutes. Susie's coming, too. And I'll give Millie Jo's daddy a call and let him know about her little money-making scheme."

Cally replaced the phone and crept back into the living room, all the while staring at the door. She half expected the mob to break down the barrier in their quest to get readings. What would she do if they did? If they remained outside, would she get trapped in her own home? Or should she try to escape through the backyard?

Emotionally and physically exhausted, she collapsed on the couch and covered her ears with the cushions, hoping to stifle the sounds of the crowd's angry shouts and curses. Whispering a prayer to help speed Billy

along his way, she began to sing, trying unsuccessfully to calm her nerves. Oh, what she wouldn't give for a peaceful, normal life!

What might have been only a few minutes passed, although Cally was sure hours had sped away while she waited for Billy and the others to arrive. Finally, she heard Billy's voice rising above the raucous noise of the crowd.

"Yo! People, listen up."

Cally waited, breath held, as the clamor of the group turned into grumbles.

"Folks, my name's Billy Hodgens and I'm the mayor of Lawson. Miss Mathews has requested you remove yourselves from her premises and go on back home. She will not give any readings today or any other day."

She recognized the voice of the engaged man, now loaded with sarcasm. The timbre of his words dredged up his sneering image and ripped its way into her thoughts. "Step aside, *Mr.* Mayor. You're not the law and you can't tell us what we can and can't do. We're not going anywhere until we get what we came for." His declaration was met with calls of support from several of the others.

Again Cally heard Billy, his words rumbling through the air. "Sir, as the mayor of this town and a concerned citizen, I can and I will call the state police to come and disperse this unlawful gathering. Every one of ya'll are trespassing on private property."

Several voices called out in protest until Billy's voice once more rose above the rest. "Also, me and my fellow Lawsonians will make citizens' arrests and hold you lawbreakers here until the state authorities arrive. Mind you, we don't have a real jail, but I'm sure there's a few folks 'round here who'd let us borrow their barns. Especially if we put you to good use shoveling manure."

"You can't do that."

Billy's laughter filled the air, drowning out the half-hearted agreement of the crowd as he thickened his accent to play the country bumpkin. "Why, shucks. There's a whole mess of things I do that I ain't s'posed to do. Hell, you're lucky if ya'll don't get shot. Accidental-like, a-

course. You know how we small town hick mayors can be. Darn, my trigger finger's gittin' right itchy jest thinkin' about shooting some trespassers."

Cally grinned as she envisioned Billy holding up his index finger and wiggling it at the crowd. After hearing a few unintelligible mutterings, an eerie quiet reached her. Tiptoeing to the window, she looked out to see the people heading for their cars. Only the angry man and his fiancée stopped to turn back. He glared at Billy and the two men standing on the lawn beside him, before pulling the haggard-looking woman into a car. Susie stood in a defiant stance on the edge of the porch, fists doubled and resting on her hips.

Cally watched, relief flooding through her, as Billy said something she couldn't hear and shook hands with his two friends. Turning on his heel, Billy headed toward her home. Susie, however, beat him to the door.

"Cally, open up, it's me."

Quickly, Cally unlocked the door and let Susie inside. Susie embraced her in a comforting hug and spoke softly and reassuringly. "They're gone, Cal, and I'll bet they won't be back either. Billy and his buddies got rid of them, pronto. You can relax now 'cause I'm here and Billy's coming inside, too."

"Billy, I can't tell you how grateful I am that you came when you did." Cally's eyes filled with ready tears, but she managed to keep them from breaking free. She grasped Susie's hand and added, "Thanks for coming, too, Suz."

Tucking his head in an embarrassment born of shyness, the corners of Billy's lips tipped upward, showing his pleasure at her appreciation. "Aw, Cally, you know I'm always happy to help you any time, any place. This little disturbance wasn't a big deal. Just a few city people thinking they could push a country girl around. Not what you'd call a lynch mob or anything. But just to be safe, Tate and Joe are hanging around outside to head off any others who might show up."

Susie reached up to grab his thick neck and pull his face down to her level. She made a show of planting a sloppy wet kiss on his cheek. Proudly, she patted his chest. "That's my man. Big as a bull and full of sugar. Gotta love the ole sweetie."

A pink tint crept across his cheeks, and Cally gave an acknowledging nod of agreement. "He's a keeper all right and your soul mate, too. Better make an honest man of him before he slips away." Her comment merited the evil eye from Susie, but a grateful grin from Billy.

"Okay, you two. Don't get started. When I'm ready to get married and have kids, I'll be the one to say so. Quit pushing me, Cal."

Coughing to cover his bashfulness, Billy diverted attention away from the sensitive topic and back to the situation at hand. "Cal, you said that guy gave you a paper? What happened to it? Don't you think you ought to read what got those folks out to hunt you down?"

Cally covered her mouth in surprise. "Oh, I'd forgotten all about it." She searched for the paper, checking around the sides of furniture. Following the sounds of scratching, she saw Houdini standing on top of the paper, paws open, ready for action, with claws eager to shred. "No, Houdini. Good kitty. Go on and get off, baby." She scooped up a protesting Houdini while reaching with her other hand to retrieve the folded newspaper.

Studying the column, she nestled onto the sofa with Billy and Susie sitting on either side of her. Susie's shoulder rubbed against hers as her friend pressed closer to get a better look. Then she heard Susie's voice in her ear, echoing the thought already sending dread and anticipation down her spine. "Oh, damn. This was written by Sloan Janson."

A throbbing began in her left temple as comprehension hit her full force. Her breath suspended in shock, making her gasp to regain her air. *Sloan Janson*? He'd written an article about her? But why? Was this what he'd wanted all along? Now she remembered he hadn't revealed his profession or his true motive for getting a reading. Of course, had she known what he was truly after, she wouldn't have gone within ten feet of him.

Again, Susie uttered the words filling Cally's mind. "I can't believe he'd do this after spouting all those lies about wanting to find true love. Instead, he was here to get dirt for his column. But why? Why didn't he just ask you if he could write about you?"

A fog covered Cally's vision, making her pass the paper over to Susie. "Suz, will you read the article to me, please? I can't seem to..."

"Sure, honey. I'll read it for you."

Slumping over to rest her head in her hands, Cally listened, noting not only the words Susie read, but the growing ire in her friend's voice.

"Cally, honey, are you okay?"

A hand rubbed small circles of comfort on her back. She remained motionless, wanting yet dreading to hear more. Susie's voice oozed contempt.

"Can you believe this? He's written a story calling you a fake without actually coming right out and saying so. How low can a man go?"

"Go on. Keep reading." Cally's voice seemed incapable of anything louder than a whisper.

"Well, if you're sure. But it's all trash. 'What is incredible is Ms. Mathews' ability to convince an entire town that her abilities are real. Couples, young and old, profess to be matched by the town's Gifted One and swear their matches are the result of Ms. Mathews naming their soul mate. All of them say Ms. Mathews never once asked for monetary compensation. Instead, much like the Mafioso bosses in Hollywood movies, she asks her clients to perform favors as payment'."

"Performing favors?" Billy's growl deepened. "Damn, he makes it sound like you're flat on your back humping people and then asking them to cut off horse heads."

"Billy!" Susie whacked him on the shoulder in protest.

"I'm sorry, but he does."

"Are you sure you want me to keep reading, Cal? I mean, who cares what this guy wrote? Everybody in Lawson knows the truth. That's all that really matters."

Lifting her head so she could see Susie's earnest expression, Cally cleared her throat and tried to ignore the pain of heartache and betrayal tearing at her heart. Yet even in a whisper, the determination in her voice made her command sound forceful. "Keep reading."

"Okay. But I hope you aren't taking any of these lies to heart." Susie cleared her throat and began again. "This reporter found the whole experience of the Matchmaker's reading to be less dramatic and yes, even less credible than those of Dallas's own Madame Selena, the infamous medium who was so unskilled at her profession that scores of people demanded their money returned. Fortunately for decent citizens, Madame Selena saw the light of impending lawsuits in her crystal ball, and presently describes her service as simple entertainment. She, unlike Ms. Mathews, no longer tries to convince anyone she has any real magical talent'."

Cally felt Billy rise from his seat. "Man, if I could get my hands on him for ten minutes, I'd show him some magic of my own."

"I know how you feel, Billy, but there's no chance he's going to come back here after this." A cold steel layered Susie's crisply spoken words. But she continued to read. "What this reporter found interesting was not the Matchmaker's ability to match people—because she never fulfilled that request for yours truly—but the fact so many educated individuals in our modern time will place their hopes and dreams on so-called magical powers'."

Cally's disbelief was reflected on both her friends' faces. Yet she remained quiet, while questions raced through her brain. How could he write those things? Would people believe him? What would everyone in Lawson think? Had he really thought so little of her? And worse, how could she have been drawn to someone like him?

"Cal, girl, do you want Suz and me to call an attorney? Surely this piece of journalistic crap crosses the line into slander or libel, or whatever the correct term is." Billy's face expressed a mixed mask of eagerness and hostility.

“He’s right.” Susie knelt before her and took Cally’s hands in her own. “Let’s be thankful you didn’t have any real feelings for the creep. You should sue the jerk for everything he’s got. Then maybe he wouldn’t run around writing garbage about good people.”

Amazingly, Cally managed a sad smile. She looked at Billy and Susie who, by their outward appearances, seemed more upset than she was, and allowed her smile to grow bigger. She saw their expressions change from incensed to quizzical, obviously thrown by her lack of rage.

“No, no lawyers.” Rising, she took them each by a hand, and stood facing them, blessed to have two wonderful friends supporting her. “Gathering from those folks showing up on my doorstep, some people either didn’t believe him or they prefer to think my talents are real. But I can’t stay here while strangers keep arriving.”

Casting Susie a meaningful look, she continued, “Maybe if I still had my power, I’d stay and help them. But since that’s not the case, I don’t think I can stand to keep turning them away. With your help, I’m going out of town for a while. I could use some space and time to get my life in order.”

Cally bit her bottom lip, using all the courage she could find to keep the tears in check. She almost lost the struggle, however, when she saw her own emotions in the face of her dearest friend. She suspected the same was true of Billy but, in his usual manner, he hung his head low, keeping her from seeing his face. “So, Suz, Billy, will you help me?”

Susie threw her arms around her, holding her so tightly she could feel the thudding of the other woman’s pulse. “Oh, Cally, you know we will. Just make sure you aren’t gone too long.”

Ragged, untamed emotions of love and gratitude for the couple coursed through Cally, making her choke on the words she wished she could say. Instead, she wrapped her arms around her friend, and hugged her until her muscles hurt from the effort. Yet only one idea repeated in her thoughts. Where could she go?

Chapter Nine

Relaxed for the first time since returning from Lawson, Sloan sighed a ragged breath and slid his body down in the seat, releasing the tension that had taken residence in his neck for the past few weeks.

Finally, home. No more talk about soul mates and especially no more ladies with special powers. At least, not any with strange special powers. Just the usual powers any *normal* beautiful woman would possess.

As his gaze scanned the dining room, he noticed coppery highlights glistening off the hair of a young woman who sat at a table in the center of the room. His breath caught in his throat while excited ideas flew through his mind. *Cally? Could that be Cally? Is she here?* If she'd turn around, he'd know.

Half rising from his seat, he felt a rush of adrenaline zip through his veins until he was sure his blood vessels would burst open from the pressure. He couldn't stop the grin he knew was on his face, and a spark of joy pulsed a welcoming pattern throughout his body. An image of Cally's face, wisps of soft auburn hair surrounding vibrant blue eyes, made his stomach clutch in anticipation and heat explode in his abdomen. He readied his smile as the woman turned around.

She's not Cally.

His smile dropped along with his stomach. The gut-wrenching disappointment quickly turned to irritation as he realized where he'd allowed his thoughts to take him. Why in the world would he want Cally here? But then again, hadn't he thought about her a lot since he'd come back to Dallas? Moments where memories of her sitting by the lake or standing close to him in her garden would flash through his mind,

startling him with the accompanying longings of desire and lust. But even stronger and more unsettling was the impression, the absolute knowledge that he should be with her, that he needed to be with her, in every way that counted. Heck, he'd even found himself thinking about returning to Lawson.

With a determined effort to rid his mind of the unwanted ruminations free-falling through him, he slumped down in the booth, and grumbled, "Knock it off, Sloan. You're focused on the column, that's all. This weird obsession for Cally will fade the second you run into another pretty face with a smokin' body and endless legs." Yet, despite his protests, lingering thoughts remained with him.

Maybe. But no one like Cally.

"Got a problem, Sloan?" Annie, owner and head waitress of The Timbers Bar and Grill, peered curiously at him before setting a bottle of beer in front of him. "I took the liberty of getting you a cold one. Haven't seen you for a while. You been out of town or too busy to drop in on your old friends? Can I get you anything else?"

Forcing himself to appear in better spirits than he actually felt, he winked at Annie, knowing the older lady expected him to flirt with her. "Thanks, Annie, honey. Yeah, I've been out of town on a short trip. And no thanks. Nothing else. I'm going to nurse this beer until Rob gets here."

A quick smile popped onto the older lady's face. "Rob's meeting you? You know, I don't think I've ever seen a man fall in love as fast or as hard as he did. But marriage appears to agree with Rob because the last time I saw him, he was happier than an old tomcat with a bucket of fish."

At the mention of Rob's marriage, Sloan's attempt to rally a cheery disposition turned sour. Annie, however, didn't notice the change in his attitude and kept talking.

"Yes, sir, Rob and Lisa are good together. He's such a nice man and she's a real sweetie-pie. Why, I'm thinking I might head on over to Lawson and ask this matchmaker gal to fix me up with a good man, too."

Unable to believe what he'd heard, Sloan choked on another swig of beer. "You've got to be kidding. Didn't you read the piece I wrote about her?"

She placed both her fists on her generous hips and eyed him with disapproval. "Well, now that you mentioned it, I've got to say I was very disappointed in you. Hell, from what you wrote, you'd think you didn't believe in true love."

Sloan was amazed a hard-working, tough woman like Annie Rawlins could believe in matchmakers. However, before he could gather his wits to give a retort to her declaration, Rob sauntered up and put his arm around her.

"Take it easy on him, Annie." Rob grinned at Sloan, enjoying her chastisement. "Annie, would you be a darlin' and bring me a beer while I talk some sense into this mule-headed guy?"

"Now that's a done deal. I'll take care of your drink and you take care of him." With one final dark look thrown at Sloan, Annie whipped around and stalked back to the kitchen.

Watching Rob lower himself into the seat across from him, Sloan fixed a cold glower on his face and got ready for whatever was headed his way. "I gather from the statement you made to Annie, you've got a bone to pick with me, too. Seems like you're forgetting why I started this whole investigation. But, you know what? I'd just as soon forget I ever heard of Cally Mathews, soul mates, or matchmakers. So before you hop up on your soapbox, let's agree to stay off that particular subject."

Rob sat closed-lipped, the smile he'd been wearing fading from his face. Sloan remained quiet as Annie returned with Rob's beer, keeping his mouth shut until after she'd deposited the brew and walked off again.

Several minutes passed. Finally, unable to stand the silence any longer and knowing Rob wouldn't let the subject die, Sloan barked out his words. "Okay, just spit it out. What am I really guilty of? Trying to save my best friend from a fraudulent marriage?"

Annoyance and another sensation reminiscent of guilt caused his stomach muscles to twist into hard knots. The brief respite from tension

he'd enjoyed earlier was long gone with tightness latching eagerly onto the back of his neck again.

"Sloan, I understand the motives behind your actions, and I do appreciate you trying to look out for me. You've hauled me out of more scrapes than I care to admit. But this time, you're on the wrong side of things." Rob leaned toward him, hands clasped tightly together. With quiet determination, he continued speaking in the rigidly controlled tone Sloan knew hid pent-up frustration and anger. "I think it's time for me to set you straight on a few things."

Sloan's harsh laughter caused a few of their fellow patrons to glance his way. "You're going to set *me* straight? Don't you get it? I'm tired of the entire mess. I couldn't find the evidence I needed—"

"Because there isn't any."

Sloan groaned at Rob's interjection. "Look, I'd rather let the matter die. Obviously my article did nothing to convince you to leave your marriage and I don't know what else I can do to help you. Frankly, I don't want to get into it with you. Let's discuss something, anything, besides Cally Mathews."

Rob paused to collect his thoughts. "Nope. No deal. You're my best friend, man, and I want you to support my marriage. Hell, God help me but I want you to be an honorary uncle when Lisa and I have kids."

"Aw, low blow, man. Getting all sentimental on me isn't going to help." Or at least, he wouldn't admit the uncle title had gotten to him. Crossing his arms, Sloan leaned back in the booth and attempted to portray an indifferent attitude.

"You need to stop this crusade against Cally and stop it now. There are some facts you need to hear, so do me the courtesy of keeping your yap shut until I've said my piece."

Although he ached to voice his opinions, he dutifully nodded at Rob, reluctantly indicating his acceptance of the conditions. Rob seemed more confident than Sloan had ever seen him.

Rob smiled in return. "Good. First of all, I want you to realize how much Lisa and I love each other. Don't give me that look, man. It may

sound sappy, but it's true. And as far as money goes, shoot, I practically have to beg her to spend any. In fact, she wants to get a job, but I'm hoping I can convince her to stay home and start a family. In the end, though, we'll do whatever makes the most sense for the both of us, because that's the way marriages are supposed to work."

Sloan sighed, resigned to believing Rob. "I'm glad for you. Really, I am. Hell, I'm ready to admit I might be wrong. After all, stranger things have happened."

"Wow. Now there's a news flash. 'Sloan Janson admits he's wrong'."

"Real funny. You're a laugh riot, you know that? Besides, I said 'I *might* be wrong'." He relaxed a little at Rob's grin. "I'll give you this. Everyone thinks you and Lisa are made for each other. So I agree I was *possibly* wrong about her. And, although it's late in coming, I wish you two all the best because I know no matter what I do, or what evidence I may find, you're dead set on staying married."

Sloan took a quick swig of his beer, hoping the cool liquid would ease the rest of the tension in his body. "Are we finished? Can we drop this conversation now? I'm tired and not in the mood for being berated anymore by you or Annie. In fact, I'm heading home. Check in with me again real soon, buddy. If your better half will let you."

He threw some money on the table and rose from his seat, but Rob wouldn't let the conversation end. "Sit down. I'm not finished discussing this." Yet it was Rob's tone of voice, one Sloan had never heard him use before, that made him stop.

Emitting a low groan, Sloan plopped back down on the cushion. "Come on, Rob. You got what you came for, right? What do you want? An oath? Would that do the trick?" Placing a hand over his heart, he spoke in a deliberate and solemn tone. "I, Sloan Janson, swear I will accept the marriage of Rob and Lisa Dillon." Quickly switching back to his normal voice, he asked, "Deal? I've agreed to support your marriage, so get off my back, okay?"

Rob stared, sending a very definite message to him. “Nope. I’m not through with you. We still have to talk about the situation you caused for Cally.”

“What situation?” The sudden pounding of his heart was a reaction to the intensity of the exchange, right? And not the possibility Cally might be in trouble? Because if his reaction was about her, he didn’t want to think about what it meant.

Leaning back in his seat, Rob took a drink before saying more. “I’ll get to Cally in a minute. Look, Sloan, right before Lisa and I got married, I did something I’m ashamed of. Then, after she’d already put up with my nonsense, I wanted it kept secret. I didn’t want anyone thinking badly about her or me. And I made Lisa promise not to say anything, too. That’s why I never told you before now. Maybe I should have and all this wouldn’t have happened. Anyway, when we saw your article about Cally, we decided it was time to speak up.”

Sloan motioned for Rob to keep going. “Yeah, so?”

Rob downed the rest of his beer. “Your theory about Lisa marrying me for my money is wrong. Which makes your idea about Cally being a fraud wrong, too.”

Sloan nodded, but got the impression Rob hadn’t noticed since he continued talking in rapid-fire speed.

“In fact, you’re so wrong your idea isn’t even on the radar. Here. Take a look at this.” Rob pulled some legal-size papers from his pocket and pushed them toward him.

Sloan unfolded the papers and began to read. As he continued to peruse the document, distrust, disbelief, and, finally, a reluctant acceptance seeped through him. The knot in his stomach tightened up even more.

“You see, Sloan? If this whole marriage is a scam Cally and Lisa perpetrated to get my family’s money, then they screwed up. You’re reading a prenuptial agreement giving Lisa absolutely nothing should we ever divorce for any reason. I’m ashamed I ever sunk so low as to ask her to sign it. Don’t you get it? Instead of listening to my heart, I listened to

my lawyer. Max Jacob brought the damned agreement to Lawson and Lisa signed it without flinching. After her unconditional love for me, I felt lower than scum on a barrel for asking her to sign and I never wanted anyone to find out. Even a bitter old fart like you.”

Flustered by this new turn of events, Sloan peered at Rob, absorbing the humiliation on his friend’s face. His gut churned, while his own shame filled him, making it difficult to maintain eye contact with Rob. Keeping his head down, he acknowledged the inevitable conclusion. “Okay, okay. I admit I pegged them wrong.” Sloan rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the screws tightening within each vertebra. “But then why’d you let me run off to Lawson?”

“Two reasons. First, like I told you. I was embarrassed by what I did. And second, I thought once you met Cally you’d realize she was on the up and up. Hell, I kind of hoped she’d match you.”

“Rob, you’re an idiot sometimes, you know it?”

“Yeah, but what I’m saying is true.”

Sloan glanced at Rob who waited expectantly, and knew he had no choice but to continue his revelation. “Well, damn. This means”—he threw a meaningful look at Rob showing he’d gotten Rob’s unspoken message—“I have to believe Cally didn’t try scamming you. She may be a bit different to believe she can match people, but she’s not a con artist.” He looked away again, working all he’d learned through the fog in his brain.

“But Cally’s ability is real.”

“You still believe she matched you and Lisa?”

Rob retrieved the prenuptial agreement and tucked it into his pocket. “You tell me, man. Didn’t the evidence prove she is? I know you didn’t find any evidence to prove otherwise, right? And there are a whole lot of people who believe in her. Including me.”

Could Cally’s gift be real? Sloan tried the idea on for size. Maybe. And if her power was real, that meant...

Sloan jerked his head up when the realization of his action cut into him. “Oh jeez, Rob. I’m not convinced of her power, but if I’m wrong, I’ve

messed up big time. My article was a killer. I've got to write a retraction today. Hopefully, I can get it out in the next edition before anything happens as a result of what I wrote."

"Too late, man."

Rob's glum expression spiked his heart rate up another notch. "What's wrong? Is she all right?"

"Fallout from the article already hit. Susie Wiggins called Lisa to tell her. People misinterpreted your article and decided Cally's powers are real. I guess people would rather believe in magic and love than not. Since the newspaper came out, scores of love seekers have shown up at her door wanting to get matched. And they're still showing up."

Sloan stared in disbelief at the news. "You're kidding? People got it backward and, instead, they think she does have special abilities?"

Rob shrugged and continued, "First of all, she really is a matchmaker. However, that's not the whole problem. You see, if Cally could have helped these people, she'd have withstood all the unwanted attention. But for some unknown reason, she's lost her powers and can't do readings any longer."

Sloan sat stunned, trying to let the effect of this news register in his already overwhelmed mind. Rob kept talking, giving him the worst of the information.

"Cally decided she couldn't handle turning away all those people. Do you get it? Because of your scuzzy article, she didn't have any choice except to leave town."

Sloan reached across the table, slamming down both his hands in exasperation. "What do you mean she left town? Where'd she go? Did she say how long she'd be gone?"

Rob shrugged and sent Sloan a telling look. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. "Slow down, man. I don't think she told anyone the details. I think she left in a hurry."

"What do you mean? Is she gone for a short trip? Or gone for good?" Could his actions have made Cally leave her home? If she was gone for good, would he ever be able to find her? The last thought made him

physically ill. His pulse raced with an urgency he'd never experienced before as the reality of what he'd done crushed him with the weight of an elephant sitting on his chest. "Aw, man, Rob, I feel like the biggest jerk in Texas. If you know where she is, you've got to tell me. I've got to find her and set things right. I've got to tell her I was wrong."

A giant grin flooded Rob's features. "Okay, Sloan. You write the retraction and we'll find out where Cally is."

* * *

A face began to take shape with determined eyes blazing in a rugged face. Gradually, the image took on more shape and clarity until she recognized the extraordinary eyes.

Sloan. Again.

Shaking her head, Cally mentally stomped down the thoughts of Sloan. Why couldn't she stop thinking about that man? Especially after what he'd written? But he kept popping into her thoughts, unwelcome and unwanted. Granted, sometimes the images weren't so unpleasant. Like the visual memory of his buffed bod without his shirt on. Or his amazing smile that curled her toes when he gazed at her with a certain twinkle in his eye. Yet every time she allowed her mind to wander, her meanderings returned to Sloan. Her idea of coming out to the lake cabin to rid her thoughts of him hadn't worked.

"No! Get out of my head. Now!" Her shout sent the birds resting in the nearby trees streaking through the air. "Sorry, little ones. I didn't mean to scare you." In an attempt to make amends, she tore the bagel she held into small sections and tossed the pieces into the yard.

"Here you go. Eat the yummy bread while I go inside the house to check the phone directory and see if I can hire an exorcist. Maybe I can get Sloan Janson out of my mind that way."

Turning on her heel, she started up the steps yet halted when she caught the telltale sign of a cloud of dust on the road. She stopped for a minute and, using one hand to shade her eyes, squinted at the sight.

Someone was coming. Probably Mr. Brewster, the rental agent, checking on her.

But why would he come out here again so soon? Cally peered harder at the dark vehicle surrounded by the billowing road dust. In spots where the dust thinned, she could tell the vehicle didn't have the same shape as Mr. Brewster's truck at all. In fact, the silhouette looked more like the shape of a sedan.

Her breathing started coming in shallow gasps as she recognized the type of car heading toward the cabin. Yet, her brain refused to believe what she saw. As the car grew closer, however, her mind was forced into accepting what her heart had already recognized. The car was a sedan, all right. A dark blue sedan. Like a Lexus. Like the one Sloan Janson drove.

Once the car passed Little Bridge, the one lane plank board bridge separating the bad gravel road from the even worse dirt road, the route grew steeper and contained more ruts than an actual lane. If she got in her car and left right now, she could escape dealing with him. She could race down the hill, whip around his car by driving off the road, and speed away. The escape route would be a rough ride, but it would be worth it.

Anger mixed with frustration and uneasiness threatened to rise in her throat. But then a thought hit her, both surprising her and invigorating her. *Why should I run away? I'm not the intruder here. Sloan is.*

As if in conjunction with her darkening mood, rain fell from the swiftly forming gray clouds. Yet Cally, concentrating on the approaching vehicle, barely noticed the fat droplets hitting the ground all around her. Instead, she focused her full attention on the approaching vehicle.

Determination built a home in her and she made her decision. Sloan was responsible for forcing her to leave Lawson. But she'd be damned if he'd make her run away from here, too. With her feet firmly planted the width of her shoulders, she held her body straight and tall, and waited for him to arrive.

Keeping watch on the figure in the car, she readied herself, fury swelling to fill her chest, as Sloan swung his car into the short driveway. He pulled the car to an abrupt stop, only a few feet away from where she stood. Rain soaked her T-shirt and hair, but she steeled herself against the weather and the man. She tried to ignore the errant reaction of anticipation surging through her in total opposition to her rage, and failed.

She glared at him as he sat inside the car, silently commanding him to stay there. Instead, he opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

“Cally, we need to talk.” Smiling his bright smile, he voiced the reason behind his smile. “Seems like I’m always saying that to you.”

He paused as if waiting for her to respond. He cringed and she’d have sworn he’d felt the heat from her glare burning his skin. In return, however, she allowed the power of his presence to flow over her while she battled to keep her heart from answering his alluring call.

“Wow. You are bulldog persistent, aren’t you, Mr. Janson? I’ve never met anyone who was so intent on getting his way. But you don’t get it, do you? I didn’t want to talk to you in Lawson and I sure as hell don’t want to talk to you now. Not after the things you wrote about me in your sorry excuse of an editorial column.”

She threw him a piercing stare, suspicion hitting her fast and furious as she recalled all the other times they’d happened to run into each other. But even though she sensed the real answer, she pushed the knowledge down into the depths of her mind, ignoring its existence and the other truths it offered. “Tell me. How did you know where to find me? Only Susie and Billy knew where I went.”

Sloan beamed another of his wonderful smiles, and she warmed in its brightness. “Well, I guess I’ve got good connections. Lisa called Susie and got her to tell us about your cabin hideaway. I guess Lisa convinced her I was desperate to get hold of you. *And* that I meant you no harm.”

“Humph.” She crossed her arms in front of her, thrown by Susie’s disclosure. Her displeasure must have shown on her face.

“Hey, don’t go blaming Susie. She’s just trying to help. Besides, I know you hate hearing me say this again, but I think I’d have found you without Susie’s assistance. Or, at least, I could have once I got into the immediate area. I knew which way to go as soon as I drove onto the main road. In fact, I didn’t have to consult the directions from that point on.”

His eyebrows converged as he squinted at her, making her uneasy and vulnerable. When she remained silent, quietly wishing he would disappear, he spoke again. “Tell me. What do you think about that? Weird, huh? Or were you thinking about me?”

Chapter Ten

Thrown off-balance, Cally decided to avoid Sloan's question. "Look, you can forget whatever you had in mind and slither on back inside your car. Get out of here, Sloan."

He flashed his wide smile at her again. "Hey, at least you're not calling me Mr. Janson anymore. That's a good first step, don't you think?"

I don't believe it. Does he think he can charm me after what he's done? If she'd had flaming arrows, she'd have aimed them directly at his beautiful grin. Maybe a few direct hits would have sent him hightailing it home. Instead, she tried to concentrate all her anger, her frustration, her desire—*No! Wrong thought!*—through her eyes and straight into his. Her glare gripped his answering stare, and she recognized the first sign of the familiar sensation. Heat slid up her arms and through her body, and she couldn't help but welcome the pulsing vibration even though she kept any sign of her acceptance hidden from his view.

"A first step to what? We have nothing to discuss." Her gaze shot upward, as if she urgently needed to focus on the storm clouds hovering overhead, rolling and bumping together in the sky. Anything rather than study his handsome face. "Do us both a favor and leave." After a second of fighting the urge, she gave in and peeked at him.

He glanced up at the sky and frowned. Lines folded in his forehead, making her wonder if he frowned at the rain clouds or at her. "Hold on a sec, Cally, I'm here to make amends."

Surprise flickered in her mind, giving her something more to consider. Could he really be sorry for what he'd done?

"I promise, once I've finished my apology, I'll leave. But have a heart. How about taking this conversation into the cabin and out of all this rain?"

Glancing down, she noted how her soaked T-shirt clung to her skin and she started back toward the cabin, unwilling to give him a verbal answer. She could hear the sound of his shoes sinking into the forming mud as he followed behind her.

Once she'd reached the first step up to the porch, Cally whipped around and pointed a finger at him. "I don't know why I'm doing this but okay, let's get inside out of the storm." She jabbed her finger a little closer with every last word she said. "But as soon as you're finished with your apology, you are... Out. The. Door." Turning on her heel, she marched up the rest of the steps with Sloan right behind her.

"Wow, whoever said women are beautiful when they're angry must not have met you."

Twisting around, she put herself nose to nose with Sloan. "What did you say?" Hoping he would repeat the statement, she was disappointed in his answer.

"Uh, I said when you're angry, you're not merely beautiful. You're more beautiful than any other irate woman ever could be."

"Humph. Good save. You can definitely think on your feet. But I suspect you've had a lot of practice at dancing around things you've said. Or written."

Grinning at her, he quipped, "Hey, my mamma didn't raise no fool, you know."

She placed an evil smirk on her face. "Neither did mine." She swung open the cabin's door and strode a few feet inside. When she faced him again she held up her hand, made certain she was far enough from him to keep any sparks from flying, and issued her next demand. "That's as far as you go. Whatever you came here to say, you can say right there. Make it short and sweet."

He frowned, his eyes becoming hard, sparkling dark pools. Yet the words he spoke were calm, even cheerful sounding. "Couldn't I sit down

for a minute? I mean, how about offering a drink to this worn-out traveler? One you won't pour in my lap."

She remained unmoving, arms crossed, glowering at him. A sliver of blue light sliced through the dreary sky outside, brightening the room for a brief interlude, and splashed his face with a mixture of light and shadows. She paused, unable to tell if the resulting boom of thunder was from the storm outside or from the one raging within her.

"Oh, come on, Cally." Sloan pointed with his chin to indicate the torrential rain pounding the earth. "The rain's coming down in buckets now. Can't I wait the storm out before driving home? Shoot, I won't be able to see out the windshield with this waterfall going on." Throwing her a cheesy grin, he added, "I promise to be a good boy."

Now what had he meant by that? Somehow she figured Sloan's *good* might be someone else's *bad*. With a growing sense of foreboding, Cally peered into the yard. The trees waved in the heightening wind, blowing the excess water from their leaves. She tried to calm her nerves and think rationally, but having Sloan near her disrupted everything except her burgeoning libido. Cally tossed back her damp curly hair, flinging a spray of droplets over the hardwood floor. She yanked at her wet T-shirt molding to the soft curves of her breasts and hips, and pulled it away from her body. With one hard twist of the fabric, water poured to the floor to form a small puddle at her feet. All at once, she became aware of his scrutiny and the admiring gaze he gave her body, and hesitated. A quick glance at the pounding rain, however, made her decision.

"All right, you can sit down and wait out the storm. I wouldn't want you to blame me if you had a wreck getting back to town. I can just see the headlines now. 'Fake Matchmaker Sends Reporter to Watery Highway Death.' But once the rain slows down a bit, you're in your car and gone."

Sloan stuck out his hand. "You've got yourself a deal."

Cally took his hand, obeying the overwhelming urge to touch him before her senses set off the red alert warning her to stay away from him. Dropping his hand like she would a live snake, she whirled around and

called to him over her shoulder as she strode into the tiny adjacent kitchen. "Deal."

She picked up a flowery teapot to occupy her traitorous, quivering hand, and turned on the stove with the other as she set the already full pot on the burner. Reaching into the cupboard overhead, she grabbed a packet of tea. Why had she agreed to his staying awhile? Brewing the tea gave her some extra moments to think and when she felt she was ready, she walked back into the living room to face him.

"Watch the tea. I'm going to go change into some dry clothes."

"Need any help?"

Before she could issue the hot retort that shot quickly to her lips, he raised his hands in supplication. "Oops. I'm kidding. Sometimes I just can't help myself."

"Try a little harder or you'll find yourself out in the rain." She walked toward the hallway, glancing back once to glare at him. With a contrite expression, he moved to sit at the small table that was the sole piece of furniture for the equally undersized dining room.

* * *

Cally took her time changing into another T-shirt and shorts and, when she returned to Sloan, she brought a towel. Tossing the towel to him, she explained, "I thought I'd at least let you dry off your hair."

He caught the towel in mid-air. "Thanks. I wouldn't want to catch a chill. Or at least, not another one besides the one you've been hurling at me since I arrived." He stopped toweling off his hair and gave her a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Sometimes my mouth starts moving before my brain starts working."

"Does the same explanation apply to your article? Like maybe you type before you think?" Pouring the tea into two mugs, she mumbled the rest of her thoughts under her breath. "What am I thinking letting him into the cabin? I'm such a sucker for a lost dog. Emphasis on the word *dog*." Mentally chastising herself for her foolhardy decision, she set the

drinks on the little table and took a seat across from him. "Okay, here's your chance. Start the apology and make it good."

Sloan lifted his mug to his lips and gingerly sipped at the tea. Shrugging, he lowered the cup, started to speak and focused on the cup in front of him. "First of all, I want to tell you my motives in this whole fiasco were well intentioned."

Cally tried to keep her face devoid of any expression. When she didn't offer any comment, he continued, "I thought you and Lisa had conned my best friend into marriage. You know Rob's rich, right?"

Again she refused to say a word, hoping to keep the heated emotions in check.

He squinted at her, once more taking her silence as encouragement to go on. "I figured she'd divorce him in a couple of months and take him for every penny to his name."

"You thought Lisa and I planned the whole thing? To take Rob for all his money?" Shock rocketed through her until rage came in its wake. "You thought I was a con artist."

Their eyes locked for a moment, intense stare meeting intense stare. His narrowed, as if searching for an answer of some kind, while she kept hers firm, daring him to accuse her. Finally, he lowered his gaze. She noticed he swallowed once before saying his next words, barely getting them out in a whisper. "But now I know I was wrong." Sloan stopped speaking and waited for her to speak.

She knew he expected a response and, begrudgingly, amazingly, she gave him one. "What made you come to this belated realization of the truth?"

"I think acceptance started to hit me when all those people told me how they'd been matched by either you or your aunt. But what surprised me the most was the small number of divorces. Even in a town the size of Lawson, someone should end up in divorce."

His forehead creased as she watched him consider his revelation. The desire to reach out and smooth the lines hit her without warning, jarring

her more than she would ever admit. Thankfully, she was able to keep her hands by her sides.

“Then Rob dropped the final blow on me. In my defense, I’m guessing I was so shocked by their quickie marriage I didn’t want to believe they could be happy together. And, to be honest, my brief but painful experience with marriage didn’t promote any objectivity on my part.”

Surprised, she wanted to confirm what she’d heard. “You were married before?” Why did that fact bother her?

He nodded and gave her a funny look, but kept talking. “I read the prenuptial agreement Lisa signed. And Rob said she signed it without any argument or discussion, much less her own attorney. That little piece of evidence blew my theory of a scam straight out the door. Trust me. Had I known about the document, I’d never have thought you and Lisa were con artists.”

She fisted her hands, digging her fingernails into her palms. Emotions warred within her, wiping out her ability to form words.

He paused to take a sip of his tea. “Cally, I was wrong about the conspiracy theory and I shouldn’t have written those things about you. I was angry about our fouled up reading, and how I didn’t get any evidence against you from your neighbors. Although I hate like hell to admit it. Because I’m rarely, if ever, wrong.” He grinned a mischievous smirk that sent warm whispers along Cally’s neck even as she clung to her fading rage. At last, the heated words came to her yet she held them in check. “I let my anger cloud my judgment. Rest assured a full retraction is hitting the newsstands as we speak. With any luck, people should stop showing up at your house and you can go home soon.”

The earnest expression on his face seemed sincere. As her resolve started dwindling, she allowed her dark mood to lift a degree.

Sloan noticed the difference in her attitude and spoke again, his voice sounding stronger than before. “As a professional journalist, I should’ve been more objective and done more research. But when I thought my best friend was in danger, I had to help him as soon as I could.” He leaned forward in his chair and his rigid features relaxed a little. His soft,

pleading eyes touched her, asking for her understanding. And without warning, she found a part of her wanting to believe him.

“Haven’t you ever done or said something you’ve regretted? Wouldn’t you go to almost any lengths to help your best friend? But even so, I feel like a bum for everything I’ve said and done. I’m sorry if I harmed you in any way.”

She bit her lip, trying to keep from saying anything before she had time to give his explanation more consideration. She didn’t want Sloan’s amazing charm to influence her. Yet she knew Sloan’s last words had hit home with her. Everyone had something they weren’t proud of having done, and she understood loyalty to friends. After all, she’d do anything for Susie. Finally, she uncrossed her arms and legs, and regarded him with something less than animosity. In fact, she thought she could understand his actions now.

“I guess I can relate to how you must have felt. But it still doesn’t excuse your actions. You came to me under false pretenses. You lied to me and wrote horrible things about me.” She continued even as she gritted the words through her teeth. “I’ll never forget what you did.” A clap of thunder rumbled as if emphasizing the finality of her words.

He’d started to smile, but the hope flickering across his features died with her last sentence. Seeing his hopes dashed, she couldn’t help but accept her growing compassion toward him.

“As I said, I’ll never forget what you did, but—” she paused to give him a meaningful look, “—I guess I can forgive you.” Cally studied his reaction carefully. Relief, genuine and sincere, flooded his face.

“Whew! You don’t know how good it is to hear you say those words. I appreciate that more than I can say.”

Either he’s a very good actor or he really is sorry for what he did. I wonder which it is.

Catching her off guard, he reached out, trying to grasp her hands in his. Her reaction was swift as she jumped up from the chair and backed away from him.

“Cally, what’s the matter? I thought we’d come to a resolution here.” He stared at her, confusion replacing his previous joyous expression.

“Sloan, I do forgive you even if I’m not over what you did to me. But considering our past, I don’t want you to ever touch me. In fact, please keep your promise and leave. Now.”

Disconcerting emotions ran wild through her body. Just forgiving him had released other unwanted reactions. How could she be so angry at him one minute, then find herself attracted to him in the next? Some of the anger she’d directed toward him earlier came back to haunt her.

“Cally, have you ever given any thought to what happens when we touch? We’ve had quite a few odd, even extreme reactions, wouldn’t you agree? Not to mention how I’m able to find you without really trying. It’s like I have a built-in GPS system for you. Like when I found you at the grocery store, the lake, and then here? Maybe we should figure out why those things keep happening.”

She recognized the wonder in his tone. She’d thought about little else besides Sloan and her reactions to him, and the resulting loss of her power. But, unlike him, she didn’t want to know *why* the reactions happened. She only wanted them to go away so her ability would return. She simply would not allow herself to believe they had a connection of any kind, much less a soul mate connection. “No, definitely not. In fact, I think it’d be best to forget those events ever happened.”

“But what about those reactions we have whenever we touch? Isn’t that why you backed away from me just now? Don’t you want to know why they’re happening?”

She crossed over to stand by the open door. “No. I don’t care to know anything about them. All I want from you is for you to keep your promise and leave.”

He checked the scene outside the window, before attempting one last ditch effort to stay. “But the storm hasn’t let up.”

Damn rain. “I know and I’m sorry, but I’ve changed my mind. You need to leave. Now.”

Sloan rose and crossed to the door while she moved cautiously away. She uttered a small sigh of—*relief? regret?*—when he placed his hand on the knob. Yet when he faced her again, her heart clutched in her chest, gripped with expectancy. She was sure he could hear her heart pounding—the rhythm steady yet terribly loud. Somehow, some way, she kept the cacophony drumming in her ears from showing on her face.

“I think you do want to know. And what’s more, I think you already know more than you’re willing to admit or share with me. But for some reason, you don’t want to face the truth.”

Sloan shook his head, turned and walked out.

* * *

Leaning against the front door of the cabin, Cally was certain her chest was about to explode. “Calm down, Cally. He’s gone. Everything’s all right.” She chanted the words over and over, using them as a verbal sedative to soothe and relax her nerves. After a few minutes, her pulse slowed and the pain in her chest lessened.

She paced the floor, back and forth, her mind tumbling with everything Sloan had said. He’d thought she was trying to rip off his friend and he’d tried to help him. True, he’d assumed she was a crook, but she could still admire his loyalty to his friend. And, since discovering he’d been wrong, he’d found her and apologized. Surprising herself, she’d accepted his apology. Now what? She wondered if his apology and retraction would change anything. Could she go home without worrying about strangers appearing on her doorstep? And if they showed up, would she be able to help them? Somehow she doubted his new attitude had altered anything, much less her loss of power.

Once again she contemplated Susie’s suggestion. Did Sloan have anything to do with her losing her ability? Damn, if that was true, no wonder her gift had blown a fuse! She was lucky her whole body didn’t explode whenever Sloan was around.

And if so, how would she get her power back online? Now that he was gone and the whole unfortunate situation was settled, would her matchmaking skills return?

Was this mess with Sloan really finished? She should go home and be happy to never lay eyes on him again, right? But then why did the idea of Sloan not being part of her life leave her feeling so lost and alone? *Could* he be her soul mate? Would she have to choose between her soul mate and the gift? And if he was her match, hadn't she made her choice when she'd sent him back to Dallas?

Maybe she ought to go home tonight. The emptiness inside her was a result of her missing all her friends and neighbors, right? The ache had absolutely nothing to do with Sloan being out of her life for good. Right? Believing any action was better than no action, she strode into the bedroom and threw her luggage on top of the comforter. Pulling drawers open, she tossed her clothes into the biggest suitcase.

A brilliant flash of light filled the room making the small overhead light bulb seem timid in its illumination. Vibrations shook the little cabin as the ensuing thunderclap struck, drawing her attention away from her packing. Cally stood motionless and waited for another display of natural power. Hearing the thunder boom again, she realized this wasn't just another summer rain shower, but a major storm. Anxiety gripped her as the thunder sounded louder, nearer. This would be rough weather to travel in. She should play it safe and lay low until the storm blew over.

Cally held her breath and listened to the pounding sounds coming much closer to the cabin now. Could thunder repeat so fast and so close together? At last her brain analyzed the sounds and pinpointed her mistake. Someone was pounding on the door.

Chapter Eleven

“Cally! Cally, open up!” She heard a half dozen expletives before the battering began again. “Hey, come on. Let me in.”

Cally’s body reacted in simultaneous, but conflicting reactions, at once stiffening in surprise, even while excited tremors raced through her limbs. “No, it can’t be. Why would he come back?” She hurried on unsteady legs into the hall, trying to make sense of the voice behind the front door. Whoever it was sounded upset and in trouble. Naturally, her gut instinct was to help. Hurrying, she grabbed the knob and pulled open the door. And wished she hadn’t.

Sloan barged into the room, drenched from head to toe, wearing a look that would have scared the fiercest grizzly into flight. “What took you so friggin’ long? I’ve been standing out there yelling my head off trying to get you to let me in.”

Who the hell did he think he was anyway? “I was busy, okay? What gives you the right to run in here, dripping water everywhere, and accuse me of doing something wrong? What’s the matter? Why’d you come back?”

With water pooling at his feet, he glowered at her. “Trust me. If I could have figured out somewhere else to go, I would have. But I didn’t have much of a choice. Your sorry excuse for a bridge is gone, washed away by this storm.”

She stared at him as the meaning of his words slowly sank in. But she couldn’t bring herself to accept the truth. “First of all, it’s not my sorry excuse of a bridge. Secondly, why didn’t you try a different route? I

mean, there's got to be another way back to the main road. You must not have searched hard enough."

She cringed under the piercing look he threw her until she remembered she was the injured party. What right did he have to expect any help from her? Yet a frightening realization sent cold chills down her arms—if he couldn't get out, neither could she.

"I've gone up and down the old dirt—or should I say muddy—road looking for another route of any kind, but no such road exists. I've checked the map and I've tried calling for help on my cell phone. But I can't get any signal out here. Hell, I was lucky I didn't get stuck in a ditch. So unless you have some ruby slippers to get me home, I'm stuck here."

Astonishment surged its way through Cally's body, constricting her breathing. Life could not suck this much. Pointing an accusing finger at him, she spit out her words, making each word sound like a staccato blast. "Uh-uh. No. You. Don't. You can not stay here."

Incredibly, Sloan's features became even more tortured-looking. "What do you expect me to do? Drive through a storm like this one? Are you crazy, lady? Driving in that mess would be nothing less than disastrous. Or do you expect me to rebuild the bridge? Whether you like it or not, you've got a cabin mate."

Sloan stay here? With me? Okay. Keep cool. You can think of a way out of this. All you have to do is stay calm.

Relief flowed through her as an idea emerged. "Look. If the bridge is out, and I'm not positive I can trust you to tell me the truth, then you'll have to find other shelter."

Sloan squinted at her while he wrung out the tail of his soaked shirt, making the miniature pond at his feet grow larger. "What do you mean, 'other shelter'? What do you think this is? A reality game show where you can send me off to Exile Island?"

Cally glared at Sloan, trying to maintain a cool composure while preparing for the strong reaction she knew would come. "Hey, this isn't my problem. You can sleep in your car for all I care."

An expression of amazement robbed Sloan's face of any sign of his former irritation, and his jaw dropped open as he gawked at her. "Come on, Cally. You can't be serious. You're sending me back out into this storm?"

She struggled to show a confident front under his glare and remained steady in her stance. "Yes, I am. After all, it's summer and warm. You'll be fine out in your car."

Sloan stared at her as if she'd grown a third eye. "You've got to be kidding. Be reasonable, Cally. I don't see any reason why we can't stay under the same roof." He lifted his eyebrows and gave her a pointed look. "What are you afraid of? I promise to control my overwhelming lust for you, if that's what you're worried about."

Throwing him a scornful look for his sarcasm, she responded with measured words. "You know you haven't made a good impression on me before this. What makes you think I should trust you now? I mean, judging from past experience, throwing you out is the best decision I can make."

Sloan gaped at her a minute longer before his features adopted a smug attitude. "Oh, I get it. This is your way of making me pay for my past mistakes, isn't it? This is retribution for the article, right?"

She tried to remain steadfast, but the glittery steel of his gaze finally made her cast her sight down. Struggling not to fidget under his distrustful countenance, her sense of compassion sent warning signals to her brain. But for once in her life, she ignored her conscience and told a lie. "No, Sloan. I would never do that."

* * *

Sloan woke to water dripping from his car's sunroof to land with a *splat* on the bridge of his nose. Wasn't dripping water a form of Chinese torture? Grimly, he looked up at his roof. "The damn thing never leaked before but, of course, now it starts."

Gingerly, he moved his neck back and forth, trying to work out the stiffness. His back ached from sitting in one position too long and threatened to remain slanted at an angle for the rest of the day. Groaning when he caught sight of his face in the rearview mirror, he rubbed the stubble on his chin and noted the hair on his head sticking out at odd angles. "Sloan, old boy, remember how you look right now. Women are not worth the trouble they cause."

What a night. Silently, he vowed he'd never spend another night in his car. He'd passed last night trying to sleep with his head lying against the side of his door and thinking about the price the auto attendant would charge to clean all the crusted mud off the leather interior. In fact, he'd be lucky not to have to replace the front seats.

What had he done to deserve all this rotten treatment? Okay, maybe he'd deserved a little punishment from Cally. Okay, maybe even a lot of punishment. After all, he'd managed, by way of the backward effect of his article on his readers, to run her out of her home. Still, judging from the aches and pains in his body, she'd managed to extract her pound of flesh. So, as far as he was concerned, they were square.

But she shouldn't blame him for anything more. Was he to blame for the bridge washing out? Hell, no. Since she'd gotten her revenge, he wasn't about to spend another night in his car.

Sloan squinted and tried to see through the heavy rain turning the yard into a swamp. Peering through the curtain of water, he saw a figure shrouded under a hooded jacket tramping through the muck toward him.

Cally tapped on his window and motioned for him to roll down his window. Trying to hide the eagerness he felt with a scowl, he did as she directed.

"Morning, Mr. Janson. Did you sleep well?"

If her smile hadn't been so gloriously evil, he'd have called it beautiful. Instead, he muttered a few choice words before answering. "Oh, yeah. Just peachy." With an extra curse word, he rolled up the

window, punched the button to unlock the car, and pushed his shoulder against the door. The door, however, refused to budge.

“Damn it.” Things just kept getting better for him. At this rate, he’d land in the hospital by noon with a major case of walking pneumonia.

“Try it again while I pull.” Cally grasped the handle from the other side and leaned back, pulling with all her might. Sloan, encouraged by her help, swayed the opposite direction from the door and came back to ram it with every bit of strength in his body.

The door flung open as he shouted in triumph. Yet once he saw Cally, his shout turned into laughter.

Cally lay sprawled on her back in the mud. What’s worse, the brown gunk had splattered all over her face. “Sloan! I am so going to kill you!”

I really ought to stop laughing. Aw, hell, since I’m already in the dog house, why not have fun with it? “Oh, so now we’re back on a first name basis, huh? But only when you need my help, is that it?” He slid out of the car and planted his feet in squishy mud.

She growled at him as she tried to sit up and flick the mud from her fingers. Straight at him, of course. “Don’t just stand there laughing like a demented hyena, help me up.” She thrust out her hand and waited for him to take hold.

Sloan kept chuckling and reached to grip her hand in his.

“Urgh!”

Lying face down in the mud, Sloan pushed his body up from the gunk. He spat out a blob of mud and rolled over. Now it was Cally’s turn to laugh as she struggled to rise.

Wiping the slop out of his mouth, he retaliated, placing his palm on her rump and pushing as hard as he could. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She yelped as she slid into the mud and rolled onto her back. Her cry grew louder when Sloan slipped over on top of her. “Very funny, lady. But do you know what’s really fun?”

Although her face scrunched up in a snarl, her eyes glittered with amusement. "What?"

"This."

Sloan's mouth slammed down on hers, and he caught the exhale of her warm breath in his mouth. The electrifying sensation of their previous encounters sparked to life and surged through his system. Ignoring the foul taste of mud entering his mouth, his tongue poked through her lips, demanding she open to him. For a moment, he thought she sighed, and his shaft took up the soft call, rising firm and hard against his jeans.

He slid his hands over the top of her raincoat, enjoying how the rain had molded the slick material to her breasts. He groaned as his thumb found her nipple hard enough to feel under all the clothes and he wished he could rip everything away from her skin. The image of a naked Cally writhing under him in the pouring rain shot adrenaline through him, strengthening his need. As he nibbled at her lower lip, he reached for the zipper of her slicker.

This time he was certain she sighed.

The zipper slid down easily but he couldn't wait long enough to unzip it all the way. Instead, he ran his hand behind her neck, pulling her up so he could push the slicker off her shoulders. She struggled to work the raincoat off her arms and, once free of the coat, she clutched him to her, bringing him down on top of her again.

Her tongue played with his as he yanked her clinging T-shirt away from her body so he could slide his hands under it. He rejoiced as his fingers found no bra and cupped her tit in his hand. She accepted his hand with a small mewling sound.

But her brief acceptance didn't last long. Grabbing him by the hair, she yanked upward, nearly scalping him in the process.

"Ow! Let go, you little she-devil!"

"You're lucky I didn't bite your tongue off." Her eyes, filled with fire, narrowed at him. "Get off me, Sloan."

Before he could protest, however, she threw her legs around his waist—*I'm in heaven now*—and jerked, twisting him off her. He landed on his side and reached out for her, but she'd already scrambled to her feet and was slogging toward the house.

"Sloan Janson, keep your dirty paws off me." The slamming of the cabin door signaled her arrival at the house.

He stomped toward the porch after her, mud falling off his rain-soaked clothes. After knocking as much mud from his body as he could, he rapped three times on the door. He waited a few moments before again raising his hand. Before he could knock again, Cally stood before him, wearing mud-splattered red short shorts and the wet T-shirt that accentuated all her many gifts from Mother Nature. The anger on her face, however, contradicted the heavenly attributes of her body. She wiped the remnants of mud from her face and glared at him.

Wow. She looks incredible. Beautiful.

"Go away."

Her harsh words drove all thoughts of her beauty from his mind and replaced them with annoyance. He wasn't about to let her stand there and act as if he was the scum of the Earth. As far as he was concerned, she'd deserved a little mud bath and could use a good lay.

"I spent a miserable night in my car, thanks to you, and I'm tired, dirty, and hungry. In fact, I'd say we're even. You've gotten your payback, so let's start over, okay?"

"You threw me in the mud. And then you—"

"Had my way with you? Shit, Cally, how old are you? You fell and I'm sorry but I couldn't resist having a little fun. Get over yourself."

He waited for her to respond but, instead, she clammed up. Trying to keep his mind on his words and not on her body, he decided to appeal to her sense of decency. "Come on, Cally. I've come out to this remote hideaway of yours and laid my heartfelt apology at your feet. Don't you think you could at least treat me with a bit of human kindness and compassion?" Was the slight lift of the corners of her mouth a good sign? Or should he get ready for the full force of her wrath?

Since he had nothing to lose, he continued with his speech. "After all, we're both civilized people, caught in a set of unfortunate circumstances. The least we can do is be caring and sensible enough to help each other out." *Talk about diplomacy!*

He waited and watched, ready for the verbal onslaught he assumed she'd give, when she threw him off balance with her answer.

"You're right."

He squinted at her, trying to discern any sign of deception, and checked to make sure he'd heard her correctly. "What? Did you just agree with me?"

She wiped the last bit of mud from her neck. Now he understood why vampires went for the necks of fair young maidens. "You heard me. I don't have much of a choice. Trust me, if I could call someone to come and take you away from here, I would. But this cabin was built as a retreat and a hideaway. Which means it doesn't have a telephone, or a television, or any kind of a radio."

"Wow. Extreme isolationism." He glanced around the interior as though taking in everything for the first time. "Not even cell phone reception." Pulling out his cell phone, he tried checking for service. "I've been trying all night. Nope. Still no signal."

She glanced up and down at his clothes, and scowled as if she'd fought an internal battle and lost. "I doubt this storm is going to stop anytime soon so I've reconsidered my decision." She cringed at his pointed look, yet stuck out her chin in defiance. "Yes, again. Besides, you look like you've paid enough for your sins."

"I knew it! Making me sleep in the car was your way of extracting revenge." Even though his back ached, he couldn't help but smile at her. She'd gotten him back but good.

She smiled in return—a tenuous one—but still a smile. "You can stay in the cabin with me under certain ground rules."

Sloan narrowed his eyes at her. Now what was she up to?

Calmly, she laid out her conditions. "First of all, you'll get changed. I'm sure you can use some of the old clothes the landlord keeps here. Of

course, they're not up to the standard of style you're used to wearing, but you'll just have to—how did you say it?—get over yourself.”

“Fine. But if you already know about clothes I could wear, then you must have thought about me last night, huh?”

“Not really. I happened to find them when I put away some of my clothes a few days ago. Now for condition two. You'll sleep on the sleeper sofa.”

“Wait a sec. You mean you had a sleeper sofa in here all this time and you made me sleep in my car?” He stared at her, his mind blank, too stunned to think past what he'd just learned.

She ignored his accusation and continued, “And, under no circumstances except for necessary functions like using the shower or the toilet, will you enter my bedroom. *After* asking permission first, of course. Is this clear?”

Letting the urge to throttle her pass, he nodded his agreement. “Cally, don't you think we could discuss all these conditions after we get changed?”

“Nope. I want these covered before you settle in. Now for condition three. You will at no time put your hands on me.”

As warning signals shot through him, he thought about what this condition might mean. “What? Do you think I'm going to jump your bones once I'm clean and fed?” Although the idea had crossed his mind. More than once.

“Isn't that what you just did outside?”

She did have a point.

“Well...”

“Never mind. Let me make it clear that that kind of behavior will not be allowed. However, what I had in mind includes any and all forms of touching. I don't want you placing a hand on my shoulder, a finger on my arm, nothing. Much less anything your sex-obsessed mind can think up.”

Sloan regarded her, noting the pink hue traveling up her neck and into her cheeks. "You're afraid of what might happen, aren't you? You're afraid we might get involved again like we did at your house and out in the mud. I'm right, aren't I?" He scrutinized her, hoping to see the truth written on her face. He wanted to find out more about their strange interactions. Yet for some reason, Cally didn't.

Her gaze dropped from his and she dragged a hand through her hair. "My reasons are my reasons. You don't need to understand them and I don't intend to discuss them. All you need to do is keep to the rules."

Staring him straight in the eye, she recovered her former self-assured attitude, and sent a telling glance toward his Lexus. "So, do you agree with all these terms? If not, you can head back to your little home away from home. Who knows? If this weather keeps up, maybe you'll make a houseboat out of it."

Sloan grimaced at the thought of spending another night in his car. "Okay, I agree." But silently, he wondered what might happen if he didn't comply with her rules. Maybe, just maybe, he should try and find out.

"Be sure you keep your word." She gave him another squinty-eyed look and crossed her arms over her chest, obviously not convinced she could trust him.

He shot her one last grin and held up his hands in a gesture meant to placate her. "Okay, okay. Don't go getting your panties—your sexy, lacy panties, I'll bet—in a bunch. I'll be a good boy, I promise."

She threw him a skeptical look. "You know, you keep promising you'll 'be a good boy' but I'm wondering how long you can last."

He knew he shouldn't, but the temptation to tease her was too much to resist. "I'd love to demonstrate how long I can last."

* * *

"I am too nice for my own good. Letting him into the cabin when I need to stay away from him is crazy. What am I thinking? I'm just asking for trouble with a capital S for Sloan." But if she were truthful, even

though a part of her wanted to shove him back out the door, another part, the part growing stronger every day, wanted him closer. Much closer.

Maybe she should've taken a cold shower. She'd jumped into the shower before him, using the time to gather her wits and the water's warmth to ease her tension. Still, with any luck, she'd used all the hot water and he'd ended up with an icy bath that had, hopefully, cooled his randy libido.

Cally brought her mind back to the task at hand and picked out some of the landlord's clothes while Sloan cleaned off in the shower. Putting the shirt and jeans on her bed, the one real bed in the cabin, she wondered if he had any clean underwear with him.

Now why am I thinking about that? Oh, come on, Cally. You know why.

Thinking about his undergarments caused her to reflect on what those clothing items would cover. She could easily imagine how his toned stomach would look, accentuated with a trail of dark hair leading south, right above the top of those tight-fitting jeans he wore. Her mind drifted, her tongue moving slowly across her upper lip, while she allowed her hand the freedom to wander along the zipper.

"You seem to like those jeans a whole lot. Want some time alone with them?"

Cally jerked her hand away as a warmth rushed up her neck and headed for her hairline. She kept her back to Sloan and straightened up, trying to recover some measure of composure. "I think these clothes will fit you well enough. At least, until you've had time to wash your own." Thinking she'd re-established her self-control, she turned around to face him and promptly lost all her senses.

Standing before her was the most delectable-looking male body she'd ever seen. The incredible hunk regarded her with an amused expression on his face while a damp, oh-so-small towel hung precariously from his waist.

Cally could feel her mouth dropping open, but couldn't bring her jaws together fast enough. "Uh, well. I, uh, guess you should try these on."

Sloan crossed the few feet between them, coming within inches of her. Picking up the jeans, he grinned at her and bent over so close she could feel her own warm breath hitting his body and bouncing back on an electric current to strike her full in the face. All rational thought bolted out of her mind, leaving her feeling weak, dazed, and very turned-on.

His musky odor drifted into her nostrils, and she had to fight the urge to sniff more of the masculine aroma. Water glistened on his chest, making rivulets that flowed over the crevices and hollows of his skin. She started to raise her hand to touch those cascading drops when his honey-drenched voice broke into her reverie.

"Cally, darlin', if you'd like to stay with me while I try these things on then, by all means, feel free. But unless you want to get up close and personal with me real fast, I'd suggest you get out. After all, I wouldn't want you to break any of your own rules."

Shaken by his declaration and by the torrent of desire thumping between her legs, she backed up toward the hallway. Again the burning flame moved up her neck, firing her face into a humiliating engine-red shade she knew he had to see. Worse yet, judging by the smirk on his face, he enjoyed her predicament. Not being able to force her eyes off him, Cally continued to backpedal until she thought she'd made it to the doorway. Then releasing a big sigh of frustration, she wheeled around and ran face first into the door.

"Shit, Cally. Are you okay?"

Please, God, don't let me look at him. I know he's got one of those snarky smirks on his face.

Yet, although she tried, she couldn't resist. Rubbing her nose where it had rammed into the door, she dared a glance in his direction.

Damn it! She gritted her teeth together and jerked her face away from his. I just had to look. What an idiot I am!

"Cally?"

She heard the snicker in his voice, but had to answer anyway.
“What?”

“Watch out for the door this time, okay?”

“Pff!” She drew her body up as tall as she could, stuck her chin in the air, and sauntered out the door.

* * *

“Idiot! I am so screwed and I did it to myself. How could I have let Sloan into this cabin? And then I stood there while he taunted me with his naked, incredible hunk of a physique. Damn. I practically drooled on him.”

Catching herself licking her lips as she recalled the image of Sloan’s hard body, she shook her head fiercely, trying to force common sense into her brain while driving out her over-sexed imagination. “Remember your own rules, Cally. No physical contact. Play it safe. You do not want to start something.”

Yes, you do.

She ramped up her self-reproach, using two of the four cushions on the pull-out sofa bed to hurl to the floor in her frustration. Striding over to the large linen cabinet, she dragged a blanket and pillow over to the bed and threw them on top. She scowled as the pillow fell to the floor.

Suddenly, she brought herself up short. “Wait a minute. Wait. A. Minute. What am I doing? I’m treating him like he’s some sort of invited guest. I swear I think I’ve totally lost my mind.”

As she paced around in a circle, her frustration mounted to an even higher pitch. “Well, that’s it. I’m through. Let him make his own bed. I’ve done enough for him.”

She snatched up the remaining two sofa cushions, started to throw them and changed her mind. With her arms full, she spied the pillow leaning next to the bed, aimed and kicked with all the strength she could muster, trying to bring it up to rest on top of the bed. Yet instead of connecting with downy softness, her bare foot rammed into metal.

"Aargh! Oh, my God. Ow! Damn, damn, damn." Expletives she'd heard but never before uttered came spewing from her mouth as she limped around the room. The pain was worse than anything she could remember and tears flowed down her cheeks.

"What's all the racket about?"

Cally looked up from her foot long enough to send a half-snarl, half-cry toward Sloan. "I hurt my foot, you ass. But, gee, I'm so sorry if I bothered you with my cry of pain." She sneered at him and wished she could drop a lead weight on his toe. Then they'd see who'd make the most noise.

She would have cursed him more, but his expression changed to one of worry when he noticed her foot. Somehow, much to her irritation, his concern made her feel even worse. Crying harder, she continued her hobble around the room while he tried to get close enough to help her.

"Here, put your weight on me."

"No. Stay away from me!"

"I'm trying to help you."

"I don't need your help. It's your fault I did this to myself." She glowered at him while hopping away.

"My fault?" Sloan stopped trying to chase after her and stood with his fists on his waist. "Oh, right. I made you hurt yourself without actually being in the same room. Damn, I'm good."

Finally worn out by her one-legged scuttle around the room, she flopped down on the unfolded sofa bed. Angered by the tears she'd shed, she swiped the wetness from her face with one hand while the other held her injured foot. That is, until she saw him coming toward her again and recognized the determination etched on his features. Obviously, he was intent on examining her foot. Gulping air between moans, she pulled her foot away before he could touch her.

"Oh, come on, Cally. You didn't mean I couldn't touch you to help, did you?"

Speechless, she stared into his face, noting the conflicting emotions displayed across his features. Sloan, however, continued to scrutinize the purple-black mound swelling on her arch.

“For Pete’s sake, Cally, you’re being silly.” Again, he reached for her foot.

Starting to calm down, she took smaller gasps and tried to think clearly. “Okay, you can look at it.” Their eyes locked, giving her the opportunity to shoot him a stern look. “But be very gentle.” With all the trust of a mouse offering cheese to a cat, Cally held out her foot.

Sloan opened the palm of one hand and slid his fingers under her heel while he gingerly touched the reddened area with the other hand. She gasped as a flow of warm energy entered her foot. The sensation didn’t cause any added pain, and even lessened the injury for a second. Or at least, she thought so. She studied his face and wondered if he, too, had felt the heat.

Even with the ache pulsing through her foot, she found part of her relishing the attention he gave her. In fact, simply having him touch her in such a soothing manner made her suffering bearable. More than bearable—almost enjoyable.

Charmed, she watched his expression of concentration change from mild concern to awe. He whistled and broke the spell his touch had on her. “How’d you manage to do this? You could have broken your foot.”

“I didn’t break my foot. It’s probably no worse than a stubbed toe. See? I can wiggle my toes. Oh, ow.” The slight movement sent more agony racing up her leg. “Okay. Maybe it’s worse than a stubbed toe.”

“Try to relax and take big breaths while I go and get ice for the swelling.”

Sloan strode into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and poured ice cubes into a dishtowel he’d grabbed off the counter. Cally craned her head to watch him. Sniffing and whimpering, she hoped her discomfort would ease before he returned. Kicking a metal bed. How stupid was she?

Pretending to examine her bruised foot, she kept her eyelashes lowered, peering through them to watch him approach. When she felt him draw closer, she raised her hand as a stop sign and took a deep breath in a vain attempt to fortify her resolve. “Just give the ice pack to me. I’ll take it from here.”

Keeping her head low to hide her embarrassment, she didn’t need to see his face to know he was more irritated than before. She could hear the exasperation in his voice.

“Come on, Cally. Quit acting like an intolerable brat. You need some help and I’m more than happy to give you a little comfort.”

At the word *comfort*, she pushed up from the bed and grabbed the pack out of his hand. Hobbling away from the sofa, she paused and then turned toward him and saw his face transform into a portrait of confusion.

“Look, I know you’re only trying to help.” She saw his face relax a little at her admission, but hurried on in case he jumped to the wrong conclusion. “But as I said before, I don’t want you to touch me and that includes any type of ‘comfort’.” Throwing him another stern look, she turned on her heel and shuffled toward her bedroom. “But thanks anyway.”

Hobbling along, she made her way down the short hallway, gritting her teeth against the pain. Rounding the corner to her room, she looked back as she heard footsteps coming up behind her.

Chapter Twelve

“Put me down!”

Getting scooped up into Sloan’s arms sent Cally’s heart rate skyrocketing and she yelled more from surprise than anything else. Yet instead of being furious at his breaking the *No Touching* rule, she experienced an emotion totally different from anger. One very pleasant, extremely enjoyable sensation while cradled against his strong chest.

“Sorry, Cally, but I’m going to help you to your bed. And if you want to throw me out into the rain, then have at it.”

A warm tingling spread over her body, causing her to glance up at Sloan’s stern face. Was he aware of the heat growing between them this time? She searched his face for any sign that he, too, felt the movement, but saw only determination sketched on his features.

Maybe if he hadn’t noticed anything, she wouldn’t have to worry. But somehow, she knew he was aware of their shared reactions, and she knew they’d have to keep their distance if she wanted to protect both their hearts. Otherwise, the physical and mental connections between them would drive them both to misery.

Without another word, he made his way to the side of her bed and lowered her down on top of the bedcover. Disappointment flooded her and she wished the trip had lasted longer. Lifting her gaze to him, she found him peering back at her with an odd expression. *He’s worried about me?* A lump formed in her throat, making speech difficult at first. When was the last time a man had worried about her? Other than Susie’s Billy, of course.

“Uh, okay. Thanks for the assistance.” She paused and waited for a response. Instead, he smiled, encouraging her to continue. “Look, Sloan, I’m sorry about what I said earlier. You know. About blaming you? I was in pain and upset and I needed to blame someone else for my own stupid mistake. If I weren’t such an idiot, I wouldn’t have maimed myself in the first place.”

He crossed his arms and nodded. “Yeah, I know. No offense taken.”

Did he mean he understood her reason for making the undeserved comment, or that he agreed she was an idiot? Nonetheless, she decided not to pursue the possible insult. “Good. I’m glad you understand.”

The corners of his lips lifted, but didn’t quite grow wide enough to bring out his dimples. “I have an idea.”

Cally’s pulse bounced up and down, while her breath escaped in a small sigh of nervousness. “What kind of idea?”

“Well, my momma always made me feel better by kissing my injuries.” With a devilish wink, Sloan slid a hand down Cally’s leg, coming to rest above her ankle.

Surprised, she jerked her leg. “What do you think you’re—”

“Relax.” Moving toward the foot of the bed, he lowered his head to her foot and ran his tongue over the skin directly above the purplish bruise.

Cally gasped, rising up on both elbows as he slid his tongue up the inside of her leg. A flash of heat seared its way along the same path, straight up between her legs. “Sloan, I don’t think—”

“Don’t think, Cally. Just enjoy.” He pushed her shoulders, compelling her to lie back, and she didn’t fight his command. “I’m going to take your mind off your foot.” Running his other hand under her shorts, he lifted her panties up and shoved them to the side. To her delight and horror, his tongue followed his hand, sweeping into her crotch to swipe over the tip of her folds.

Cally moaned, both at her lack of will to stop him and from the hot sensation peaking her nub to attention. “Sloan.”

He murmured something against her pussy but didn’t raise his head. Both his hands gripped her shorts and panties to scoot them under her

buttocks and onto the floor. He spread her lips as his tongue probed between the folds. Sighing, he caressed her clit with stroke after stroke.

Forgetting about her foot, Cally lifted her buttocks to give Sloan better access to her throbbing pussy. She took his hands in hers as he reached upward, and guided them to her breasts. She breathed through her mouth as he worked on her, sucking and nibbling at her bud until she was hissing from the ever-growing energy inside her.

Lust, as raw and needy as she'd ever experienced it, coupled with the flow of electricity surging from his touch, ripped into her and she cried out in joy. He intensified his hold on her with both his mouth and his hands as she squirmed and moaned.

He growled a satisfied sound and gripped her bottom to shove his face closer. Sucking, he held onto her as she bucked and panted. Growling his pleasure, he drank in the juices of each release, sating her time after time.

Cally arched her neck, still shaking from her orgasms, to look at Sloan's head resting between her legs. Bit by bit, her shudders stopped and coherent thought returned along with anger and embarrassment. After her speech about no touching, she'd let him do *that*? Pushing him away, she cried out in pain as her foot bumped against his head and she pulled the cover over her exposed lower body.

"Sloan. Get the hell out!"

He cocked his head at her, surprise filtering through his pleased expression. "Come off it, Cally. You can't tell me you didn't want that. Hell, you came several times."

"I said get out." Some of the force of her demand left her with the truth of his words, but she had to regain control. She had to, even if control was the last thing she really wanted.

"You, girl, are one psycho chick."

His declaration cut her to the quick, giving her the edge she needed. "If you don't get out right now, I'll..."

"What, Cally? What'll you do? Take me to bed and fuck me within an inch of my life?" Sloan got to his feet and wiped his mouth with the back

of his hand. “You throw all these rules around, but you know you don’t want to enforce them. Give up the act.”

He rose and scooped up the melting ice-filled rag she’d dropped. “Put the ice on your foot for awhile. I’ll come back in a bit to check on you.”

At the word *come*, Cally blanched and wanted to dive under the blanket. Holy hell, why had she let him do what he’d done?

Sloan pivoted and headed for the door before stopping to turn back to her and giving her a wink. “I’ll go sit on the porch for awhile and let you cool off. But you know you feel better, right?” Abruptly, his eyes darkened. With an I-already-know-the-answer smirk, he turned and headed out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

Hiding in her room, Cally wondered if she'd made a bad agreement. Why in the world had she given him the run of the rest of the cabin while she was a virtual prisoner in her own bedroom for the entire day? Thank God she'd left a box of crackers in her nightstand. She tossed another book across the room, disgusted at how her plan was—or wasn't—working. Seven books were scattered around the bed, a testament to her lack of concentration and interest. Her lack of interest, that is, except in Sloan Janson.

She ran a hand through her hair as she remembered how he'd carried her to her room. She sighed as she pictured his forehead, his hair falling across it, peeking above her pelvis.

Oh, how good his tongue had felt on her clit. Oh, how good he was at using his tongue. Again, the sizzle zipped through her, reminding her of the force they shared. Before she could stop, her mind ventured off, envisioning him next to her in bed, running his hands over her before plunging his wide, long shaft into her.

She blew out a tension-powered breath. No, she'd been right to cut things off when she had. She didn't know if she could withstand another intense physical reaction and not give into him in every way. Although the temptation to be nestled in his arms almost overwhelmed her good sense, she knew she'd done the right thing.

If what they shared were purely physical, maybe they could enjoy each other. But she knew the current flowing between them was so much more than simple physical attraction. And when she was truthful with herself, she could admit the magnetism, the energy zapping back and

forth, was very much like the sensation she got whenever she read for someone. Like the same sensation except juiced with steroids.

So maybe Susie was right about Sloan being her match. No other explanation fit. In fact, Cally realized now she'd always known the truth. She simply hadn't wanted to accept it until they'd shared this past morning together. Not to mention her total lack of control when he'd touched her.

But she also knew being a matchmaker meant she couldn't have the best of both worlds. To add to the odds against her, she knew any man she married would leave her brokenhearted and alone. Hadn't her mother told her the sad truth often enough? Hadn't her own father left her?

Now she had additional proof. Aunt Miriam had lost her gift because of a man. But she'd recovered once the man was out of the picture. So, all Cally had to do was to get Sloan back to Dallas and forget about him.

Yeah, right. Like that'll happen. I'd have a better chance of winning the lottery.

For a few rare moments, Cally allowed her thoughts to wander again, unfettered by reality. If only she were just another woman and not a matchmaker.

Cally let her dreams take over, picturing Sloan standing beside a minister and smiling at her. She moaned as she envisioned Sloan crouching over her, his chest rippling with muscles. And finally, she sighed as she pictured Sloan holding a small child with eyes of sparkling jade.

Another wistful sigh escaped her lips. If only these joys could exist for her. But she had an obligation as a matchmaker and she wouldn't turn her back on her duty.

A piercing pain ripped through her head and echoed in her heart. She knew these pains were the first of many to follow. Letting a tear roll down her cheek, she wished her mother back into her life. She could use a soft shoulder right about now.

Groaning aloud in frustration, she threw another paperback on the pile. She'd do well to keep her wild dreams in check. Dreaming of Sloan would lead to heartache and misery. To get any more involved with Sloan would be taking a chance of repeating her mother's mistake. No way would she marry a man who was bound to leave her a few short years later.

She forced her mind back to her present situation. If she succeeded in getting Sloan to leave her alone, how soon would her power return?

Cally was deep in thought when a knock sounded on her bedroom door. Without waiting for an invitation, Sloan poked his head into the room. The sparkle in his jade-colored eyes grabbed her like a lasso around a wild filly, and she gasped at the force of his presence. The man had charisma, no doubt about it.

"Hey, aren't you getting bored in here? You've been cooped up in this room all day. 'Fess up. You're secretly hiding a cell phone, right? I'll bet you ordered pizza and had the delivery boy slip it through the window so you wouldn't have to share." He pushed the door open and pretended to search the room. "Come on. Where'd you hide the empty pizza boxes?"

She couldn't resist his joke and laughed. "Sorry. No pizza. Just stale crackers." Holding up the empty box, she jutted her chin out. "Now that you know what was in my box, how about telling me what's in yours?"

Obedying her, Sloan held up his box. "There's no food in it, but maybe something almost as good. How about joining me for a game or two? You know, to pass the time? I've fixed you a little something to eat since you've been living on crackers."

She squinted at the box, trying to read the label, but couldn't quite bring the name into focus. "What game is it?" *Do I really care?*

"Um, the game's called *Truth or Dare*. So how about joining me on the couch and let's play?"

From the smirk on his face, Cally wasn't sure what game he actually wanted to "play". Besides, she knew she should stay apart from him. But the boredom of the morning had worn on her and she decided to take the risk. Surely, an innocent little game wouldn't make things worse. They

couldn't resolve anything anyway until the storm was over and he could leave. Why not make the best of a bad situation?

Good excuse, Cally.

"Okay. You go ahead and get it set up and I'll be there in a second. But remember. Hands off."

A large grin replaced the smirk on his face. "Sure. Great. I'll set it up and open a bottle of wine. Meet you in the living room."

* * *

"*Truth or Dare*, huh?" Cally studied the two stacks of cards resting on the coffee table, then picked up the box covered in red and black hearts and read the title. What was Sloan up to? "You didn't tell me the whole title was *Truth or Dare: For Lovers Only*." Cally shot him an I-know-what-you're-up-to look. "Pretty sneaky, Sloan."

Feigning a shocked expression, he attempted to smooth over his deception. "Oh, come on, Cally. It's just a game. You know how these games go. They're all pretty tame in reality."

Uh-huh. Tame like a snake. A snake with piercing green eyes. She shot him another suspicious look, but decided not to push the issue. Besides, she wanted to play.

Without asking, he filled her wineglass to the brim. Inclining his head to the tray on the table, he added, "Feel free to eat as many sandwiches as you want. Contrary to what some women think, men do realize women like to eat. And you must be starved."

She had to give him credit. He definitely knew the perfect things to say. Chuckling a bit at his explanation, she picked up her glass and took a sip. "Yeah, right. But don't go thinking you can get me drunk and take advantage. I mean that, whether we're talking about the game or anything else." She wagged a finger at him for added emphasis. Nonetheless, she welcomed the warmth as the alcohol spread through her, giving her the slightest bit of a buzz.

In response, he adopted an exaggerated expression of indignation and attempted a poor imitation of a southern accent. "Why, Miss Cally, I am destroyed to realize you think so little of me. I, my lady, am no cad."

An image of him at the end of the bed as he slipped toward her sent a shiver through her. Cad? Maybe not. But stud? Hell, yes.

She shot him a skeptical look. "Well, just make sure you mind your manners. And remember this is Texas, not the deep South." She reached for a sandwich, took a quick bite, and followed it with another sip before continuing, "Okay, tell me how the game's played."

"Well, we have two decks; one for ladies and one for men. Which I guess means the truth questions and the dares are different for men and women."

She found him peering at her questioningly. "That makes sense. But I've got to admit I'm a bit nervous of the possible questions. Not to mention the dares."

Shifting his eyebrows up and down in a comical manner reminiscent of Groucho Marx, Sloan laughed and continued outlining the directions. "That's what makes the game fun. Anyway, one of us takes a turn and draws a card from the other player's deck. Then the other person decides if they'd rather tell the truth or accept a dare."

"Okay, so aside from the gender separation, it's like the normal game of *Truth or Dare*. I guess the part for lovers comes in on the type of questions and dares the game entails, right?"

"Right. Now, if a player opts to tell the truth, the opponent reads the truth question, and the first player has to answer with the honest-to-God truth. But if the first player chooses the dare, then the opponent reads the dare portion of the card and the first player has to do whatever the dare is. Easy." He winked at her. "The game, that is. Not you."

"Ha, ha. Funny." She'd meant the sarcastic remark, but couldn't keep the corners of her mouth from lifting.

He took a drink from his glass, rolling the liquid lazily around in his mouth. "Good wine. Ladies first?"

She selected the first card off the men's deck. "Okay, here goes. Truth or dare?" Trying to keep her face emotionless, she hoped he'd choose to tell the truth. Although she had to admit she found the idea of him taking off his shirt, which was part of the dare portion of the card, more entertaining. Although much more dangerous.

"Truth." His response sounded firm and sure, but she saw a flicker of indecision cross his face.

"Truth, huh? Very well, this question has two parts. First, answer part one. 'What do you consider to be your best physical feature?'" Cally quickly lowered her gaze away from his. If she had to answer for him, she'd have a hard time picking only one of his many fine attributes. Would she choose his dimples? Or his strong jaw or mesmerizing eyes? Of course, his biggest asset was the large bulge in his pants.

Sloan, however, gave his answer without delay. "I don't like to brag, but I'd say my best physical feature would be my butt."

She choked as she took a sip of wine. "Your butt? Really?"

Putting on a hurt expression, he quipped, "I'm insulted. You mean to tell me you haven't noticed my enticing derriere?"

Recovered from her choking episode, she crossed her arms and lied. "Um, actually, no. I haven't."

"Well, let's remedy that oversight right now." Sloan jumped up and turned his back, thrusting his firm backside straight at her. Swinging his head around to check her checking him out, he asked, "So, what do you think? Is this prime Grade-A butt or what?"

Recovering from her initial surprise and thrilled at having his wonderful backside so close to her face, she wiped spilled wine from her chin and put on a look of intense concentration. She wanted to be offended as any good girl should be, but she admitted, to herself at least, that he looked pretty darn sexy standing in front of her with his behind pushed out for her examination. So, she decided to give him a truthful answer this time. "Okay, Sloan. I confess. I've noticed your, um, best attribute before. Very hot."

He bowed and flopped back down on the couch. “Ah, ha! I thought I’d seen you drooling over my ass.”

Again, Cally sputtered a sip of wine.

“Thank you very much for both the honesty and the compliment. Now, how about part two?”

Cally shot him a pointed look and returned her attention to the card. She scanned the next part and rechecked the question. “Here goes. Part two reads ‘What do you consider to be your best personality feature?’ Uh, oh. You may be in trouble with this one.” She grinned at Sloan, letting him in on her joke.

Pointing a finger at her, he responded in mocking overtones. “Hey, we’re friends now, remember?”

Friends? Why did the term make her feel good and bad at the same time? But a tiny annoying voice answered her before she could pause and give it more thought.

You know why.

Oblivious to her thoughts, he adopted a serious attitude and answered the card’s question. “Anyway, my best personality feature is my loyalty. I’m very loyal to my friends and to the lady I love.”

Everything went quiet as her eyes met his. His probing look dove down into her, searching for something she wasn’t sure she possessed. Or, if she did, she wasn’t sure she wanted to let him see. Finally, he dragged his gaze away from her allowing her pulse to slow to its normal pace again.

“Okay, Cally. Your turn. Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

Dare? She’d never taken a dare in her life. Cautious, careful. That was Cally Mathews. Yet since this man had entered her life, she’d said and done things totally out of character. Like playing this game when she should’ve locked herself safely in her room, alone and away from him.

She started to speak again, to try and change her answer, but Sloan read the dare portion of the card before she could utter a sound. Holding her breath, she waited.

“Here’s your dare. ‘You must find the person you are most attracted to in this room and kiss him or her to show that person how you feel.’”

Flipping the card on the table, Sloan glanced around the cabin’s interior before turning a face of sheer innocence and delight toward her. “Well, considering I’m the only other person in the cabin, I guess you’ll have to pick me, huh?” In an exaggerated gesture, he picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth. Pushing his lips out as far as was physically possible, he added through a puckered mouth, “Lay some sugar on me, schweetie-pie.”

She stared at him, sitting there with his eyes closed and mouth readied, playing this turn of events for all he could. Not wanting to break her dare, she leaned over and placed a wet, sloppy kiss...on his cheek. She ignored the rush of energy sizzling on her lips.

“Hey, what’d ya think you’re doing?” His dimples peeked out and Cally bit her nail to keep from touching them.

“A kiss is a kiss. The card didn’t specify where I had to kiss you.”

“Oh, is that how you’re going to play? I guess it’s just your bad luck I wasn’t still showing you my tush.” He laughed at his own joke and, no doubt, from the dismayed expression on her face.

“You wish.” Dropping her gaze away from his, she picked up another card from his deck. “Okay, Sloan. Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

Damn, why does he always choose the truth option?

“Okay, let’s hear your answer to this. ‘What’s the strangest place you’ve ever made love?’” Cally peered at the question again before daring to see his reaction. The appearance of his dimples told her he was about to throw her another curve. “Uh, oh. I’m not sure I want to know your answer. Want to change to the dare?”

Sloan laughed again and shook his head. "Nope. Gotta tell the truth. Rules of the game, you know. And we both know how you feel about breaking rules, don't we? Even though we keep on breaking them."

She fought her desire to stick out her tongue at him. No doubt he'd misinterpret her gesture to suit his purposes.

"Hmm, let's see. The strangest place, huh?" Rubbing his chin, he made a big show as he paused to think. "Oh, I know. The strangest place would have to be the monkey's cage at the Dallas Zoo."

Cally let his words sink in. He had to be making fun of her. "Yeah, sure. Come on, you're kidding, right? The monkey's cage at the zoo? The big zoo in Dallas with all the hundreds of visitors passing through it each day?"

"That's the one. The big metropolitan zoo with the extremely popular simian exhibits. However, I like to think the ape exhibit gained a little more popularity after my appearance there. But, of course, the zoo's administration won't confirm or deny my claim."

Deciding to play along with his silly game, she pretended a serious air. "Oh, well, of course they won't. And who were you, um, with? Jane or Cheeta?"

His rich laugh echoed through the room. "I swear I'm telling the truth. And yes, I was with Jane, er, Michelle, or some very nice zoo keeper lady whose name escapes me right now."

"Come on. You expect me to believe you and this lady keeper got busy inside the actual cage? Were the monkeys in the cage at the time? Or were you two alone when you started rolling around naked in banana peels?"

Putting on an equally false expression to match hers, Sloan explained. "Good one. Your version would have made a new kind of attraction for the visitors, wouldn't it? Actually, the monkeys were in a very natural-looking habitat area, more of an exhibit than a cage. But, yep, there we were, getting back to nature big time behind one of the larger rocks."

She couldn't believe her ears. He couldn't be serious, could he? "But this had to be at night, right? When the zoo was closed to visitors?"

Sloan scoffed. "What fun would that have been? Nope. We had sex right in the middle of the day at the height of visiting hours. Hey, maybe that's where the phrase 'making wild monkey love' originated."

She giggled at him, and knew she had to ask. "Where were you raised? How could you have sex in a public place? Did anyone see you?" She could easily visualize Sloan making time with a woman anywhere he got the chance. *Lucky girl.*

He shrugged, smiling before he took another drink. "Hey, I was your typical sex-crazed teenage boy. Could I help it if an older lady found me attractive? And she was quite a knock-out too. So, being an all-American male, I couldn't pass up the opportunity she offered. I guess working around all those animals every day made her want some wild sex, too."

Cally let the scene play out in her head and couldn't stop laughing. Gasping for air, she asked, "But didn't you get caught? Didn't someone report you to another zoo keeper? Holy crap, what if a child had seen you?"

"I guess we'd be paying for the kid's therapy session to this day. But we got lucky and nobody saw us. We finally had to stop because one of the monkeys kept throwing banana peels at me." He tried to assume a somber expression, glanced down at his crotch, and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I think he was jealous."

Cally fell back onto the coach, her side hurting from all her laughter. "Now I know you're kidding. Admit it. You made up the whole story."

His eyes sparkled with delight. "Yeah, okay. The last bit about the monkey throwing the banana peels is a lie. However, we did get caught and she ended up getting fired. I felt really bad about that part of our very brief, but active, relationship."

"Oh, sure. I bet you were so upset about her dismissal, you never talked to her again." Cally took a sip of wine to cover her smirk. She knew his story was false, but she didn't care.

“Well, okay, you’re right. Again, in my defense, remember I was a randy, underaged kid at the time. But you know, to this day, I think of her every time I see a monkey.”

Another peal of laughter burst from her, spewing some of her last sip of wine across the table. “Oh, you poor—” But she couldn’t control her laughter long enough to finish her remark.

He joined in her hilarity while he wiped the wine off the table, and the laughter continued for a few minutes more. Finally, Cally managed to gulp in several big breaths and started to calm down. “I can honestly say, Sloan, I will never look at you—or a banana—the same way.”

Perhaps because of the laughter, or perhaps because of the wine, at that moment, her guard dropped and she gazed at him, seeing him clearly for the first time. Somehow, something was different now. Could he be different or had she changed? Either way, she couldn’t help but smile at him.

He’s actually a good guy. In fact, he seems very nice. More than nice.

“Sloan, I almost hate to admit this, but I think I may have to change my opinion of you. You seem, well, nice. Not at all the jerk I used to think you were. Either that or it’s simply too difficult to dislike someone you can share some fun with.”

Sloan’s eyes changed from a bright, lively green to a dark, shimmering pool. His face, too, took on a sincere expression, an attitude of gravity pervading not only his features, but his entire body. “Cally, I am a stand-up guy, you know. I think we just got off to a bad start. Admittedly, entirely my fault. I’m hoping this time together will change your impression of me.”

He paused and gazed at her in a deeper, more personal way causing shivers to run up and down her spine. As they continued to connect, he leaned closer to her.

Even as a part of her brain shouted a warning, she felt her body respond. Bending forward, she closed her eyes and got ready for what she hoped would come next. Her body ached for his touch, yearned to

have him pleasure her as she'd always dreamed of. She wanted nothing more than to be with him in every way possible.

His thumb ran across her bottom lip, opening her mouth as he reached over and touched his lips to hers. The gentleness of his move startled her almost as much as the simultaneous burst of power scorching its way from her mouth down through her torso and into her abdomen.

Cally sucked his lip into her mouth and nibbled on its fullness. She sighed as his arms slipped around her and she saw their naked bodies on her bed, writhing in ecstasy. Yet, the voice she'd fought to quiet within her head broke through this time, urging her to gain control. "Sloan, no. We shouldn't."

He sat back, his hands leaving her body, forcing her to withstand a gut-wrenching pain. She wanted nothing more than to quench her desire, but years of hearing her mother's warnings won out.

"Why not?" His eyes, tempting and mysterious, questioned her. "Let me taste you again, Cally. Why not this time?"

She searched his face, trying to send him an unspoken message. But words would do a better job. "You know why. Because I won't stop this time."

"And that's a problem because why?"

She shifted away from him, away from temptation. "I don't want to talk about it."

The silence thickened between them as she waited for him to speak. Yet, he was lost in thought as he twirled the drink around in his glass, his face stoic and unmoving.

"Sloan?"

"Fine. Whatever you say."

His cold tone left her freezing inside, but she couldn't let herself go. "Please. Trust me. This...we...can't happen."

Another long silence ensued while Sloan gulped down another glassful. At last, he sighed, a great, painful sigh and turned back to her.

“Okay, I don’t understand, but I’ll try. Then how about sharing a toast with me and putting all the bad stuff behind us? Especially since we have two friends who are married to each other.”

The disappointment on his face ripped through her, but she was determined to stand her ground. Could they be friends? Could she keep him in her life as a friend and have her gift return? She’d like to try, but her heart whispered for more.

Cally lifted her glass and offered a toast. “To a new beginning of friendship, and understanding the importance of keeping a little distance between us.”

Even if we’d rather not.

Sloan’s lips grew into a whisper of a smile and he nodded his agreement. “To a new beginning.”

They shared a moment of silence while they both took a drink. Then he reached for the other deck of cards. “Your turn. Friend.”

She watched as he read the card.

“Okay, here goes. Truth or dare?”

“Well, since I got lucky with the dare part before and I don’t want to push my luck, I’ll tell the truth. Ask away.”

Something about the way Sloan paused before he read the card sent shivers down her spine. Should she have chosen the dare?

Clearing his throat, he read, “Who would you consider to be the greatest love of your life?”

You. You are my greatest love. My only love.

She gasped and struggled to keep her gaze away from his. Without warning, a wave of heat ran through her body, making her stiffen with caution.

Thankfully, however, she didn’t allow her thoughts to escape through her lips. Instead, she straightened her posture as she renewed her determination and sought out his searching eyes, timidly at first, then more hopefully, and saw the usual green giving way to the darker, more sensual color again.

“Yes. I am,” Sloan whispered, confirming both her wildest hope and deepest fear. She shivered with barely restrained lust as he reached out for her hand.

Cally felt the color run to her cheeks. The lovely tingling traveled in seconds from her fingertips to her toes, warming her heart along the way. But still she moved away from his grasp.

“What did you say?” Yet her squeal drowned out his answer.

Chapter Fourteen

The lights blinked out, plunging them into darkness. Recovering from her initial surprise, she calmed down and waited for the lights to flicker on. Yet somehow she doubted power would be restored anytime soon.

“Boy, you’ll do anything to get out of telling the truth, won’t you?” Sloan’s chuckles at his own joke helped ease the mood and she giggled nervously.

“Yep, whatever’s necessary. But I’m afraid the lights are out for a while.”

“I’m surprised at how dark the cabin is.”

“I think the combination of the storm clouds and all the trees surrounding the cabin keep it fairly dim most of the time. Without the aid of lamps, darkness really sets in.”

She paused and considered her next statement but couldn’t resist teasing him. “Don’t tell me a big, strong man like you is afraid of the dark.”

“If I say yes, will you hold me close and keep me safe?”

She heard him chuckle softly. Squinting into the dark, she could see the outline of Sloan’s form and would have bet he wore his glorious smile.

“Touché.”

She wondered what he was thinking and considered asking him, but quickly thought better of it. Maybe she didn’t want to know. Better to address the problem at hand.

"Listen, I'm sure I saw some candles somewhere in the kitchen when I first moved in. Could you see if you could find one? I'd try, but I'd probably end up banging my foot again."

"Sure. Give me a second to remember the layout before I get up and start stumbling around."

"Good idea." She sat without saying another word, wishing he'd hurry up and get going. Sitting in the dark with him accentuated the aroma of his aftershave, and she felt more drawn to him than was comfortable. Finally, she saw him stand and move away from the sofa and, although she felt a tangible pang of separation from him, she sighed in relief. The farther away he moved, the less she could distinguish his form.

"Ow. Damn it."

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I ran into a little obstacle. No big deal."

"Well, be careful. We don't want both of us hobbling around here." He agreed with her and started moving again. After hearing him bump into a few more "little obstacles" along the way, she heard him opening the drawers in the kitchen to dig around in them.

"How're you doing?" Cally peered into the darkness toward the kitchen area, but couldn't see anything clearly.

"Uh, hang on. I'm looking, or actually feeling, through the drawers now."

A few more rummaging sounds, along with a couple of cursed exclamations assaulted her ears before he finally shouted in victory.

"Hot damn! I've found a flashlight instead. Hopefully, with good batteries." Using a dramatic voice, he added, "And let there be light." A steady stream of light cut into the darkness, marking a glowing path through the air.

"Good, I can see the light and that lets me see well enough so I won't run into anything. Stay there and I'll come help you find the candles." Following the trail of the dust-filled light, she shuffled toward the kitchen.

When she turned the corner and the beam caught her straight on, she heard Sloan take a sharp breath.

Now what had happened?

“What? What’s wrong?” At the edges of the ray, she could barely make out a strange look on his face. “Is there something wrong?”

He shook his head, his tone filled with awe. “No. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just...”

The way he stared at her made her feel uneasy, yet kind of wonderful. She murmured, afraid of ruining the moment. “It’s just what, Sloan?”

“It’s just...you’re so beautiful.”

Instantly, she warmed under his penetrating gaze and unexpected compliment. However, unable to think of a suitable response, she opted to ignore what he’d said and move the conversation back into a safer area. “Um, Sloan, could you not shine the light in my eyes? And maybe start looking for the candles?” She held up her hand to block the brilliance thrown in her face.

He dropped the beam to the kitchen counter. “Oh, sorry. I was lost in thought. Anyway, you said you know where some candles are? If you do, I found some matches in my search.”

“Um, let me think. Oh, now I remember.” She opened a cabinet door where several candles rested on the top shelf. Rising up on her toes, she reached up to get a candle, but her fingertips only grazed the nearest one, failing to get a firm grasp on it.

He came up behind her and grabbed the candle. In doing so, however, his chest bumped into her back, trapping her between his body and the counter. A bright snap of blue light erupted between them, crackling for a second before extinguishing.

She gasped and held her breath when his chest pushed against her back. His face moved next to her hair, and she could hear him take a long breath, as if luxuriating in her scent. In a trance, she watched while he placed the candle and the flashlight on the kitchen counter, leaving the beam to shoot outward. Intense warmth running in the crevices between their bodies echoed the growing heat in her abdomen. Her

sudden reaction to his closeness left her mind reeling, unable to function and unable to force herself to break away.

Blocking out everything around her, she closed her eyes and willed her body to relax. She savored the sensation as he slowly brought his left arm up to caress hers. Her skin burned under his touch, but like a bee to a flower, she ached to grow nearer. She could feel something beating rhythmically and, unsure if the beating was from his pulse, hers, or a combination of both, she held her breath, hoping to gather more from her sense of touch. In an instant, certain knowledge ran simultaneously through her heart, her mind, and her body. *Our two hearts are beating together. Heart to heart. Soul to soul.*

Tenderly, more tenderly than she'd thought he possibly could, Sloan drew his hands along her arms, skimming them more than touching them, to rest on her shoulders. She heard his breath quicken to match her own shortened intakes. He lowered his mouth to graze his lips along her neck and she basked in all the pleasure she found from the act. Then, surprising herself, she leaned back, letting her head fall to rest on his broad chest.

Wild, new thoughts ran through her mind, making her more alive than she'd ever been before. Yet in direct contrast, her body felt drugged, incapable of movement unless touched by him. How she wanted his touch!

Bringing up his hands to chase his mouth, he caressed the slope of her neck with his fingertips while his teeth gently nipped at her earlobe. She turned her head up and to the side, so she could welcome his hard, hot mouth upon hers. A low moan escaped her lips as his tongue played with hers, diving in and out with agonizing temptation.

Moving her tongue with his, she tasted his flavors. Groaning low and deep, he grasped her arms and brought her around to face him, but still she kept her eyes closed. Wanting more. Needing more.

She shivered when he ran his hands back down her arms again, traveling from her shoulders to the tips of her fingers. Moving faster, he skimmed his palms up her arms to her elbows and, pausing for only a

second, he placed his left hand on the curve of her buttocks while the other gently, questioningly touched her breast.

She heard the all-too-familiar scream deep inside her, warning her to stop, warning her of the danger. Yet, this time, she denied its existence, keeping the cry unheeded.

In answer to his quest, her nipple strained against the cotton of her T-shirt, anxious to be kneaded. An animal-like growl escaped him as his hand worked to remove the fabric separating him from her treasure. Reaching beneath her shirt, his fingers climbed upward, seeking the bud of her breast.

She felt the fire of his palm scorching her skin and the warning entombed in her depths broke free of her self-imposed bonds and flew to her brain. Her mind, functioning again, forced her to stop ignoring her cry of alarm.

“No. Stop. Please.”

She pushed hard against him, requiring him to take a step backward, compelling him to remove his hands from her body. She stared at him where he stood, frozen, puzzlement combined with frustration etching deep lines in his forehead. “What, Cally? What’s the matter?”

Yet instead of the answer she knew he wanted, she glared at him while the tears she failed to hold back raced down her face. “We have to stop. We can’t let this happen.”

Agony showed in the way he gritted his teeth. “Why? I don’t understand.” With his voice a hoarse grumble, he spat out the words. “Cally, don’t do this to me. Don’t do this to us.”

The sound of his voice threw a log on the flame of her desire, but she pushed her feelings aside, fighting to make her words seem more reasonable than even she believed. “I’m not doing anything to us. We can’t change what isn’t meant to be.” Her harsh breath tore at her throat, throttling her words, making her struggle to push them out. “We’re friends, remember? We can’t be anything more. Ever. No matter how good that may feel, it’s still wrong.”

Great droplets balanced on the brink of her eyelids, ready to fall on her chest. "You shouldn't have let this happen. I shouldn't have."

She covered her face, wishing the past few minutes could be erased. Knowing their brief time together would later bring both anguish and cherished memories.

Sloan took her hands in his and she raised her eyes to meet his troubled ones. "Cally, I don't understand what's happening anymore than you do. Maybe less than you. But I do know what we experience when we're together is the way we're supposed to be. We have to be together. I think I knew you were meant for me from the first moment I saw you."

With tears streaming down her face, she pulled her hands away from his. "No, we can't. No!" Grabbing the flashlight, she whirled and limped from the room, leaving Sloan in the dark.

* * *

Sloan suffered through a restless night after Cally's departure. He spent hours thinking about her, about them, when the horrible, wonderful realization of his love for her pounded him like a sledgehammer to a piece of ice. It was a horrible realization because he knew Cally would fight her feelings for him with every ounce of her strength. How would he overcome all the obstacles he knew she'd throw in his way? Yet he knew he'd never stop trying. And a wonderful realization? Well, wonderful simply because Cally was wonderful.

When he awoke around noon, his first thought, his first image was of her. He had it bad. Who'd have believed it? Definitely not him. Definitely not this fast. But look at Rob. He and Lisa fell head over heels the very first day they met. Maybe there was something to this soul mate thing after all.

Sloan no longer feared another marriage. Somehow, he knew once Cally committed to him—and one day, she would—they'd stay together forever. No conspiracy to marry and then divorce for the alimony like his

first so-called wife had done. No, Cally was the real deal. Now all he had to do was to convince her they'd make a good match.

Sloan chuckled at his choice of words. No reading necessary here. Just good old-fashioned attraction.

* * *

Cally awoke late the next morning after a night tossing and turning with her dreams. Dreams of Sloan holding her with his arms wrapped tightly around her. Dreams of Sloan leaning over her as he ran his tongue over her nipples. Wonderful dreams she wished with all her heart could come true.

Yet the beautiful dreams soon morphed into unbearable nightmares. In these dreams, crowds of people suffocated her as they encircled her, penning her inside their human trap. Closer and closer they came, pulling at her hair and clothes, demanding she match them. She tried screaming for Sloan, but saw him walking away from her, turning to glare at her with unspeakable hatred. She jolted awake, soaked to the skin and unsure if the wetness came from sweat or her own tears. Yet one fact was certain. With the dawn came the cold reality and the choice she had to make.

But why couldn't she shake the sense that they were meant to be together? How could she have let herself get involved with someone when no future was possible? Why had she let her emotions rule her head? She, of all people, knew so well how love ends up hurting you when you're a matchmaker. Wasn't that already the case with Sloan? Hadn't he hurt her emotionally, not to mention ruining her ability to match? Hadn't his mere presence turned her life upside down?

Sorrow flooded her, filling her with quiet resolve. She would keep the idea of love and a relationship with Sloan from her thoughts during the day. True, she had no control over what her mind might do at night, but she was determined to control what she thought about during waking hours. To this end, she would keep all their conversations light and easy. She wouldn't hide in her room because she knew he would seek her out

in one way or another. Besides, she was an adult and able to control her feelings, right? Throwing the sheets away from her body, Cally drew a cold wall around her heart and prepared to meet the challenges of the day. Even with a heavy heart, she picked up her pace and headed to the living room, pretending a lightness she didn't possess.

"Good morning, Sloan. How did you sleep?" Cally fixed what she hoped was a cheerful grin on her face as she glanced around the interior. "Hey, the lights are back on." If she was lucky, the effect of her heart tightening into a hard ball wouldn't show on her face.

He turned from the window with a large grin of his own. "Super. In fact, I had a great night. Want to know why? Because I dreamed of you."

Her pulse sped up, mimicking the rest of her body as it quickened in unexpected response. *Dreams of me? Like my dreams of him?*

"Cally, I know you realize something special is happening between us. Something more than simple sexual attraction. But for some reason, you don't want to admit you know." Powerful, smoldering eyes locked onto hers.

His hot look dissolved the bones in her legs which made the fact that she was still standing all the more miraculous. With his words registering shock in her mind, her words stumbled out as she fought to speak.

"Us? What are you talking about?" She frowned at him, intent on keeping all her own comments light. "Oh, right. Come on, Sloan. You're not a newbie at romancing the girls. I'm sure you've had some major experiences with lots of women. You can't seriously think this animal magnetism, or whatever you want to call it, is anything more. Can you?"

The joyful expression on his face faded. "Cally, I'm deadly serious. Why are you so intent on ignoring what's obvious? This wonderful, wild attraction we have between us is magical. There's no other word for it. For Pete's sake, we literally create sparks together. Which means we have something extraordinary, right?" He started to walk closer to her, but she crossed the room, keeping a good distance between them. Irritation flickered across his features.

“No, Sloan. I don’t.” Her throat constricted at the lie, but she had to continue for his sake and for her own. “I think we have some sort of very potent physical attraction getting intensified by my ability to match people. Maybe my ability even causes this weird attraction. I don’t know. But I do know we shouldn’t mistake this whatever it is for something more. In fact, I think the intensification is the reason why I haven’t been able to match anyone since your reading.”

She stopped, thrown by the pitying expression on his face. “Oh, I see you know about the loss of my gift. Good. Maybe you’ll understand now.”

She crossed the floor with her head bowed, trying to remain composed while giving her explanation. Casting a glance his way, she tried to gauge his reaction and failed. “You see, I think all of my power was directed into this corporeal link between us which left nothing for any other connection. You know. Like the ones I make for readings.” Weren’t the best lies based on a grain of truth?

His face appeared made of marble, devoid of all his previous emotions, making her nervous about his reaction to her words. Unable to watch his impassive face any longer, she turned to stare out the window. Rain continued to fall, but at a lighter rate than yesterday.

Minutes passed while she watched the rain and waited for him to speak. When his words came, his voice was tense and subdued. “So you believe we’re simply a couple of primates who are physically attracted to each other, and somehow your power has gotten mixed up in the attraction.”

“Hey, you’re the one with primate experience.” Forcing a grin, she turned to face him and was stunned to see his tormented face. Yet she knew he would recover with time. But would she? Tossing away thoughts of her own lonely future, she lost her fake smile and steeled her nerves to keep his well-being foremost in her mind. “Well, other than the comparison to primates, I think you understand my position.”

“What about this mental connection we have? I mean, we can sense where the other is, and I know I’ve felt drawn to go to you, at least a couple of times like in your garden and at the pond. Actually, I’m positive

your craving for those disgusting pork rinds triggered a craving in me at the same time. What's your explanation for all of that?"

Cally tried to paste a scornful expression on her face, hoping to convince him of the truth. "Oh, come on, Sloan. I didn't know you believed those times were anything but coincidences. A mental connection? I don't think so. That's almost as silly as me accusing you of following me." She tried to laugh, but the sound came out brittle and forced.

"I see. You're trying to tell me our bond has nothing to do with what happens between us?" Again, he tried crossing the room toward her. And again, she moved in the opposite direction. "Relax, Cally. I'm not going to touch you if you don't want me to. We're only talking, okay?"

Taking a deep breath, she sat on a nearby chair. "Our bond, as you call it, has nothing to do with it, whatever 'it' is. Besides, for someone who doesn't believe in matchmakers, you seem all too ready to believe our connection is mystical in nature. Why the change of heart?"

Sloan moved to sit on the sofa bed close to her chair, and bowed his head. "A few days ago if someone had told me I'd believe in powers like yours, I'd have rolled on the floor laughing my head off. I'm an investigative reporter and a cynic at heart. I didn't believe in true love or people with special powers." He let out a rush of air before going on. "But since then, I've talked to too many people like Rob and your Mrs. Perkins, who are believers. And now I'm thinking we're living proof."

Cally's stomach did a flip-flop in surprise. Could he have changed so much, so quickly? Could his change of heart change anything for her?

When she didn't say anything, he continued. "Yeah, I spoke with Mrs. Perkins and others in your town back when I was trying to get a reading from you. All in an effort to prove you're a fake. Every single person I spoke with has either been matched successfully or knows someone you matched. It's kind of hard to dispute those facts."

He ran his fingers through his hair, letting the hand pause at the back of his neck before dropping to his side. Silently, she ached to feel his touch again, and lowered her head to keep her longing from showing

on her face. But in its place, her pain was fed by the hope evident in his tone.

“Even though the explanation that your power is real seemed illogical, that’s the rationale I kept coming back to. But I refused to believe my own conclusion. You know, believe it or not, some people have told me I can be stubborn at times.”

She almost smiled at the wink he sent her.

Steeling herself against her own heart’s betrayal, Cally leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms over her chest and threw Sloan a cold stare. “I don’t understand you. After talking with all those people and hearing their stories, you still had the gall to write your malicious article calling me a fake.”

“Yeah, I know. Believe me, I feel lousy about what I wrote. But I’ve done all I can think to do to make that right. Besides, you said you forgave me.”

Softly, she affirmed his words. “I did. I do forgive you.”

The sides of his lips turned up, forming a rueful smile and highlighting his dimples. “I was in denial. But I can see everything you’ve told me about your ability is true. That’s why I can’t let you sit there and tell me we’re just physically attracted to each other. You know there’s more to us.”

He stopped, piercing her with an intense glare. “Tell me, Cally. Why are you lying to me? Why are you lying to yourself? What are you afraid of?”

Her mind whirled with all he’d told her. He’d accepted her as a matchmaker and believed in her power. But he still didn’t understand the conflict she faced. Could she live a life without the gift as long as she was with him? No. But now that she’d found love, could she face a life alone?

Wells of teardrops blurred her eyes. Hope dared to flicker in her heart, but died before it could grow. Even as the hope died in her, she recognized the yearning held in those unfathomable pools and knew her

words would replace desire with hurt. But what better way to prove her love for him?

“Sloan, if you understand that everything I’ve told you is real, then you have to believe all of it.” Cally fixed her gaze on his confused face. “A matchmaker’s fate in life is to find love for others. That’s her honor and duty above all else. Nothing else is more important. Nothing.”

“But, Cally, I know you’re a matchmaker and I don’t want to change you. So what’s the problem?”

She clenched her hands, fighting against the urge to hold him and wipe the pain from his eyes. “But the irony, perhaps the payment for such a wondrous gift, is that should a matchmaker find love she must choose between that love and her gift.”

He stood and tried to move closer to her, but she quickly rose from the chair and backed away. “No, stop. Please listen.”

Fresh hurt played on his face.

“No matchmaker I’ve ever known has had a lasting relationship. My father left my mother because of her power. I don’t know why, but I think it has something to do with channeling all our energy into finding matches for everyone else. Maybe there simply isn’t enough left over for our own love. Does any of this make sense?”

She waited for his understanding, hoping he could believe what she’d said. Instead, his frustration grew. The growl in his voice raked her heart with despair.

“No, I don’t understand. All I know is this. I have a connection with you. A connection I’ve never had with anyone else. I have to be with you, to find you when you need me, and keep you safe in my arms.”

She turned her back to him, unable to withstand the angry, yet yearning look he sent her. What more could she say to get through to him? “Please try to understand.” She repeated the words she’d heard so many times in her childhood. “Matchmakers are destined to find love for others. The gift is as much a part of me as my very heart. If I gave that up for you or anyone else, I’d be giving up everything I hold dear. I’m not

certain I'd be the same person I am right now. Would you want me to give up who I am?"

Pivoting toward him, she walked forward and took his hands in hers, ignoring the swift current passing from her fingertips to his. "You have to leave and go back to Dallas."

Agony tore through her and she could see the same aching mirrored in his eyes and body. Breaking the visual grip he held on her, she turned, grabbed her raincoat off the hook, and walked toward the door.

She stopped when she heard his quiet words. Placing her hand on the knob, she held her breath and waited. Yet she didn't dare turn to look at him.

"I won't ask the impossible of you. But I believe in us. All that's left is for you to believe in us. I love you, Cally."

Choking back a sob, she opened the door and walked into the rain.

Chapter Fifteen

In direct contrast to how Sloan felt, the dreary clouds lingering over the cabin broke apart and the raindrops stopped falling. But, much like his heart, the sun remained lost. A terrible demon of despair had moved into his soul, determined to drag all the life out of him.

He returned to where he'd sat during their last discussion, with his hands folded in his lap and his head held so low his forehead almost touched his thumbs. His body seemed incapable of moving. Lost in his thoughts, he sat and waited for her to come back to the cabin.

He didn't know how much time had passed and he didn't care. His mind was trained on the biggest problem he'd ever encountered. How could he get Cally to give them a chance? He knew from the moment she'd taken his hands that she loved him. The flash of energy that had passed through their fingertips had conveyed her true emotions. No matter what words she'd spoken, her body couldn't lie.

The obstacle standing in their way was her belief that matchmakers couldn't have a love without sacrificing their special ability. Surely life wasn't so cruel? Maybe in time, her power would return even with him in her life. Part of him yearned to beg her to take the risk. Yet, he squelched his selfish voice. He loved her too much to ask.

Trying to study his dilemma from every angle, he tossed one idea after another into the scrap heap in his mind. For some unknown reason, he knew they could break the cycle, the curse haunting matchmakers. If she'd believe in the strength of their love, anything was possible.

Deciding on a course of action, he rose, snatched the blanket covering the sofa and strode from the cabin. He stood on the porch, feet wide apart, and searched for any sign of her. Her car sat where it had always been. Not that she could have driven anywhere.

“Cally! Cally! Where are you?”

The birds answered his call with their screeches of fear as they lifted off from the branches of the surrounding trees. Then came the silence.

He tilted his head to one side to listen and heard nothing. No bird, no animal, not even the wind. The placidity unnerved him.

It's too quiet.

For several minutes he squinted upward, turning around in a circle, taking care to notice how the sky had turned a sickly green-black color in one area. Blowing out a long breath he studied the part on the horizon where the gray grew darker than night. God help him, but he knew that color.

The rain which had subsided for a brief time picked up speed, adding hard pieces of ice to pelt him. Hail bounced on the ground around him and the air thickened, wrapping a wet blanket around his face. Hoping he was wrong, he continued to scan the horizon and found what he dreaded.

The wide whirling black funnel churned up the ground beneath its cone-shaped rotation and filled the view of the landscape on the other side of the lake. From this short distance, he could see the debris circling in the ominous cloud. The storm marched forward, alternating between yanking up trees and throwing them away in an imitation of a mad giant tired of playing with his toys.

His heart rate escalated, shooting the adrenaline through his veins. Panic gripped him, bludgeoning him solidly in his gut to send him running toward the lake.

Desperately, he searched his mind for the mental connection to Cally he'd experienced so many times before. Whispering, he begged for their bond to show him where she was.

“Please. I know our connection is real. Cally, where are you? Please, God, let me find her.”

Where could she have gone? Almost before he’d finished asking the question, a strange sensation struck him, sending him the information he needed. Sloan ran down the muddy path, slipping in the muck as he hurried forward, oblivious to his safety, caring only that he would find Cally at the end of the trail.

* * *

Damp and cold from her walk in the rain, Cally huddled in the shelter by the lake. She’d spent the past few hours sitting, gazing unseeing at the water, and trying to decide what she had to do.

Sloan had claimed he wanted her. Yet even more wondrous and frightening to her was how fiercely she returned his affection. How had she allowed her heart to open to his? How had she found the one man she could love? She sobbed, knowing despite their love for each other, they had no future together.

Cally sensed him before she heard his approach. *Sloan.*

He called her name, the edge in his tone jolting through her. Something was wrong. She absorbed the tension pulsating through his body. Again he called for her and this time she answered.

“I’m here. At the end of the path. Under the lakeside shelter.” She heard him come around the side of the shelter and she raised her searching gaze to his.

A cold blast shot through her as she caught the wild, frantic glint in his eyes. All other thoughts were whisked away, allowing her to concentrate on him. “I knew something was wrong. What is it? What’s the matter?”

Sloan dropped the blanket he carried to grab her arms, pulling her up to stand next to him, and pointed across the lake. “Look.”

Following his direction, she stared across the lake and saw the approaching tornado.

“Oh, my God.”

Alarm rushed through her body, whipping her around to face him. Sloan’s features were set in stone, intense determination mixed with apprehension. Clutching her hand in his, he spun toward the path, pulling her along with him. She had no choice but to follow and tried taking two steps to his one in an effort to keep up with his long strides. Terrified, she peeked back over her shoulder and grabbed a glimpse of the monster growing closer, faster.

“Hurry. We’ve got to hurry. That thing’s closing in on us.”

Although she tried to ignore the pain, her injured foot couldn’t take the pounding pressure and gave out. She landed with a hard thud on the muddy ground. “Argh!”

For a split second, Sloan gazed at her, confusion written across his face. Once he realized what had happened, he bent over her, roughly grabbed her under her arms, and pulled her to her feet.

“Oh, God. What is that noise?”

“It’s the howl of the tornado. And pretty soon, the sound will be close enough to burst your eardrums. We’ve got to go!”

“Oh! Careful!”

Sloan lifted her onto his shoulder and hugged her legs close to his chest as her arms flailed outward. With her head hanging next to his broad back, she watched, gasping for air as the ground whipped by underneath her.

Her head bobbed up and down until she managed to brace her arms against his torso. Feeling somewhat secure, she stretched her neck up to catch a peep of the tornado pursuing them. Was the funnel closing the distance between them?

Although she knew only seconds had passed, the brief time dragged out until, at last, they neared the house. “Wait, Sloan. Don’t go in the house.”

He pulled up short, his breath panting out in harsh gasps, and lowered her to the ground. “We have to get inside for shelter. I know it’s not much, but at least the house will give us a little protection.”

She shook her wet hair and sent water spraying outward. "No. We shouldn't go in the cabin. I remember Mr. Brewster telling me about an old storm cellar." She kept talking as she hobbled toward the other side of the cabin with Sloan holding her arm to support her. "I never bothered going inside, but I think I remember the cellar being over here." Hobbling as fast as she could around the corner of the building, she pointed. "There it is."

Sloan attacked the door of the cellar with all the force of a bull seeing red. But the lock on the latch wouldn't budge. By this time, sweat ran down his face and he puffed out short bursts of air from his effort. "Unless you have the key, I'll need something to break open the lock." Checking over her shoulder, he added, "I don't have time to find some tools."

She turned to see the tornado making short work of the distance between them. "Damn. I thought tornados never went over water. That thing's tearing up the lake on its way here."

Hearing him laugh, she whipped around to stare at him, her mouth gaping wide. "You think this is funny?"

His grin dropped into a frown. "No, not funny. It's just kind of curious that a born and bred Texan like yourself doesn't know the one rule about tornados."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Tornados always do what no one expects them to do. And a big one like our friend over there can do anything it damn well pleases."

Together they took a second to stare at the swirling mountain headed their way. Sloan returned to the problem keeping them from finding safety.

"You're not going to get it open. Maybe we should try the house." Wind pushed against her back, moving her two steps forward as she tugged on his arm, urging him to follow her. But she'd forgotten about Sloan's bulldog persistence.

With one yank, he tugged her hands off his arm and took off for the woods.

“Sloan, what are you doing? We need to get inside the house while we can.” As if reinforcing her words, the wind picked up speed, whipping her hair around her face and obscuring her vision.

Ignoring her, he continued searching the ground until he found what he wanted. Picking up a large branch, he hurried to the cellar door, raised his arms over his head, and slammed down on the lock with the makeshift battering ram.

After several fruitless thumps, Cally’s hopes started dissolving. “Sloan, I think we’d better take our chances and get inside the cabin. We can get into the middle closet and hope the frame holds. Ducking under the frame is better than getting caught out in the open.” The grisly sound grew louder, roaring like a ravenous lion victoriously announcing the death of his prey.

But again Sloan ignored her suggestion and continued ramming wood against metal. Sweat poured off his head and blood tinted his hands where the branch had scraped long gashes into his palms. He stopped for a second to turn and gaze at her.

Sensing what he needed, she reached out her hand so their fingertips touched. A sharp burst of energy flowed between them, creating their own tiny flash of lightning. Gripping his weapon in both hands, he drew back and struck the stubborn lock one more time.

The metal restraint popped open as Sloan yelled out in excitement. Exhilaration swept through her body and she returned the wide grin Sloan sported. But her joy was short-lived when his smile faded as abruptly as it had arrived.

He reached down to pull on the metal latch and open the bar across the door. The latch moved, but not enough.

“No!”

Sloan’s shout startled her, momentarily dragging her mind away from the impending danger. “Sloan?”

“The damn latch is rusted. It’s stuck.”

For a second, she thought he’d given up. Yet, with a fearsome look on his face, he raised one boot, and thrust it forward to kick the latch.

“Kee-aaah!”

At once, the rusted metal gave way and separated from the door. Pausing to wipe his brow, Sloan threw open the door, turned to her, and made an exaggerated sweep of his arm. “Ladies, first.”

She swept the hair out of her eyes and checked on their pursuer. What she saw sent her flying down the old wooden steps into the shelter, shouting her words behind her. “Move! The tornado’s almost on top of us.”

Darkness enveloped her, but a railing on the stairs kept her from losing her step. Concentrating on her footholds, she ran headlong into sticky threads of cobwebs and had to fight the urge to reverse direction and run back up the stairs. “Ack! Get them off me!”

“Cally, are you all right? Hang on a minute. I have to close the door.”

At the bottom of the stairs, she forced herself to squelch the scream slipping up her throat, running her hands through her hair in a frantic effort to get the webs off her. She moved around in a small circle to check out the interior, guided by a trace of light peeking through the gaps between the boards of the entrance as it banged up and down. Rubbing her hands over her body, she tried not to think of the spiders that might be crawling in her hair.

While she fought her own battle, she could hear Sloan cursing at the door. The wind continued to whip it out of his hands as he tried to keep it closed. The meager light from outside sent flickering shafts of white into the blackness, creating a kaleidoscope of flashing images.

Within seconds, a loud moaning descended on her, chasing away every other sound in the world. The wailing maintained a steady crescendo until her eardrums threatened to burst and she cried a scream she couldn’t hear.

Darkness surrounded her at the same time she felt an object, hard yet pliant, strike her legs. Hitting the floor with a thud, she felt nothing except the pain in her ears from the relentless howl of the monster.

Chapter Sixteen

Crying, Cally got on her knees and groped in the dark, searching for what had knocked her down. A bleak fear ripped through her when she found what she'd feared.

"Sloan, are you all right? Sloan, please say something."

The sparse light coming through the door was gone, leaving only the noise of the giant as the cyclone tossed branches and boards against the cellar's barrier. Her trembling hands ran over Sloan's soaked body, coming to rest on his head. Afraid of hurting him further, she gently slid her palms over his face while her tears ran harder and sobs shook her shoulders.

"Oh, God. Please don't let him be hurt. Please, oh, please." Carefully, she ran her hands over the entire length of his prone form, but couldn't tell whether the wetness she felt on her fingers was from water-soaked clothes or blood-drenched wounds. Was it his blood on her hands? What could she do to help him when she couldn't see his face lying mere inches from hers?

She wasn't sure how long she sat on the dirt floor of the cellar listening to the shrieking of the wind overhead, because all her attention was focused on the man whose head rested in her lap. After an undetermined length of time, a quiet came over the cellar and she thought the storm had passed over them.

How could this have happened? What would she do if he died? In the middle of a cellar, in the midst of devastation, she forgot about herself and concentrated on the one person, the only person who mattered. Quietly, she prayed.

“Dear God, I know I can’t have him in my life. I understood that when you gave me the gift. But please, please, don’t take him from me like this. He wouldn’t have been here if not for me.”

She held his head and stroked his wet hair and tried to transfer all her willpower, all her strength from her body to his. She felt his breathing, steady and solid, giving her hope in the face of bleak uncertainty. At last, fortitude built on her need to help him and sent strength charging through her body.

I have to help him. I have to get him out of here.

Getting on her hands and knees, she crawled her way to the bottom of the staircase and pulled herself up to stand on the first step. Testing every plank with each move, she reached the door, firmly closed by the tornado’s assault. She pushed on the wooden barrier with her hands and moved the door less than an inch, but no more.

Cally stopped and sat on the top step to rest. What if the way was blocked from the outside? What if a tree had fallen against the exit, trapping them inside? Starting to give way to more tears, she straightened her body and her fierce resolve steeled her tenacity. “No. We can not get trapped down here. Not when he needs help.”

She stood again and raised her shoulder to the door. Taking several large breaths, she prepared for her next try. “Okay, girl, you can do this. Put your shoulder to it. Hee-ah!” Shoving with every ounce of strength left in her, she rammed against the plank restraint. To her surprise, the exit flew open allowing her to fall forward, landing face-first on the ground.

The world was eerily quiet under the gray sky. Rain slapped at her face as she peered around her, but no other movement, no other sound was evident. Creeping out of the cellar, Cally rubbed her arm and turned in a slow circle to breathe in a sigh of relief.

The cabin was intact. Although numerous branches, leaves and other debris had fallen on the roof or been scattered throughout the yard, she didn’t see any major damage. That is, until she walked around to the other side of the cabin and saw Sloan’s car.

One of the larger oak trees surrounding the cabin had been uprooted and thrown against the Lexus, crushing the roof from the driver's side to the passenger's seat. She circled his car and surveyed the destruction, awed by the power of the storm. "Sloan is not going to like this."

Sloan. I need to get back to him.

She limped into the cabin and headed straight to the kitchen where she gathered some rags, a bottle of water, and the flashlight they'd left on the counter the night before. She picked up the flashlight, hugged it to her chest, and remembered how she'd left him last night. "If I'd known what would happen to Sloan, I wouldn't have run off. I would've stayed with him." Wiping a tear from her cheek, she opened her eyes and shook off her thoughts. "Cally Mathews, this is no time for remorse."

Rushing to the cellar, she found a stone lying close by and braced it against the door, making sure to keep the exit open against any unexpected gusts of wind. She punched on the flashlight and made her way back down the steps.

With the combination of the flashlight beam and the light from outside, she found Sloan's limp form on the floor. Kneeling over him, she pulled his head onto her lap and wiped his face clean. At once, she could see the wound on his forehead and the lump already forming. Cautiously, she placed the wet rag over the injury, trying to wipe off at least part of the blood starting to cake the area. "Sloan. Please, wake up. Listen to me and wake up."

Getting no response, she felt the terror snake its way into her, sending its icy venom racing to her heart. A pain, more excruciating than any she'd ever felt before, rose up from the depths of her soul, threatening to tear her heart into thousands of pieces, robbing her of the dim hope still lingering there. Half crying, half pleading, she released the words she'd kept secreted away. Words she hadn't allowed herself to acknowledge, much less speak out loud.

"Oh, Sloan. Please. Now that I've found you, please don't leave me. I need you. I've longed for you all my life. You're here with me where you

belong.” She allowed the dream to float off her tongue even while reality dampened the tone the words traveled on.

With a tenderness she’d never before had for anyone, she ran one hand from his face down to rest on his chest. She waited, daring to believe in the rise and fall of his breathing moving with a regular and steady rhythm. Shaking, she studied his face, rugged lines contrasting with the pale complexion. She continued to clean him with the damp rag while she waited and watched for any change. Time became irrelevant in the comforting repetition of stroking his face.

At last, he emitted a low groan, scrunching his features together in pain. Joy, luminous and wonderful, filled her while her tears and kisses fell upon his face. “You’re awake.” She giggled, releasing pent-up tension, before feigning a you-are-so-in-trouble expression. “Damn you, Sloan. You scared the hell out of me.”

Reaching up to touch his forehead, he grimaced when his fingers found the large bump. “Ow. What happened?” He tried to sit up but dropped back from the effort.

Laughing, she pressed her palms on his shoulders and urged him to relax on the floor again. “I’m not quite sure what happened. All I know is you must have come down the stairs the hard way. In fact, *you* knocked *me* off my feet.”

With the concern raising his voice in pitch he started to rise, but could only lean on his elbows. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m all right. You took the wind out of me for a minute, is all.”

He coughed a short laugh and winced at the pain his movement cost him. “Well, I did want to sweep you off your feet. Although I hadn’t planned on knocking me off mine in the process.”

The warm sizzle of their combined energy flowed up her arms to roll over the chill terror had placed inside her. “Yeah, you sure have a way of catching a girl off guard.”

His chuckle turned into a groan. “I recall something hitting me on the chest when I was fighting to shut the door. Must have been the storm slamming the door against me. How long have I been out?”

Smiling at him, she nodded. “Long enough to scare the bejeesus out of me. I’m not sure. We got down here and all I could do was hold you and listen to the storm wailing overhead. Time didn’t have any meaning any longer and it was so dark I couldn’t tell how badly you were hurt. I crawled my way up the stairs, but then I had to work to get the door unstuck. I thought we were going to be trapped down here.”

Lying with his head in her lap again, he grinned that marvelous grin of his, albeit a bit weaker than usual. When he touched her lightly on the cheek, her pulse quickened in rapid response.

“You mean we can get out? That damn door didn’t get stuck again, did it?”

At her nod, he continued, “And the storm’s over? Damn. Leave it to me to sleep through the best part of the whole adventure. Shoot. I could have been wide awake, trapped with you with no way for you to escape.”

Playfully slapping his hand away from her face, Cally returned his feigned disappointment with a semi-serious expression. “Okay, Sloanny boy, fun’s over. Let’s get back into the cabin.”

“Sloanny boy?”

“I like doing funny things with names. Like when I’m having fun with my students. So shoot me.”

“I’d love to shoot you. But not with a gun.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “If you know what I mean.”

“You’re incorrigible.” Yet all his teasing gave her an instant feeling of relief. After all, how critical could his wound be when he could still flirt with her?

Bracing him with her hands, she helped him to rise slowly to his feet. He swayed alarmingly and she lifted his arm over her shoulder. “I believe you’re going to have to let me help you.” Then catching the grin he swiftly wiped away, she stopped their forward movement and glared at him. “Unless this helpless routine is all an act and you’re perfectly capable of making your way on your own.”

He shook his head in adamant refusal and explained. "No, Cally. No subterfuge here. I really do need your help." He pulled her closer as the current between them intensified. "Feel that? Oops, there it is again."

She grumbled a response she knew he couldn't make out and held him steady. Looking toward the steps, she resumed their movement. "Don't take advantage of my helping you, Sloan."

"Who? Me? I wouldn't dream of it. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the ride, right?" A sly smile wafted briefly across his face, and she couldn't help but smile at his cheerful expression.

Cally positioned him slightly ahead of her and secured him with one hand on his back while he used the other arm to grip the rail. Gradually, they ascended the steps together. After what seemed a long time, they reached the top of the stairs and walked out into the open.

"Hey, it's not as bad as I thought," remarked Sloan as he surveyed the yard. "Only a few trees downed and, luckily, none of them hit the house. Although my head feels like a large oak tree crashed on top of me." He raised his hand to the large welt on his forehead and gave her a wan smile.

Oh, jeez. Why couldn't he have chosen a different way to describe his injury? Cally tried desperately to keep her thoughts from playing on her face. Yet she could tell from his furrowed brow that she'd failed.

"What's the matter? Why do you look like I just threw ice water on you?"

Flinging his arm over her shoulder, she tried changing the subject. "Let's get inside so I can take a good look at your head, okay?"

But he refused to budge. Instead, he removed his arm and grabbed her, turning her to face him. "Hey, I'm not an idiot and you've got the worst poker face I've ever seen. I can tell you're trying to hide something from me. We're not moving an inch until you tell me what's wrong. You may as well spill it, Cally."

She'd been trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to shield her eyes from his, but at his last words, she sighed and gave up. However, even when she gazed straight at him she couldn't find the words to break the news. "I'm

sorry, Sloan. Really, really sorry. But you have to remember that we survived mostly unscathed.”

Annoyance mixed with apprehension deepened the lines in his forehead while he listened to her cowardly words. “Cally, having an aching head doesn’t make me feel very inclined to be patient. Be blunt. What are you getting at?”

“I was hoping you could learn about this sometime later. You know, after you’ve had time to rest. But I guess I’ll have to show you right now.”

With that said, she took his arm over her shoulder again and they walked an awkward pace, with her desire to go slowly and his need to move quickly fighting a silent war. Finally, however, they rounded the corner of the building.

He made no sound and stood transfixed, staring straight ahead. Secretly, she dared to glance at his face and found no emotion showing on his features. In fact, if she hadn’t known better, she’d have said he’d transformed into a statue. A stone figure of a man driven so completely insane that no spark of life flickered on his face.

Speaking in a comforting voice as if talking to a frightened child, she dared to comfort him. “Sloan, everything’s going to be okay. Remember to put this unfortunate event into perspective. After all, you’re alive and well and that’s what counts, right? I mean, it’s only a car.”

She shivered when his cold, hard eyes bored into her and he repeated the words she wished she could pull back into her mouth.

“‘Only a car’. Yes. Of course. You’re right.”

The tone of his voice could have sent geese flying south in the summer, and she knew he was mimicking her. Not knowing what else she could do, she watched his demeanor change. Each second that passed brought a minute portion of life back into his body. With the change came the pain he felt, registering in his face and in the way he slumped.

“Oh, damn. My car. My brand new, special-order Lexus is a total wreck.” Slowly, he slid out of her embrace to stand apart from her. For

several moments, he stared at the tree lounging across the car. “Right through the top.”

She turned to face him, touching him briefly on the shoulder. “Hey, let’s look at the bright side of this.”

Again, he pierced her with an incredulous expression. “The bright side?”

She forced a grin she didn’t feel and explained, “At least you weren’t sleeping in the car when the tree fell.”

Sloan stared at her as if not comprehending her words when, without warning, he crumpled to the ground.

“Sloan! Sloan! Are you okay?”

Chapter Seventeen

Cally squatted next to Sloan as he stared at his car and gave no answers to her questions. At last, without speaking a word, he let her lead him into the cabin.

Although the car was new and something he'd enjoyed, he knew she was correct. What was the loss of his car when they'd managed to survive a tornado? On top of that, finding Cally was more valuable than anything he could have ever wished for.

He sat at the table, commanded to remain stationary and silent, while she scrutinized his injuries. With each stab of pain splintering through his head he found an odd form of contentment in watching her face. Again, he felt their mystical energy fly between them, only to be studiously ignored as she disinfected the cuts on his hands. Once those were taken care of, she turned her full attention to the wound on his head.

Her eyes filled with concern when she gazed at him and her brow lined, unaware of her own reaction to his wounds. Her pouty lips pursed together in a pinch born of concentration that would have been called severe on any other woman. Yet on her, the sight made him want to touch his lips to hers to ease the tension lying underneath. Soft waves of auburn hair drifted on her face and were flicked away without a thought. Captivated, he wished he could tangle his fingers in those errant strands.

"Sloan, are you sure you're all right? I've asked the same question several times now." The worry in her tone was unmistakable.

"Oh, uh, yeah. I'm okay. Sorry, I guess I drifted off somewhere. What'd you ask?"

Irritation stole the worry from her face for a moment before she spoke again, her tone less soothing than before. "I asked if your vision was blurred."

Trying to tear his attention away from her lips, he struggled to answer coherently. "Nope. No blurriness. No dizziness. Mainly a headache, but even that's not too bad. Just the typical nail-through-the-eye type headache. Maybe you could get me some pain meds?" He sent her a smile tendered with a silent plea, willing her to relax, and was rewarded with a trembling smile playing over her lips.

"Okay. You stay seated and I'll go get the bottle."

She rewarded him with an expression flashing between concern and relief, and pivoted to go into her bedroom. Attempting to rise to his feet, a wave of nausea wafted over him and he had to sit back down. "Whew. That wasn't good."

"What wasn't good?" queried Cally as she walked in holding the medicine. Concern returned to her features, but he noticed another part of her anatomy that was faring better.

"Hey, you're not limping anymore. I guess your foot's feeling better?" He gestured to her foot, happy to see her moving without pain.

"Oh, hey, how about that?" She glanced down at her foot with surprise. "You know, I think in all my worry about you, I totally forgot I was hurt. I must've forgotten to be leery of putting my full weight down. My foot does feel better." She looked up, flashing him a glorious smile.

"Glad my injury proved useful for you."

Her elation swept from her face, replaced by dismay. "Oh, no. I didn't mean you getting hurt was a good thing. Your wound doesn't have anything to do with my foot feeling better. I mean, I wouldn't want anyone to be harmed so their misery could take my mind off my own problem. Oh, hell, you know what I mean."

Secretly, he delighted in her flustered response, but dared not show his feelings. Instead, he brought the subject back to the original discussion. "I see you got the pain meds. Think you and your good feet could get me some water, too?"

A smirk at his remark washed away her look of embarrassment. "Don't get too pushy, Mr. Janson, or you'll be fending for yourself sooner than you'd like." With a toss of her hair, she swept past him and into the kitchen.

Returning, she came up behind him and placed both the tablets and the glass on the table. "Here you go, *sir*."

Deciding to use honey instead of his usual sarcastic vinegar, Sloan tried to move the tone of their conversation back to a more convivial mode. "Here's to us for surviving the storm, surviving the tornado, surviving the cellar and, most of all, for surviving each other." In one seamless motion, he swallowed the pills and drank the water.

Although she failed to make a remark concerning his joke, he thought he saw the tips of her mouth twitch before she moved to sit in the chair opposite him. "There is one dilemma remaining."

"You mean other than the fact that we've broken the No Touching Rule all to hell and back several times now?"

She scowled at him, sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Yeah, other than that problem."

Happy she'd finally stopped insisting on enforcing an unenforceable rule, he added, "Oh, you mean how I'm supposed to leave without a car?" He gave the matter some thought and came up with the proverbial brighter side. The loss of his car might prove beneficial. After all, Cally couldn't send him packing if he didn't have a car, now could she? "I guess I'll have to hitch a ride with you."

She opened her mouth to answer, then shut it as if she'd abruptly changed her mind. When she spoke again, her voice was softer, her eyes narrowing. "No, no. We'll deal with your transportation problem later." Staring hard at him, she bent forward, impressing him with her urgency. "Sloan, you were unconscious for awhile. Now, I don't know much about head wounds, but I think I've heard that losing consciousness is a sign you may have a concussion."

She was probably right. He could very possibly have a concussion. "So, what do I do about that? With the bridge out, we can't get to a

doctor's office or call for an ambulance. And I doubt there's a doctor willing to make a house call way out here even if we could get in touch with him."

Although pleased by her real concern, he wanted to relieve her anxiety. "I wouldn't worry too much. I know you may find this unbelievable, but people have told me I have one of the hardest heads they've ever known. Including you."

"Now *that* I can believe."

"Oh, ha ha. Go ahead. Make fun of a poor injured man." He put on a helpless, I'm-so-pitiful expression for her before quirking an eyebrow up. "But what do they know? They haven't met you." He dropped his jaw in an I-got-you "ha" and slapped his knee.

"Touché." She grew serious again and continued where she'd left off earlier. "Still, the fact that you haven't had any dizziness or blurred vision is a positive sign." Furrowing her brow, she added, "I think."

Sloan grimaced when he recalled the dizziness he'd felt when he'd tried to stand. "Actually, I did get a bit woozy for a sec when I stood up. But the sensation went away fast enough. It's probably just from getting up too quickly while I'm still a bit weak."

She inhaled a slight gasp and clasped his hand in hers. "Why didn't you tell me? Promise me you'll tell me about any other problems, okay?"

Warmed by her obvious distress for him, he nodded, buying the time he needed to get rid of the lump taking up residence in his throat as the vibration her touch started ran up his arm. "Agreed. I promise to tell you if anything else happens."

She sat back in her chair, mollified with his promise. "As I see it, the only course of action I believe we can take is to keep you awake tonight. I'll go make a strong pot of coffee. Got any ideas on how to keep you awake?"

Sloan shot her a telling look, unable to resist the bait. "Do I have any ideas? Oh, baby, do I ever."

* * *

"I knew I should've kept my trap shut." After his offbeat remark, Cally had decided to get some rest before staying up the rest of the night with him. He'd agreed to call her if he felt woozy or sleepy. An hour passed while Sloan paced the cabin floor. Cally was in her room and, although she'd said she was supposed to be resting, he'd heard her moving around. He waited, stalking the hallway, his body playing out the restlessness of his mind.

What was going on with her? Had he done something else to scare her off again? He'd hoped he'd broken down a piece of her emotional barrier after their escape from the tornado, but now he wasn't so sure.

She'd gone to her room over an hour ago and he'd tried several times to get her to come out and talk. Each time, however, she'd declined.

Deciding to try once more, he approached Cally's door, jerking to a halt when he heard a sharp sound from inside her room. What was that? Unable to recognize the sound, he stayed where he was, straining to hear. Within seconds, another similar, yet much louder noise resounded from the room, making him think of a heavy branch breaking off a tree. His glance darted to check outside, but came back to rest on Cally's door. He was certain the sound had come from inside her room.

Knocking on her door, he demanded more than asked for a response. "What's going on in there? Cally, let me in now." What could she be doing?

Apprehension placed a noose around his neck, choking his breathing, making him fight for air. Was she all right? Why didn't she answer? Urgently, he twisted the knob.

"Cally?"

"Sloan!"

The fear in her voice crystallized in the air, dread twisting his stomach muscles into sinewy ropes. Her scream sliced through him, reaching in to clutch his heart in a death grip that threatened to stop its next beat. An enormous crash followed, reverberating through the walls,

and he struck his hands against the walls, palms down, as if to hold them up. Icy sweat ran down his neck.

“Cally, can you hear me? Answer me!”

He yanked on the knob and found the door locked. Why didn’t she answer him? Was she hurt and unable to make a sound? An image of Cally lying in a pool of blood, trapped by a massive fallen oak splintered through his mind. Vomit born of panic flooded his throat.

Pushing the foul taste down, he resumed his attack on the door. His arm ached from the abuse as he pounded with his fist, but he ignored the pain. Shouting, his stomach once again turned over in terror for her. *Why doesn’t she answer?*

“Cally, open up. Now!”

Chapter Eighteen

Hearing nothing from the other side of the door, he backed up, ready to hurl his body against the thick barrier.

“Hang on. I’m coming! I’m going to break down the door!”

He backed away, squeezed his eyes shut, and prepared for the assault. Throwing himself at the door, he was surprised when he didn’t hit the hard surface. Or at least, not the hard surface he’d expected to hit.

“Oomph!”

His shoulder met the rough wooden floor where he’d landed, sending shockwaves rippling through the rest of his body. For a moment, he lay motionless, trying to regain some of the air that had been forced from his lungs. Once he caught his breath, he rubbed his shoulder, gingerly sat up, and stared in disbelief at Cally standing beside the open door, apparently unharmed. Fear for her bluntly switched to anger and he struggled to keep his voice level. “What the heck happened? Why didn’t you open the door?”

“I did.” Although she’d answered him, her attention was focused behind him.

“Yeah, great. And real nice of you to do so. But maybe you could have told me first? Damn, I almost broke my shoulder.”

Her glazed eyes still weren’t on him as he rose to stand in front of her. Instead, they were locked in place, staring straight past him, as if hypnotized by the sight. Turning to see what she found so fascinating, he discovered the cause of the noise and confusion.

The ceiling of the bedroom had crumbled into a heap on top of the bed. Plaster, boards and a whole lot of dirty water rested in the middle of her mattress, soaking the bedding, and everything under the covers. Debris, consisting mainly of leaves, pinecones and tree limbs, was strewn around the room.

Every ounce of frustration left him, replaced by an overwhelming sense of gratitude. The ache in his shoulder subsided as he pictured Cally bleeding and unconscious under the collapsed ceiling.

"I was sitting on my bed when I got up to blow my nose. If I had been right there..." She stared at the mess, the shock stiffening her body making her appear small and fragile.

He grabbed her, forcing her to look at him, driving the dazed gleam from her eyes. "But you're all right? You're not hurt anywhere?" He scanned her body, trying to see signs of any wounds.

At last, her mind appeared to emerge from her stunned fog. "Yes, I'm fine. And I guess very lucky." Emitting a high-pitched titter, she continued, "But my bed wasn't as lucky."

He stared from Cally to the bed and back. She giggled in a slightly delirious way as a wave of relief rushed through him. "Good to know your sense of humor is still intact." He smiled, even as the pain in his shoulder stole the respite from him. "But hey, don't worry about me. I fractured my arm in this little drama but, please, don't let my injury concern you."

She clamped a hand over her mouth, smothering the cry—or was it a snicker?—that escaped her lips. "I'm so sorry, Sloan. Are you hurt?" She bent closer to examine his shoulder.

"I guess I'm intact. My shoulder's a little sore, that's all. Nothing to worry about. Unlike your bed, that is."

Feeling a bit better since she'd shown some consideration for him—even *macho men need attention*—he walked over to the bed and surveyed the damage. "The tornado must have damaged a section of the roof. Strong winds probably blew up some shingles and caused a hole somewhere that's letting the rain and debris make its way in between the

ceiling and into the attic to pool up right over your bed. I doubt it would take much to weaken the ceiling of this old place.”

She peered into the hole above her. “Do you think the rest is structurally sound?”

Sloan followed her gaze into the darkness. “Well, since we don’t see any light coming through, I assume the basic structure of the roof is intact and safe.” Noting the apprehension etched on her face, he felt compelled to offer more reassurance. “Of course, if you’re uneasy about the roof in general, I could go up there and take a look.”

“No way. Are you crazy? You want to get on a rickety old roof? And you with a possible concussion? What would I do if you blacked out, fell off and broke your neck?”

Her horrified expression caught him off guard, delighting him in an unexpected way. The joy of his smile played in his voice, giving him a dash of optimism. “Yeah, you’re right. Dumb idea.” That is, until the way she’d worded her concern hit home. “Wait a minute. I’d fall and break my neck, and the person you’d be most worried about would be you? Gee, thanks for the concern.”

“Huh? Oh, you know what I meant.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, his thoughts meandered until one struck him as especially humorous. “Say, Cally? Seems like this storm destroyed both our, um, sleeping places.”

At her blank look, he added, “You know, your bed and my car? But hey, don’t worry about a thing. I’m a nice guy. You’re more than welcome to share the trusty ole sleeper sofa with me.” Grinning broadly, he couldn’t resist throwing out his now familiar line. “Trust me, Cally. I promise to be a good boy.”

“Not on your life.” She planted both hands on her hips and glared at the I’ve-got-you-now leer he sported for her benefit. “Perhaps this is a sign for you to leave.”

The smirk immediately left his face as he realized what she’d said. “Are you crazy? I’m not walking miles to the nearest spot of civilization in

the middle of the night. I'm also not leaving until you do. What kind of man would I be if I let you stay in a place that's falling down around you?"

Okay, that last part was exaggerated. Even so, he hoped she'd go for it. Watching her expression, he couldn't help but be encouraged that she'd believe him. Because he had no intention of going back to Dallas. At least, not before he had a chance to change her mind about their relationship.

"You said you thought the roof was okay."

"You never know, though. I'm not a builder by any stretch of the imagination."

Throwing him a look he couldn't quite decipher, she swiveled around and, with a flighty toss of her hair thrown in for good measure, stormed from the bedroom.

She half-ran, but he followed right behind her. What was she up to? Not understanding the rush, he was content to stay behind her and enjoy the view of her jiggling butt.

"Ah, ha!" Flopping down on the sofa, she stretched out her arms, claiming as much of the sofa as she could. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law and this bed is all mine now. Besides, I'm paying for the rental of this cabin and that includes the sofa sleeper."

He stood hovering over her, enjoying her playful manner and contemplating his next move. "Okay, Cally. Here's the deal. We'd planned on staying awake anyway, so no big deal for the rest of tonight. But tomorrow night we're both going to need to sleep and we only have the one bed. I can't go back to my car and I'm not walking out of here and leaving you alone."

He adopted a firm stance with arms crossed in front of him. "So be realistic. There's absolutely no reason why two respectable adults can't share a bed together. Unless one of them is a cold, unfeeling woman. And we both know you're neither cold or unfeeling."

She opened her mouth to state her refusal, but stopped before any words came out. Instead, he found her agreeing. "You're right. We have to do the best we can under these circumstances. I do trust you."

Twisting around to put her back to him, she continued talking, mumbling quietly to herself, yet loud enough for him to hear. "As much as I'd trust a jewel thief at Tiffany's."

* * *

They kept their distance the rest of the night, each of them knowing the tenuous hold they had on each other. Cally stared at a book for most of the time, letting her mind travel in a fantasy land where she had both her power and Sloan.

Sloan, sensing her need for silence, found a deck of cards and played solitaire. At last, as the morning broke over the horizon, and the sun showed its face for the first time in days, they agreed it was safe for them to rest. Rolling up a blanket to place on the bed and form a makeshift divider, she and Sloan crawled into the sofa bed and, exhausted, fell asleep.

Later the same day, Cally helped Sloan clean up the mess on her bed. She used the work as a much-needed distraction from her thoughts, and soon started talking about everything. Everything except the future. Yet, although she managed to carry on a conversation on a number of different subjects, her mind plummeted ahead, thinking of the empty tomorrows.

Too many times, she'd find herself standing in the middle of the room with her arms full of the box holding small branches and leaves, and watching him work. She'd study the way his tendons moved in his arms, and marvel at the powerful muscles in his back, flexing through his tight shirt as he reached for more boards and plaster.

But her reflections on him were more than lustful looks of passion. She ached to know more about him, not only his past, but his thoughts at that very moment. Was he thinking of her? All too often, he'd sense

her staring at him, glance up and smile at her, sending arrows of excitement racing through her abdomen.

“Cally, have all the women in your family been matchmakers? And is it only the women?” Sloan continued working with his back to her, throwing his questions back to where she stood.

“Um, yes, just the women. But not all of them. My grandmother wasn’t a matchmaker. In fact, she never liked the idea of my mother or me having the gift. I think she was happy when Mother gave up her gift to marry my father. So, you see, I never saw Mother match anyone. If I hadn’t had the help of my Aunt Miriam, I’d never have developed my power. My mother, my aunt, and a few others in the family line were matchmakers, but I never met any of the other relatives.”

He rose from his squatting position to turn and send her a piercing stare. “And none of these women ever found their soul mate?”

She glowered at him and he returned to his work. “Sloan, let’s not go there.”

“Hey, don’t get all worked up. No harm in telling me about your history, right?” Yet before she could decide, he’d already moved on, assuming the answer she’d have given. “But if that’s true, how did they have children?”

She answered through clenched teeth, growing more upset at his curiosity. “I assume Mother found her soul mate in Dad. Aunt Miriam, on the other hand, chose not to lose her powers. As a result, she’s never married or had any children. And, like I said, I never met or heard much about the other matchmakers in the family.”

“So your parents had a good marriage?”

Cally’s throat constricted at the mention of her parents’ union. “No. My father left us right after I received the gift.”

“But if they were soul mates—”

“Being soul mates doesn’t mean you don’t have marital problems. They did. They fought all the time. But I believe he left because I received the gift and couldn’t give it up like my mom did. I remember my mom making me promise to never use it because it upset my father.”

Needing to change the subject, she decided to ask some questions of her own. "So why did you marry your ex-wife? And why did the marriage end?"

Instead of getting angry, however, he appeared to give her inquiry considerable thought. She waited, not so patiently, for him to answer. *Please don't let him say he loved her. Or worse, that he still loves her.*

"When I met Gloria I thought I'd found the perfect woman. She was smart, beautiful, and the daughter of a very influential man. Not that I cared about the status part, but her family ties made my parents happy. However, I never realized power, money and influence were what made Gloria happy, too. My family's importance in Dallas was Gloria's real love, not me. After a few short months and a considerable amount of money, we divorced."

Gazing at her with an indecipherable glint in his eye, he said the words she both loved and hated to hear. "Of course, now I know what real love is."

She must've let her reaction show on her face because he was quick to change the subject. "Say, I'm getting hungry. Think there might be something good in the pantry? Something better than what we gulped down earlier?"

"Depends on what you think of as 'better'. But I think I have something that will take the edge off." Relieved by the change of topic, she placed her box on the floor and headed to the kitchen with Sloan following on her heels.

"What are you getting, Cally?"

"I think I have a cake in the pantry." Returning to the table where he sat, she placed a small chocolate cake and two plates close to him. She took the seat next to him, telling herself she wanted to sit near the cake and not the man. *Beefcake, anyone?* "Shut up."

"What'd I say?"

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"Looks pretty yummy."

Licking her lips in anticipation, she noticed Sloan's attention on the cake and not her. Somehow, although she knew she should want him to keep his eyes—and ideas—on the cake, she, nonetheless, felt a jab of disappointment.

Slicing a large piece for each of them, she resisted the urge to lick the knife and directed her hunger toward her piece. "Now I ask you. Is there anything better than chocolate cake?" With her mouth full, she let the deep rich taste rest for a moment on her tongue.

Her enjoyment amused him as his mouth started quirking with humor. Dabbing his finger into the icing of his piece, he held his finger up ceremoniously. "Oh, I can think of a few things."

Reaching toward her, he slid the tip of his finger along the bridge of her nose toward her forehead, his gaze fixated on its progress. Startled, she straightened in her chair, all the while remaining seated, uncertain if she should move. Then, with a different finger, he ran down the slant of her nose, laughing when he scooped up the last bit of chocolate off the end. He popped it into his mouth with a flourish of his hand. "Yep. Pretty damn good. Especially with the added nose."

She struggled to suppress a giggle. How did he always manage to make her laugh?

Dipping her finger into her own piece of cake, she plunked a dab of icing on the very tip of his nose. "Let me see." Using a different finger, she scraped the chocolate off his nose and wrapped her tongue around her finger. "Yum. For once, you may be right."

"For once? Lady, I'm always right about what tastes good." Sloan flashed a mischievous grin, dazzling her, leaving her unable and unwilling to stop him when he whipped a bit of icing across her lips, spreading the creamy goodness from one corner to the other like sugary lipstick. Surprised and all too aware of what he'd do next, she raised her napkin in a futile attempt to wipe off the chocolate. She was too slow—*on purpose?*—and in one easy motion he caught her hand, holding her motionless while his tongue glided over the confectionery sugar.

Entranced, she allowed his tongue to venture past the glaze and into her mouth, her decision driven by a different type of hunger. His kiss stimulated her, sending shivers of desire racing through her body. Slowly, deliberately, he tasted all the flavors she had to offer.

Pulling her to her feet, his strong arms encircled her waist, fusing their forms together. The spark ignited by their souls burst into a blazing inferno when he slipped his hand behind her neck, demanding they grow closer. Closer until nothing, not even their skin, would separate them. Swiftly, but gently, he lifted her T-shirt over her head and tossed it away. As she waited, breathless with anticipation, he unbuttoned her shorts, allowing them to drop unheeded to the floor.

Sloan lifted her into his arms, and carried her toward the sofa. His mouth crushed against hers, stealing her breath away. She heard a whimper and was surprised to realize the sound came from her own throat. Emotions whirled within her while the rational part of her mind battled the commands her body sent. But the war wouldn't be won by reason this time.

Cradling her shivering form against his, he traveled his kisses down her neck, leaving her no recourse but to lean her head back. Light, airy kisses rained on her throat, driving more moans from her. Her breath came in ragged puffs, a poor harmony to the pounding beat of her heart.

Gently, he rested her on the open sofa bed and pulled away from her, seeking her eyes with his. But there was no question, only knowledge of her silent consent.

Using the end of his thumb, he traced a line across her swollen mouth, pausing for a moment to part her lips. Slowly, seductively, he studied her and she trembled, praying he would lean closer.

"All the icing is gone," she whispered.

The corners of his mouth stretched a little more, bringing his dimples out to wink at her. "Doesn't matter. I prefer the taste of you more than chocolate. More than anything."

He leaned over her, using one arm to hold his body above her while the other skimmed a path from her abdomen to her breasts. Her

breathing, no longer rough, was shallow, as if she feared any sound would break the spell he held on her.

Sliding his hand underneath, he eased the lacy material of her bra aside to run his fingers temptingly over a hardened nipple. Delighted shock gripped her, but her brain fought valiantly to bring her back to her senses.

“Sloan.”

The whispered word was halfheartedly meant to stop him, yet it only served to encourage him more.

She searched his smoldering eyes and knew he, too, was lost in the spell. Without resistance, she allowed him to remove her bra, feeling no shyness when his gaze ran over her breasts.

Her hands gripped his shoulders and pulled. With his help, his shirt lay crumpled by the bed. Her heart quickened even more when she viewed the tanned chest above her. Realizing what her action could do, she moved her hands over his shoulders and slid them over his stomach.

A low groan escaped his lips as he lowered his head to her welcoming nipple. Gasping, she arched her back, willing him to take more of her into his mouth. Caressing her bud with his fingers, his tongue drew lazy circles around the other.

Her mind was only partially aware when his fingers blazed a trail down her stomach, coming to rest at the top of her panties. He lifted his head to look at her again, and the gleam in his eyes asked the unspoken question.

Her thoughts tumbled around in a storm fueled by desire, at once wanting, yet fearing to give him the answer he sought. She attempted to speak, but found she could say nothing. Instead, she closed her eyes and waited.

Taking her silence as his answer, he pulled her panties from her in a single motion. Lowering his head again, he caressed her thighs with his lips, teasing her, driving her need higher. Desperately, she pulled him to her.

“Cally, no.”

Startled by his harsh words, she opened her eyes and stared at him. A wild show of emotions swirled on his face, jerking her back to awareness. Pain filled with urgency stole the desire from his features as he rose to pace the room.

“We can’t do this, Cally. As much as I want to, we can’t.” Turning, he sent her a wretched look. “God knows I want to, but we need to stop. Now. Before I can’t stop.”

With the illusion broken, she hastily covered herself with a pillow. “What are you talking about?” Embarrassment sent a flush to her cheeks. “I thought...” She’d given into her emotions only to have him fight against her?

Coming to sit beside her, Sloan took her hand in his. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you. But this can’t happen. Not yet. Not this way. Not after your explanation.”

Confusion brought the tears as much as the anger beginning to boil within her. “I don’t understand.” How could he refuse her? After all the times before, she’d finally wanted to give into her needs, uncaring what the consequences might be.

His features hardened as he contemplated his answer. “I understand about your gift and what making love with me might mean. If we make love—*when* we really make love—I want to know our love will last a lifetime. We’re too special for one night of lust. When we make love, I need to know you’re coming to me with the understanding that we’ll be together for the rest of our lives. Our lovemaking will be a commitment, for more than one night, for more than one year, for always.” Amusement flickered across his features. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ve changed since meeting you. We can have everything, Cally.”

Anger, shame and another, strangely unfamiliar, emotion ripped through her. “No, you’re wrong. I want to give myself to you. When we go back to our own lives and my gift returns, knowing we can never spend our lives together, at least we’ll have had this one time to remember. I want to give that to you. Hell, I want to give it to me.”

"I want more, Cally." Sloan coughed a sarcastic laugh. "This is a switch, huh? The guy wanting the commitment instead of the girl. Especially this guy."

Tossing the pillow from her, she pushed him away as she scrambled off the sofa. Frantically pulling on her clothes, she let her anguish lash out at him. "What do I have to say to get you to understand? We can't share our lives with each other. What I am, what I do makes any future with you impossible." She yanked her T-shirt on and glared at him before spinning away. "I'm a matchmaker and I have a responsibility to others first."

His hands, once gentle, gripped her, sinking tightly into her arms to twist her to face him. "Admit one thing, Cally. You know we share a connection, right? You know what binds us together is something wonderful? Come on, admit it. Since I won't take the other, at least give me that much."

With tears streaming down her face, she glared at him and nodded once.

He let out a sigh, but refused to let her go. "Thank you for admitting that. Now tell me the truth. Look at me and tell me. Do you love me?"

She tried to turn away, to look anywhere but at him. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look into his face. "Tell me, Cally."

Oh, God, how could she have let this go so far? Why wouldn't he let this end? How could she deny her love for him? Would she be able to break his heart now in order to save him from future misery? Yet she knew her only choice. Steeling her nerves, she stared hard into the malachite eyes she adored...and lied.

Chapter Nineteen

“No, Sloan. I don’t love you.”

As soon as the words left her lips, he pulled her to him, molding her against him. “I don’t believe you. Your words tell me the lie, but your body tells me the truth.”

She closed her eyes and wished she could tell him the truth. If only she could believe as he did in a love that could be shared with her power.

Motionless, she struggled to conceal her thoughts and keep the words locked inside her. Her head pressed against him, letting her hear the wild ride going on in his chest.

“Miss Mathews? Miss Mathews? Are you here? Are you all right?”

She felt Sloan’s frame stiffen at the sound and he tightened his hold on her. Lifting her head to meet his gaze, she sent him a silent message and pushed away from him. “It’s the rental agent.”

She wheeled around to face the door as Sloan snatched up his shirt. Squinting through the torn mesh of the screen door, she saw the elderly man, battered old hat in his hand, starting up the porch steps.

“Oh, hello, Miss Mathews. I’m glad to see you’re all right.”

With a quick glance at Sloan, she strode over to open the door. Forcing a pleasant expression on her face, she greeted the visitor. “Yes, I’m fine. Come on in.”

Mr. Brewster opened the screen frame and walked inside, staring pointedly at Sloan. “I’m sorry to disturb you, miss. I didn’t know you were up here with someone. You should have told me about your, um, friend when you rented the cabin. Not that it would’ve changed the price or anything, but I could’ve put in more supplies for you.”

Sloan reached out and shook Mr. Brewster's hand. "Hello. Name's Sloan Janson. Actually, my stay at the cabin was a bit unexpected. I dropped by for a visit and wound up stuck here when the bridge washed out."

A knowing grin etched the older man's weather-worn wrinkles deeper into his skin. "Well, shoot. Will you listen to me? Talkin' about supplies and such when you must've had a time out here what with the storm and all." The grin left his features as swiftly as it had appeared. "Mister, is that your car out there? Sure looks like your vehicle got in the way of a downed tree."

Sloan threw a glance out the window at his wrecked vehicle. He smiled and told a version of the joke Cally had used earlier. "Yeah, but fortunately I wasn't in it at the time."

A look of confusion covered Mr. Brewster's face until the joke finally sank in. "Yep, I should hope not. That's a good one, son."

A brief silence followed before Cally realized the implication of Mr. Brewster's appearance. "Oh, my gosh. You're here. That must mean the bridge is repaired. Or is there another way out?" She felt a surge of excitement at the news even while a tremendous weight dropped on her heart.

We can leave now and I'll never see Sloan again.

"Yep, Little Bridge is back in order. Or at least, passable again. Me and the boys started working as soon as the rain let up and did a makeshift job of it. It'll do until the real road crew from the state can work their way out here."

I hadn't even noticed that the rain had stopped. She glanced out the window and saw the evening sunset bravely forcing its way through the clouds.

"Just remember, you need to go over the bridge at a snail's pace, but it should be safe enough." Mr. Brewster flipped his hat onto his head before addressing Sloan again. "Still, I'd wait 'til tomorrow morning if I were you. Some of the roads have standing water and they won't be easy

to handle in Miss Cally's Honda. I expect you'll be riding back with Miss Cally?"

Flashing her a meaningful look, Sloan answered before she could object. "I guess so. Can't think how else I'm getting out of here."

She stumbled over her words, searching for a way out. "I can. I, um, was hoping Mr. Brewster would drive you to the nearest town heading toward Dallas. That would make more sense than my going in the opposite direction from Lawson."

Another reason for Sloan riding with Mr. Brewster hit her before she'd finished speaking. "Oh, wait. Sloan, you ought to go with Mr. Brewster right now and get someone to look at your head." Not letting Sloan speak, she explained, "Mr. Janson was knocked unconscious for a bit. Would you mind taking him to the nearest hospital or clinic?"

The older man's gray perusal pierced her, picking up her uneasiness and interpreting her reaction correctly. "I'd be glad to. But it'll have to wait for tomorrow. I promised the wife I'd visit her sick sister tonight." He ran his gaze over Sloan. "Besides, you look like you're none the worse for wear. Think you can hold on until tomorrow? I can swing back here tomorrow afternoon."

Sloan nodded, taking his cue from the older man. "Don't worry about me, Mr. Brewster. I'm doing fine and I'd rather stay here with Cally. I'd hate for something else to happen, like another ceiling falling in, and have her out here all by herself. Besides, I'd rather ride back with Cally and make sure she gets home all right."

The agent's gaze jerked upward. "A ceiling fell in? Where? What's happened?"

Cally shot Sloan a glare and narrowed her eyes more when he shot her one back. "I'm afraid Sloan's car wasn't the only casualty of the storm. In fact, a tornado passed right over us and damaged the roof." Taking a firm grip on Mr. Brewster's arm, she moved him toward the bedroom. "You'd better come with me."

All three of them entered the room with Sloan explaining how they'd cleaned up a lot of the debris. Mr. Brewster, stunned at the collapse of

the ceiling, couldn't speak. Instead, he nodded, agreeing to everything Sloan said.

"So you see, Mr. Brewster, I'm staying the night. I wouldn't feel right leaving Cally here."

At last, the older man found his voice, although it wavered a little. "On second thought, maybe you two should leave now instead of risking it."

Cally opened her mouth to agree, but Sloan was quick to jump in. "I think we'll wait for the morning and daylight. She'll be safe in the other room. With me."

Catching his innuendo, Cally crossed her arms, daring him to challenge her. "I can take care of myself, Sloan." Who did he think he was, anyway? Her big brother?

"Sure you can." Sloan and Mr. Brewster shared a knowing, we-men-know-best look. "But no real man would let you."

"Huh?" Had she somehow been transported back into the fifties? Cally's jaw dropped as she gawked at the two men deciding her fate.

Sloan caught her expression and clapped the agent's back to lead him out of the bedroom and toward the front door. "Mr. Brewster, I'm glad you stopped by. Thanks for letting us know about the bridge. But don't worry. You go on and visit your sister-in-law and don't give us another thought. I've got things under control here." He craned his neck over his shoulder and winked at Cally.

"Sloan."

"Be right back, hon."

She followed them out of the cabin, mad enough to spit bullets, as the two men clucked their tongues at Sloan's car. Yet, even as they talked, Sloan kept moving the agent toward his truck.

Cally watched Mr. Brewster's departing truck as Sloan waved goodbye. She concentrated, running the conversation around in her head. How in the world had she allowed Sloan to control the situation?

One minute, she had Mr. Brewster offering to take Sloan to a doctor and the next, Sloan and Mr. Brewster were good ole boys joining together to decide how to take care of the “little lady”. She’d been dumbfounded, powerless as Sloan had pulled out his charm and old buddy-buddied Mr. Brewster into doing exactly what Sloan wanted.

Pausing before going into the cabin, she drew a slow breath in and held it. Then she tried to relax her body as she exhaled, determinedly bringing a pleasant expression to her face.

She had one last night with Sloan. After that, she’d ache for him at night, but, eventually, she’d learn to live without him. And he’d go on without her. That was the way it would have to be. But the small truthful voice inside her forcefully disagreed.

Pacing into the kitchen, she searched through the pantry for another bottle of wine. “Damn, just when I need some liquid strength, the bar’s out of business.”

The door slamming closed jerked her attention away from the empty cabinet and she wheeled around when she heard him enter the dining area.

“Yo, Cally! How about we play a game or two of cards? After all, we have to do something to kill the boredom.”

Surprise registered in Cally. A grinning Sloan sat at the kitchen table shuffling a deck of cards. How could he sit there acting as though Mr. Brewster had never walked through the door?

She cocked her head to the side and propped her fists on her hips. “You have some nerve. After you treated me like I was nothing more than the sexist pig’s dream of a dumb bimbo?” Unable to decipher all the emotions running through her, she put a scowl on her face to let him know how angry she was. At least she was sure of *that* emotion.

The twinkle in his eyes gave way to a concerned gleam. “All I did was make Mr. Brewster aware of how close you came to being hurt. And, of course, he could see I’m physically fine. So can I help it if he agreed with me on keeping you safe until we can leave tomorrow? Unless you want to take me with you now? But I’d think he’s right about waiting for

tomorrow. Your little Honda won't take the waterlogged roads as easily as his pickup can and I wouldn't want to spend the night stuck in your tiny car. Surely you can see the logic behind our thinking."

Sporting a look that was the picture of reason and understanding, he gazed at her, making her feel she should nod in agreement and be quiet. Not a chance.

"Let me get this straight. You two big, strong men decided I needed taking care of, right? And that was more important than getting you to a doctor? Look here, Sloan, I am not some dimwitted, helpless female needing help from the alpha males."

Nothing she'd said seemed to faze him at all. Instead, he used the same irritatingly calm voice to answer her. "Of course, you're not." He patted the chair next to his. "Come on, Cally. Play a few hands of cards while we discuss our future together."

Her heart and mind betrayed her by leaping with joy at his declaration. How she wished she could believe in his dream. But she knew all too well wishes don't always come true. Fighting to keep the tears away, she turned and started walking toward the door. "We've already had our discussion and I don't intend to beat an impossible horse to death."

* * *

Cally sat on the swing watching the shadows play on the ground around her. The full moon was exceptionally bright and cast its glow over all the objects in the yard. She relaxed and pushed the swing harder. Such perfect summer nights always brought peace and tranquility to her heart. But not tonight. And probably not for the rest of her life. Now, whenever she saw a full, brilliant moon she'd be reminded of their last night together. The idea of their time ending so soon with tomorrow arriving faster, much faster, than she could stand, struck her as cruelly as a dagger slashing through her heart.

Her mind and soul were far away, locked in a closet of sadness, when she heard the screen door squeak. Hastily wiping away her tears, she

jutted her chin out and raised her head to see him standing before her, hands shoved in his pockets, waiting.

In direct contrast to how he'd appeared earlier, she could see her own melancholy reflected in his face. Without asking, he came and sat beside her on the swing, resting his hands in his lap. She dared not say a word, not wanting to break the quiet bond between them. Yet every time she lifted her eyes to his, she had to dart hers away again, fearful to let them linger.

Tempting fate too often, their eyes locked and she sensed the tingle of his visual embrace race down her spine. Her body gratefully accepted his physical message. No longer able to control her responses, her mind opened to him and heard the plea he sent her. No real words formed in her brain, yet she heard his thoughts as well as she could have heard his spoken words.

"You're right, Cally. Let me hold you tonight. If you'll give me only one night, let's make that night matter."

She watched, mesmerized as he rose from his seat, stood over her, and took her hand. At his touch, the familiar tingling sensation coursed over her skin but, this time, the trembling in her body was borne not of the spark of their connection, but from the excitement surging through her. *Can we do this? Can we have one night without breaking our hearts? Can I live if we don't?*

The war waged on inside her. She knew if she made love with Sloan, her world would never be the same. And making love wouldn't change the future. A lifetime together was still an unattainable dream. She'd promised to protect his soul and hers, but could they tempt fate just this once?

In the end her heart won and she stood, taking his other hand. Fearing she would break the mental link between them, she kept silent. Instead, focusing all her energy on him, she prayed he'd receive her thoughts. *"I want you to hold me tonight. I want to have you take me tonight; my body, my heart, and my soul. Tonight will be ours to live on in our memories."*

His lips curved upward slowly, relaying his response. Tenderly, she reached up to touch her lips to his. She mewed a soft sigh as she delighted in his caress of her lips with a slight, seductive nip of his teeth. Moving his tongue to find hers, he tempted her to explore his mouth. Probing briefly, Cally welcomed the warmth in her abdomen as it grew stronger, urging more, wanting more.

She leaned into him, dropping his hands and running hers up his back. Even with his shirt on, she could feel the muscled hardness of his back quivering in anticipation, and knew he was as affected as she. A gasp escaped her, barely more than a whisper, when his hands found her lower back and slid down to rest on her buttocks. He drew away from her, his breath coming in short intakes of air.

"We need to take things slowly." His gaze probed her, needing to hear her. "Tell me what I already know."

She tried to pull away, but didn't fight when he held her to him. "Sloan, stop. Can we just have tonight? Can't you hold me all night, the way I want you to? Let's not talk about tomorrow." She felt his chest rise and fall when he allowed his ragged breath to escape.

"Yes, I'll hold you. But I'm not going to give up on us either. Maybe you can't accept our love tonight, but one day you will. And then we'll be together."

"Sloan..."

Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her lightly on the lips. "No, don't."

Feeling overwhelmed, she couldn't find anything to say. Thankfully, he didn't wait for her to say a word. Instead, he took her by the hand and led her inside the cabin and over to the unfolded sleeper sofa.

"I love you, Cally. You're the one person I've needed all my life. I think I knew that from the first minute I saw you. I was wrong to let everything else get in the way, including my stupidity." Sitting with her on the edge of the bed, he explained further. "I never knew I could love anyone this way before I ran into you. Even if you don't consider a future with me

possible, I know I'll never stop loving you. Should you ever need me or want me, you only have to call."

Tears sprang to her eyes and, as one drop ran down her cheek to the corner of her mouth, she tasted the salty sweetness. "Oh, Sloan. Please, please understand. I wish we could spend our lives together, but we can't. Please hold me close to you tonight and pretend these moments will last forever."

Casting him a meaningful look, she unbuttoned her shorts and let them slide to the floor. She heard his sharp intake of breath and she delighted at the hungry expression on his face as he gazed at the simple white lace panties covering her flat stomach. Slowly, deliberately, she pulled her T-shirt over her head and unhooked her bra, adding both to the pile on the floor. Covering her breasts with her arms, she turned to face the bed.

While she crawled between the sheets, Sloan rounded the bed removing all of his clothes. Sliding into bed next to her, he whispered. "I want to feel your skin next to mine." His look skimmed her body, finally resting on her face before he laughed a soft laugh filled with more torture than gaiety. "Cally, honey, you're asking a miracle of me. To have you for one night is impossible."

She touched his cheek and moved into his open arms. Gently, he held her close and caressingly kissed her on the ear, nibbling at her lobe, as he slipped her panties off her. In answer, she turned her head and offered her lips to his, sighing in the joy of their touch.

Instead of the crush of his mouth on hers as he'd done in the past, he skimmed his lips over hers, teasing her with the barest of touches. The tip of his tongue tickled her mouth, asking for entry, and she opened for him to come inside.

Their kiss was more than a mere kiss, as their bodies slid together. Their kiss was an unspoken promise, recognition of what they were.

Sloan's fingers feathered over her aching nipples as he tracked his other hand through her hair. She moaned, anxious for more, but didn't want to demand it. His tongue followed his fingers along her body, taking

his time to linger in the sensitive hollows as if this were his first exploration. "Cally."

She reveled in the sound of her name in reverent tones of desire and answered with her own voice of awed wonder. "Sloan."

Sliding his body on top of hers, he held her head between his hands, his desire shining in his eyes. "Are you sure?" He chuckled and added, "I was noble once before but I don't think I can be noble again. If anyone stops this, it'll be you."

She lifted up to kiss him on the tip of his nose. "I'm sure." Yet she knew he didn't know she spoke of the need to give him up. *Let us have this night before the long, lonely days come.*

She welcomed him then, into her heart, her mind, and her body. Keeping his eyes fixed on hers, he thrust into her. She gasped, thrilled by his entry, and wrapped her legs around him. As the womanhood within her broke, she saw his eyes widen in surprise, tears glistening in the corners.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His tender whisper wafted his warm breath over her.

She lifted the tips of her mouth a bit and shrugged slightly.

"I should've known." The adoration, the awareness of her gift to him, lit up his face.

In answer, she tightened her hold on him and rocked her pelvis against him. He groaned and matched her rhythm. His lips caressed her neck and shoulders as he murmured endearments she'd waited so long to hear.

When she felt his body tensing on top of hers, she released the pressure within her, timing her climax to meet his. Together, they cried out, clinging to each other with their bodies and their souls.

Afterwards, with him still inside her, she listened to his breathing and tried to memorize every texture, every smell, and every sensation between them. He kissed her neck again and slid off her to her side without ever letting his hands lose their hold on her.

"Cally?"

“Not yet.” She shook her head, not wanting him to break the spell between them. Tomorrow would come soon enough without talking about what lay ahead. She wanted to enjoy more time in his arms without the pain of the future intruding into their one perfect night. Understanding, he lay with her, pulling her to him to snuggle in silence. With their heads touching, they stroked each other and listened to the sounds of the night.

Cally nestled in Sloan’s arms, discovering for the first time what love really felt like. Instead of speaking what was in their minds, they talked of unimportant things, common everyday problems, useful because the topics allowed them to pretend tomorrow would never come.

Soon, however, they couldn’t help but share all the various emotions running through them, trying to express everything they felt at each moment. She wanted Sloan to know what she thought, what was important to her besides the gift. And, in return, she wanted to know his ideas, his life, and his past. But not once would she allow him to speak of any time beyond that night.

Slowly, the talk ended and a contented quiet settled over them. Turning to place her back against his chest, she couldn’t leave a lie between them and whispered the words she knew he needed to hear. Even if he was too near sleep to understand them.

“Sloan?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you, too.”

His arms closed in on her a little tighter and she closed her eyes to let all her other senses take over. While she listened to the steady rhythm of his heart, she knew the anguish of her own as despair threatened to rip it from her chest. Silently, she wiped away a single teardrop.

* * *

Sloan stretched out his arms before opening his eyes. Satisfaction played on his face, a tribute to the dreams he’d enjoyed throughout the

night. Lying with his back to the other side of the bed, he toyed with the idea of turning some of those dreams into reality. Flipping in one swift motion, he prepared to surprise his love with a *good morning* tussle. Instead, he found an empty bed.

Bolting upright, he scanned the small room. No Cally. "Cally? Where are you, babe?"

Panic played bongos in his chest, but he tried to keep the fear suppressed by making light-hearted comments as he pulled on his boxers. "Let me guess. You're one of those ladies who can't stand being called 'babe'. Am I right?"

As he ran from room to room, checking everywhere and finding nothing, he hung on to the small flame of hope flickering in his chest. "Well, that's okay. I promise to never use the term again. Satisfied?" He stood in the living room and fought against the knowledge lurking in the back of his mind.

"Cally?"

Panting now, more from the dawning reality than from actual exertion, he ran to the front porch. He scanned the yard and stark realization struck a deafening chord in his heart as his gaze fell on the spot where her car had been.

She's gone.

Chapter Twenty

Sloan continued to stare for several minutes at the spot, attempting to make the Honda materialize from thin air. At last, his mind accepted the truth even though his heart fought to hold on to the fantasy.

Walking back into the cabin, he let the screen door slam behind him and stood studying the empty room before him. Slumping, he swallowed, as if gulping down the lump in his throat could keep the pain in his heart from growing. As he scanned the room, he noticed a note lying on the table, anchored down by the salt shaker, and felt his stomach drop.

The lump disappeared as his throat constricted and his heart pounded, threatening to break apart from the force. With his hand moving as though through unseen water, he reached for the letter like a drunken man grasping for his last bottle, and began reading. At first, the words blurred together, whether from his own tears or shock, he didn't know.

Dear Sloan,

I've gone home and I'm asking you to return to Dallas. I'll call Mr. Brewster and ask him to pick you up.

Please, don't try to contact me. We can't fight something we can't change.

Thank you for our night together. I will treasure those memories for a lifetime.

Love,

Cally.

He crumbled the letter while contrasting emotions of love, hurt, and anger fought for final control of his heart. Beaten down by the turmoil

within him, he sat on the nearest chair and bowed his head, unwilling and unable to move.

How could she have left him? Just like Gloria had. But no. When Gloria had left him, he'd felt angry, used, betrayed...and relieved. Cally leaving him was much more. Much worse.

Could last night have meant so little to her that she could leave with only a note to say goodbye? He closed his eyes and could smell her presence on his skin; feel her hair, soft and silky, flowing over him when she'd laid her head against his chest. She'd said she'd wanted to listen to his heart to know their hearts were beating as one. And, although she'd never said so, he'd protected the small flicker of optimism wavering inside him, hoping she'd come to accept their chance to be together.

Tears dropped to the hands he clasped together beneath his lowered head. How could she tell him she loved him and leave? What had changed between last night and the dawn? The answer was clear. Nothing had changed, including her fear that matchmakers couldn't have love and keep their power. Still he remembered whisperings of their declarations for each other, and they echoed in his mind building a determination hardened through love and pain.

Rising from the chair, he showered and waited for Mr. Brewster to arrive.

* * *

Cally had managed to stop crying by the time she'd reached Lawson. Yet the stone replacing her heart weighed heavily inside her. Pulling into her driveway, she parked behind a maroon colored jeep already in the drive. She'd never seen the jeep before, but assumed it was one of the old vehicles Billy kept repairing for Susie to drive. Her friend was probably inside keeping her promise to feed and water Houdini. Cally sighed and wondered if she'd be able to explain what had happened.

She trudged to her door and dug in her purse for her house key. Somehow the sight of her quaint yellow cottage, for once, failed to boost her spirits. Would anything ever feel good again?

Just as she was about to insert her keys into the knob, the door swung open and a woman with spiked short-cropped pumpkin-colored hair stood grinning at her.

“You’re home!”

Strong, flabby arms covered by a multi-colored shirt encircled her, bumping her into the woman’s large chest and crushing her face against the perfume-doused body. The hug threatened to continue well past a few seconds and Cally, desperate for air, pushed away from the lady’s bosom.

Pausing to take a couple of much needed breaths, she gaped at the woman, unable to figure out why she looked familiar. “Who are you and how did you get in my house? I’m sorry, but if you read the article in the Dallas paper about me, you’re going to be disappointed. I don’t do matchmaking any longer.”

Seeing her first words bring a bigger grin to the stranger’s face, she took on a sterner tone. “You’d better start explaining or I’m calling for help in about two seconds. Breaking and entering is a felony offense, you know, and our mayor is a good friend of mine.”

The lady paused as if surprised, then the generous lips spread even wider as she burst out into a raucous laughter loud enough for the neighbors to hear. “Cally, honey, I know it’s been a long time, eleven years to be exact, but I’ve always believed I’m a very memorable character. Most people aren’t likely to forget me.” She let go with another loud cackle. “Although some of them might like to.”

Placing her hands on her ample hips, she continued, “But I guess I’m not so memorable after all. Well, never mind. Here, give me your bag and come on in. You settle in and I’ll get us a drinkie-poo. Beer okay for you? I didn’t see anything stronger than that and I haven’t had time to make a grocery run.” With those words said, the short, bell-shaped woman turned on her heel and hurried toward the kitchen.

Dumbfounded, Cally stood in the foyer for several moments before finally following her. At least the woman didn’t seem dangerous. “I’m

asking again before I call the authorities. Who are you and how did you get into my home?"

She waited for an answer while the woman stuck her head in the refrigerator and extracted two beers. A fuzzy sensation on her ankle made her glance down to see Houdini rubbing up against her. Momentarily forgetting the woman, she bent over and picked up the cat, cuddling him against her cheek. "Oh, Houdini, I've missed you so much."

"And I think the poor little dear missed you a bunch, too. Always mewling around me, asking me where you are."

Cally looked up to see the two beers placed on the kitchen table. The stranger sat at the other end of the table and took a swig from her bottle. "I'm very surprised, Cally Mathews, that you don't remember your Aunt Miriam. I thought at least you'd recognize my voice. 'Course, like a lot of us, I've added more than a few pounds and wrinkles through the years. And I guess I've changed my hair a bit. I change my hair almost weekly now. But after all, wasn't I the one who taught you how to use your gift? I would've thought you'd remember me for that if nothing else."

Cally's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Aunt Miriam?" Recognition sank into her brain as the familiar eyes met hers. "Oh, my gosh. I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you, but it was such a long time ago. When did you get here and how did you get into my home? Not that I mind, of course. You're welcome here whenever you like." She moved to sit across from the other woman.

"Your good friend, Susie Wiggins, called me, honey. Didn't she tell you?" Cally started to answer, but her aunt waved off the question. "Well, never mind. She explained about this rough patch you're going through and said you needed some help with someone who knows about the gift. So I rushed up here and she let me in with the key you'd left with her. I'm sorry you had so much trouble getting through to me. If I'd known what this was all about, I'd have cancelled my trip to Vegas." She leaned her head to the side in thought. "Or was it Atlantic City? I always get those two mixed up. Anyway, I would've dashed right over. Of course, this gave old Houdini and me a day or so to get acquainted."

Wonderful, loving memories of Aunt Miriam rushed back to Cally. Wild hair and a loud booming voice were what she remembered about her mother's sister. Since her mother had lost the ability to match, Aunt Miriam was the one who'd first explained what the gift was and how to use her power effectively. Aunt Miriam was the one who'd made her understand how special she was to have the ability. And that with the special gift came responsibilities.

Tears threatened to fall as she took one of her aunt's hands in hers. "Oh, Auntie, I'm so glad you came. The past few weeks have been just terrible. And yet, wonderful at the same time."

Aunt Miriam peered at her, considering her words before she spoke. Her aunt's gaze grew more intense and Cally recognized the tingling in the hand her aunt held. A small smile surfaced on Aunt Miriam's face and a soft glow sparked in her eyes. "Oh, my dear, sweet Cally. You were special before, but now you're lucky, too. You've found your soul mate, haven't you, dear?"

Cally gawked at her aunt. "My soul mate? How did...?" She waited for Auntie to nod, confirming what she already knew. "Oh, Auntie, you're right. I do love someone. Did Susie say something to you?"

Letting a smile play on her lips, Aunt Miriam reached over with her other hand and gave Cally a playful pat on her leg. "Don't be silly, honey. Of course, I know about Sloan Janson. I read you when I greeted you at the front door. A second or two after I touched you, I knew. But I needed to confirm the information by holding your hand. I hope you don't mind my reading you without asking first."

Reeling from her aunt's words, Cally pressed on. "But so quickly? My readings take much longer." The overwhelming sadness tugging at her since she'd left the cabin came rushing back, flooding her senses. "Oh, Auntie, I did find love, but I wasn't sure he was my soul mate at first. Or maybe I didn't want to believe. Oh, I don't know. I've been so confused. But how am I lucky? We can't be together because we'll end up hurting each other. Just like my mom and dad."

Her aunt's expression changed to a bewildered look. "Oh, honey, no one ever told you the truth, did they? Which is partly my fault. I should've told you myself."

Frustration at having to explain something her aunt should know already only added to Cally's whirling emotions. "Of course, she did. Didn't my mother tell me often enough? 'Matchmakers match other people, but they can never find their own love. Any love they do find is doomed to heartache and failure.' I know Sloan would have left me after a few years. Even my own father left me."

If eyes could have thrown real flames, Cally bet Aunt Miriam's glare would've reduced the kitchen to hot embers. Pushing back her chair abruptly, the older woman stood with an ease that belied her years and stalked around the kitchen. Cally listened intently, but couldn't understand the mutterings her aunt was saying. Finally, after several minutes of pacing the floor, Aunt Miriam returned to her seat and took both of her hands in her own.

"Cally, dear, I'm going to tell you some truths you should have been told a long, long time ago. I blame myself for being part of your misconceptions, but a large load of blame belongs to your mother." She stopped, sadness enveloping her. "It pains me something awful when I think of how she took that lie with her to her grave. Her soul will never rest easy with a lie lingering after her."

"Auntie, please. What are you talking about? I was by her bedside when she passed on. If she'd had anything she needed to tell me, she would have."

Taking a long swig of her drink, Aunt Miriam continued, "Honey, I hate to be the one to tell you but your mother, God rest her soul, was the most bitter woman I've ever known."

How could she talk about her mother this way? Somehow the world had tilted, making everything she'd ever known a lie. "She was unhappy because she was so sad and heartbroken after my father left us. And he left us because of me, Auntie. Because he couldn't stand the thought of my being a matchmaker like my mother. She told me he left because of

my getting the gift. She gave up her gift for him, but he couldn't make my power go away. So he left."

Shaking her head in refusal, Aunt Miriam explained. "No, you're wrong. She was bitter because her husband left *her*. He didn't leave because of you. He ran away from your mother and her controlling ways. Honey, your mother lied about everything. And worse, she made you a part of her lies."

Cally started to object again, but her aunt raised her hand in a gesture to stop her. "No, now, listen up good. What I say to you is the God's honest truth. Your mother drove that dear man insane with her constant jealousy and suspicions. Why the poor man couldn't walk to the store without getting cross-examined when he got home. Who had he seen? Who had he talked to? He left when he couldn't stand her nagging any longer."

Could all this be true? Cally tried to absorb everything her aunt had told her. Could her mother have lied to her? What did this mean? However, Aunt Miriam didn't give her any more time to reflect on what she'd heard so far.

"Know this, Cally Mathews. He tried to stay in touch with you, but she wouldn't allow it. She destroyed every letter, every present he sent to you. And after a year of trying to phone you and having her hang up on him, he gave up, defeated and beaten down. In fact, I'm the one who sent him information and pictures of you until the day he made his peace with his Maker."

Stopping to take another drink, Aunt Miriam took a deep breath. "But she found out about that, too, which is the reason you haven't seen me in all these years. I wasn't welcome here and she told me to never contact you. Still, that's no excuse. I should have forced my way into this house and made sure you knew the truth."

Cally wiped the tears from her cheeks. "My father wanted me? He didn't leave because of my gift?"

Aunt Miriam shook her head, lowering her gaze to the floor. Her face was drawn, having aged years in the past few minutes. "No excuse. I

should have come here the day after your mother's funeral. Maybe that's part of why I didn't come to see her buried. Not that she would have wanted me there. I guess I simply couldn't 'fess up to my part in this horrible charade."

Cally squeezed her aunt's hands and forced her to lift her head. Emotions ran wild through her, but anger was not one of them. She knew regret, sadness, and emptiness. But not anger. "Maybe I could've gone to my father after Mother's death, but I didn't have the nerve to try. Besides, I thought he never cared. But maybe we could have rekindled our relationship."

Aunt Miriam coughed, clearing her throat before speaking. "No, that wouldn't have worked. You see, your father died a few years after he'd left, when you were still a young girl, and your mother refused to tell you. Then your mother passed away a few years after that. So when your grandmother began raising you, we discussed whether or not we should tell you and decided against it. After all, your father was already dead, so you couldn't have gone to him. We decided we'd leave you with good memories of your mother and not the ugly truth of what she'd done. We wanted to spare you, but I can see now we were wrong to do so."

Could her mother have been that unbending, that cruel? Memories of her mother's voice echoing in the house, yelling at her father, brought back images of her mother's enraged face as she railed at her husband. "Oh, my God. I remember. I remember her yelling at him. But I always believed her rage was because she'd lost her power for him. I thought she resented him."

Aunt Miriam nodded sadly. "You're right. She did blame him. But giving up her power for him was her choice—a choice she shouldn't have made. He was never her soul mate and she knew it. Still, he tried to stay for you, honey, but in the end, her abuse was too much to take. His leaving had nothing to do with you becoming a matchmaker."

Cally's mind reeled with questions. "But why didn't Gran tell me later when I was older? I could have handled the truth."

Aunt Miriam shook her head. "Oh, honey, she'd gotten wrapped up in the lie from the beginning. And naturally, she supported your mom, her daughter, over your dad. But you see, once she was involved in all the subterfuge, she could never figure out how to get out. She couldn't stand the thought of you hating her for her part in the whole mess. I felt that way, too. So we kept the lies going, if only by never setting the record straight, even after your mother's death."

A sob racked Cally's body, making her chest ache more with the pain of betrayal than with any physical cause. "All these years I've been afraid to love any man, thinking he'd leave me like my own father did. Now I find out my father never left *me* at all."

This time it was her turn to pace the floor. She rose from her seat and began stalking up and down the small kitchen. At last, she grabbed hold of the countertop and lowered her head. An unsettled silence held the room in limbo for several minutes until she raised her head to look at her aunt. "I understand why you and Gran decided what you did. That doesn't mean it was the right thing to do; just that I understand your motives."

"Cally, honey, I'm so, so sorry for my part in all this mess. I was a coward hoping someone else would tell you the truth. I hope you can forgive me."

Ignoring Aunt Miriam's plea, Cally confronted the older woman. The past couldn't be changed now, but maybe the future could. "Auntie, what did you mean earlier when you said I was lucky, too?"

Aunt Miriam retrieved a tissue from between her breasts, blew her nose and tossed it into the nearby trash basket. Sniffing, her eyes took on a different expression, one borne of longing. "Did I ever tell you about my Leo? Oh, of course, I didn't. You were too young the last time I saw you, and the pain of losing him is awful even after all the years."

"Wait. Was this the man you started to tell me about on the phone? The one who caused you to lose your ability?" Had Aunt Miriam experienced the same thing she had?

Sitting up straighter in her chair, Aunt Miriam continued, "Leo Rattlespurger was my soul mate."

Cally dropped to her chair, wonder flowing through her mind. "Auntie, you found your soul mate?"

A twinkle played in Aunt Miriam's moist eyes. "Yes, I found my love. Leo was handsome, kind, and successful. We were going to get married the day after he was due to return from finishing a major business deal out of town."

Cally watched as the happiness radiating from her aunt's face transformed her features from an elderly woman to the firm, young face of a new bride. "Auntie, what happened? Did you get married when he returned?"

"No, child. Our marriage never happened. Poor Leo's car was hit head on by a drunk driver."

She reached out to touch Aunt Miriam's hand. Empathy was the message she sent, but she knew forgiveness wouldn't be far behind. "Oh, Auntie, I'm so sorry. But of course you never got married. Mamma really did speak the truth about matchmakers. What she'd said was for the wrong reasons, but maybe some of it was true, nonetheless. 'Matchmakers can never have their own true love.' Look at how her marriage ended and yours never even started. At least she was telling the truth about that part."

Aunt Miriam's other hand slamming down on the table jerked Cally's head up, and dropped her jaw.

"No! That's not true. Your mother told you part of the facts about matchmakers and love. Being angry and bitter, she never wanted you to know the entire truth. She said she didn't want to give you any false hopes and, God forgive me, I believed her and did as she asked. I really didn't have any other choice."

Aunt Miriam picked up a paper napkin and blew her nose, then added the napkin to the trash. "You see, the odds of a matchmaker finding her own soul mate is about the same as finding a million dollars, so what use would it have done to let you dream? After all, good fortune

had already been mine, so I figured that gave you an even smaller chance of finding your love. Your mother swore me to secrecy.”

Cally frowned at her aunt. “What are you talking about, Auntie?”

Aunt Miriam swallowed and then cleared her throat. “You have it all wrong. ‘Matchmakers *rarely* find true love.’ Not ‘can never’ have true love. It’s true, honey—finding and keeping your own soul mate is extremely difficult for matchmakers, but not impossible.”

Cally’s heart beat wildly with her aunt’s words. Not impossible? Listening intently, she gripped the edge of the table while she watched Aunt Miriam rise to pace again.

“I think the reason it’s so rare is because we give so much of ourselves when we match others that the power to find our own love is greatly diminished. I even lost my ability to match when I first met Leo. Finding him virtually zapped me of all the power in my body leaving nothing left over for anyone else. So you see, a matchmaker finding her own soul mate is extremely rare, but definitely not impossible.”

Shock echoed through Cally’s body at her aunt’s words. Her aunt had lost her power, too. “Your power left you? But you got it back. When? Did the gift come back to you when Leo was gone? It came back when he died and left you, right?”

“No, dear. My gift came back to me when I finally accepted in my heart that Leo was my soul mate and we should be together. Thankfully, I did so before the accident. Oh, at first, I had trouble accepting the idea he was truly my soul mate, but once I did acknowledge the fact, the gift came back to me stronger than ever.”

Aunt Miriam paused, appearing to study her. “Cally, Susie told me you’d lost your gift. And now we know Sloan Janson is indeed your soul mate. Have you accepted his love and a life with him? Has your ability returned?”

Cally sat unmoving, unsettled by all she’d learned. She remembered the image of Sloan, lying asleep as she slipped out of the cabin. “No, Aunt Miriam. I know he loves me and I love him. But I also told him we can never be together and I left him. I didn’t think I had a choice.” She

tunneled a hand through her hair, trying to regain her composure as hope rushed through her.

Rising to take her aunt's hands in hers, Cally prayed for the right answer. "Auntie, do you think, is it really possible for Sloan and me to have a life together?" She bit her lip and held her breath while she desperately waited for the answer she needed.

Aunt Miriam's eyes sparkled as gaiety sprang into her face. "Honey, you must indeed be one of the few lucky ones. Go to him. You should find him and accept him for what he truly is. Your soul mate."

She grinned, excitement sprinting through her, driving her adrenaline into high speed. "Should I really go? I can't believe this is possible, Auntie. After all these years of believing I can't have what I've dreamed of, then to find out I can is incredible. I'm overwhelmed." She paused as an awful idea came to her. "But, Auntie, doesn't the fact Leo was killed, and you didn't spend your life with him, prove the fact matchmakers can't have lifelong relationships? Between you and my mother, love didn't win."

"Pish, posh, girl. I found my match and you've found yours. Don't you realize how many people in this world never know the happiness of finding the one, special person who's meant only for you?"

Aunt Miriam's sparkling eyes dulled a moment, and Cally knew she was remembering her Leo. "Just because you've found your match doesn't mean harm can't come to him or you. What happened to Leo was awful and I've never loved any man after him, but the wreck was an accident. A plain and simple accident and nothing more. He certainly didn't die *because* we were soul mates."

Aunt Miriam grabbed her and gave her an enormous hug. "Cally, girl, go to him. Don't waste another precious minute. Houdini and I will take care of each other until you get back."

Cally giggled when Aunt Miriam turned her around and pushed her toward the front door. "Now go. Take care and give Sloan a big kiss from his future auntie-in-law."

Chapter Twenty-One

Cally watched the rotund man sitting behind the desk. A middle-aged woman stood beside him listening intently to him. Standing by the doorway to his office, Cally couldn't help but overhear their conversation.

The man glanced up from the paper spread out on his desk and sent the woman a questioning look. "Dorris, did you find Sloan and tell him to come see me?"

Cally was about to knock on the doorframe when the mention of Sloan's name stopped her. Sloan was in the building somewhere.

Giving the man a come-to-me-baby look, Dorris positioned her body closer, brushing her breasts against his shoulder. "Yes, I found him. He was down in the lunchroom, just sitting there, staring at the television. I sure hope your talk gives him the boost he needs. He's acted like a zombie since he came back from that little town, Whatitsville."

Cally wondered how the man could have missed Dorris's overt manner. Her attraction to him was obvious. Instead, he grumbled out his words, hardly the tone of a man trying to keep a woman's attention, much less affection. "The town isn't what put him in the dumps. He's got a bad case of rejection. I wish I knew what to do to snap him out of his misery."

This time Cally didn't hesitate to knock. "Maybe I can help."

The man and Dorris turned to her with surprised expressions on their faces. Both studied her, although the man's expression harbored annoyance while curiosity formed on the woman's features.

"And who are you?"

"I'm the one who rejected Sloan." She tried not to grin while she said the words, but the anticipation pounding in her heart slipped into her smile. "My name is Cally Mathews."

Moving quickly for such a heavy person, the man rose from his chair and crossed to stand in front of her. "I'm Jim Daley and this—" he gestured toward the woman, "—is Dorris Connelly. Considering we're good friends of Sloan's, let me suggest you turn around and get the hell out of here." Jim spread his feet and crossed his arms in front of him as his glower grew darker.

Dorris, however, placed a hand on his shoulder and his body relaxed a little. "You seem awfully happy to have rejected Sloan. Could I ask why you're here? Surely not to rub salt in the wound?"

Deciding to ignore Jim's harsh words, Cally smiled at Dorris and prayed she'd found an ally. "No, of course not. In fact, I'm planning to do the opposite. Could you tell Sloan I'd like to talk to him?"

Jim started to speak, but Dorris jumped in first. She regarded Cally as women sometimes do, deciding whether to trust her or not. "Maybe we will. But first, why don't you tell us what you hope to accomplish?"

"I'd rather tell Sloan, but I promise you I won't cause him any pain. In fact, I think he'll be happy at what I have to tell him." Trying to put on her friendliest expression, she continued, "I didn't mean to pry earlier, but I overheard you say Sloan is in the lunchroom. Could you show me where that is?"

"Not on your life." Scowling at her, Jim's face was a picture of controlled outrage. "Again, I'm telling you to get the hell out of the building. Do I need to have Security escort you out?" Jim picked up the phone at a nearby table and held up the hand piece. "So, lady, what's it going to be?"

"I'll take you to him." Dorris started toward her, waving her hand toward the elevator.

"Dorris, have you lost your mind?"

“No, Jim, I haven’t. But I do think Ms. Mathews has a right to tell Sloan what she needs to say. Don’t bother with Security. I’ll take her to Sloan and he’ll decide whether she stays or goes.”

Cally couldn’t help but feel hope as Dorris linked her arm through hers. Within seconds, Dorris had changed from Sloan’s suspicious coworker to Cally’s ally.

Jim grumbled something under his breath. “Okay. But if you’re going, I’m going.”

With Dorris leading the way, they stepped into a crowded elevator. Dorris punched a button and pivoted to face Cally. “I hope you’re telling the truth.”

“I am.”

The car shuddered as the elevator came to rest on the top floor. The doors opened to reveal a large cafeteria-style room where people were lined up to order. Cally scanned the area for Sloan and tried to remember the speech she’d prepared, but couldn’t. Along an opposite wall sat six vending machines with drinks and snacks of various descriptions. Her pulse jumped in speed as she saw Sloan sitting next to the machines at a table for two.

But he wasn’t alone. Sitting across from him was a curvaceous blonde who arched forward over the table, displaying an ample amount of her plentiful bosom. Cally’s mouth went dry as she realized the blonde’s overt attempt to attract Sloan. Was he with this person? Was this woman someone Sloan was involved with? She bit her lower lip, trying to understand the scene before her.

Cally followed Dorris and Jim out of the elevator and walked toward Sloan. Why was the blonde smiling at him like he was as yummy as chocolate cake and more? Sloan sat with most of his back to Cally so she couldn’t see his entire face. But what she did see made her stop and her mouth fall open as a small gasp of horror slipped out. Sloan held out a small velvet case toward the blonde and flipped open the lid.

Cally stayed glued to the spot, leaving her several feet behind Dorris and Jim before they noticed she wasn’t with them. In a painful mental

fog, she saw Dorris look from her, to the scene between Sloan and the bombshell, and back again.

Recognition flashed between the two women before Dorris grabbed Jim's arm to shake him. "Oh, my God. Victoria. Surely he's not proposing to Victoria Ratlan?"

Almost in answer to Dorris's question, Victoria took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her left finger. A high-pitched ringing blared in Cally's ears and she fought to keep breathing. How could this happen? How could he have found someone else so quickly? No. He had to have been involved with this woman all along. Was Aunt Miriam wrong? Was Sloan not her soul mate? Had she misinterpreted all those feelings and sensations she'd shared with Sloan?

Her breath caught in her throat and the view around her started to spin, making her dizzy. In slow motion, the blonde pushed her body over the top of the table to get closer to Sloan and, wrapping her hand around the back of his neck, planted a long, sensuous kiss on his lips.

Unable to stand another moment of this torture, Cally whirled and dashed toward the elevator. Frantically, she punched the buttons, but the elevator failed to appear. She had to get out of this building. Spying an exit sign down the hallway, she turned and ran for it.

With her chest aching and her heart threatening to explode, she bounded down the stairs, jumping the last couple of steps at the end of each series of stairs. In what felt like an eternity, she found her way to the bottom of all twelve flights and burst out the exit door into the lobby.

Spinning around wildly, Cally turned toward the entrance. Her gaze fell on the familiar man coming through the revolving door. But she didn't take time to wonder who he was. Instead, she kept running as the tears streamed down her face.

"Cally, is that you?"

The familiar man grabbed her by the arms, her forward motion twirling her around to face him.

"Hey, what's wrong? Obviously something's very wrong. Hang on a sec and Lisa will be here."

“Lisa?” Cally’s voice cracked as the name registered in her mind. “Rob?” Peering at him, she pulled her mind away from her heartache and straight into confusion. But the ache came rushing back all too soon.

Rob added a tentative grin to his concerned face and nodded. “Good. You do remember me. Lisa stopped to window shop next door but she’ll be here any second. How about we wait for her? You look like you could use a friend right now.” Keeping his hold on one arm, Rob led her over to a sitting area with couches and tables for guests.

Once seated, fatigue overtook her body and she slumped against the couch. She bent over, holding her head in her hands, and tried to gather her thoughts. Sloan had proposed to another woman. He’d already forgotten about her. How could this have happened if they were soul mates?

“Oh, my gosh. Cally?”

Cally raised her head to see Lisa striding toward them. She tried to force a smile, but found her mouth couldn’t move. Instead, she ducked her head again, letting a small whimper escape. Although she wanted nothing more than to block out the entire world, she instead zoned in on her friend’s conversation.

“Rob, what’s going on? What happened to Cally? What’s she doing here?”

“Lisa, calm down and talk slower. Let me explain, okay? I ran into Cally when she came barreling into the lobby. She hasn’t told me what’s wrong, but maybe once she’s settled down a bit, she will.”

Cally felt Lisa sink onto the couch next to her and put her arm around her. “Take your time, Cally, and pull yourself together. We have plenty of time so don’t rush.”

Giving the only response she could, Cally nodded and kept her head bent. Try as she might, she couldn’t stop crying, causing the people milling through the lobby to stop and gawk at her as their murmured curiosity drifted to her. Yet, although her mind told her to quit making a scene, her body was unable or unwilling to comply. She dredged up what

little strength her body could muster, making her words came out in a halting whisper.

“He’s...my soul mate...and I pushed him...straight into the arms of another woman. Oh, damn, I sound like a drama queen.”

“What are you talking about? Who’s your soul mate?” Lisa glanced from Rob to Cally for an explanation.

Rob’s tone was low, but the words held an underlying frustration in them. “You’re talking about Sloan, aren’t you? He’s your soul mate?”

She glanced up and caught the incredulous expression on Lisa’s face. Seeing her friend’s disbelief brought on another bout of sobbing. Was she a fool to believe Sloan and she belonged together?

“Cally, you’ve got to get a grip on yourself. How do you know he’s the one? Did your gift return?” Lisa hugged her close.

Sniffling and wiping her eyes, Cally stopped crying long enough to answer. She clutched Lisa’s hand and tried to explain. “No. Or at least, I don’t know whether my power is back or not. Aunt Miriam read me this morning and told me who Sloan is.”

Seeking Lisa’s comfort, she struggled to continue. “But I think I knew from the first second I saw him. I just didn’t want to accept the truth. I couldn’t accept the truth. Why would I? Mamma always told me love, especially a soul mate’s love, could never last. I ran away from him and all my feelings because I thought our love would destroy us in the end. Don’t you see? I care for him too much to ever see him hurt.”

Lisa handed her a tissue to blow her nose and she glanced around, for the first time daring to look at the other people watching her. One petite brunette pushed her way through the crowd and headed straight for them.

“Susie!”

Cally hugged her friend as hard as she could without breaking any bones and her bear-hug was returned with equal fervor. Fearing she’d start blubbering again, Cally broke free from the strong arms holding her and searched Susie’s face. “I’m so glad to see you. But why are you here? How did you know?”

Susie hugged her again. "Your aunt called me after you'd driven off. If I hadn't taken the time to convince her to stay home by taking her jeep keys away from her," Susie giggled at her joke and continued, "I would've been right on your tail."

"But why didn't you bring her along?"

Susie gave a quick perusal around her before lowering her voice. "I couldn't, Cal. When I left, she was drunker than a skunk and twice as smelly. I left her singing and dancing all around the house, scaring Houdini half out of his wits. She called it a celebration of you finding your soul mate. So what's the deal, Cal? If you've found your man, why the hell are you sitting out here bawling in front of strangers instead of being in Sloan's arms?"

Flopping back on the couch, Cally stared at her hands resting in her lap, and steeled herself against the pain to come. "He's already found someone else. I saw him put a ring on her finger not fifteen minutes ago."

"Yes, you did. But if you'd had the decency to talk to me before you ran off you'd know Victoria and I aren't an item. She wanted to try on the ring and I let her. Nothing more. But then you do have a tendency to run off without getting everything figured out first."

Cally whipped up her head to find Sloan, Jim, Dorris, and the gorgeous blonde standing in front of her. An even larger crowd had gathered to witness the spectacle playing out before them. Sloan stood with his arms crossed on his chest and a stern expression on his face. "Dorris told me you came to find me. What do you want, Cally? Didn't you say everything you needed to say in your note?"

The new hope fluttering in her breast faded along with her fleeting smile. Gazing into his eyes, she lost some of the exuberance she'd first felt when she'd seen his stoic face. She couldn't tell if he was angry at the way she'd left the cabin or annoyed at her for causing such a commotion. Either way, his expression wasn't one of love.

"But I saw you put the ring on her finger. And then you kissed her."

For the briefest of moments, she saw a twinkle in his eye. But the scowl remained on his face.

“No, you didn’t. What you actually saw was her *taking* the ring from me and putting it on her finger. I did, after all, ask her opinion about the ring. And, for the record, *she* kissed *me*.”

Confusion grounded the anger welling up inside her. “But you didn’t push her away when she kissed you, did you?” Was it just her imagination or did his scowl lessen a little at her question?

“You’re right on that count. But then, why shouldn’t I enjoy a kiss? It’s not like I’m involved with anyone. You made yourself crystal clear about never seeing me again.”

She could feel the color rising in her cheeks. Worse, she couldn’t think of anything else to say. He was right. She’d given up any right to be jealous.

“To tell you the truth, Cally, my so-called kiss with Victoria had no zing, no appeal, no nothing whatsoever.” He shrugged at the blonde eyeing him. “Sorry, Victoria. No offense intended.” Turning back to Cally, he carried on. “You know what I mean. Like the intensity we shared. Victoria and I are not in any way involved.” His slight smile morphed into one of his brilliant grins.

She took a quick intake of air and held her breath. Did he mean what she thought he meant? Was he still hers?

His emerald eyes, the eyes she’d envisioned for so long, sparkled at her. “So, is there anything else you’d like to tell me before I break up this show and go back to work?”

She stared up at Sloan, amazed, delighted, and confused by his explanation. Could this be another chance? If so, she’d have to make the first move. “Sloan, things have changed since we were at the cabin. Aunt Miriam, who’s also a matchmaker, came to visit me.”

“Go on.”

Gaining confidence, she rose and stepped toward him, reaching out to touch him, needing to touch him. The sizzle of warmth rushed into her and, this time, she welcomed it into her heart. “My aunt told me the whole truth about love and matchmakers.”

His grin slipped and he stepped back from her, avoiding her touch. “And you’re going to tell me she confirmed everything you told me about matchmakers and love, right? Cally, I don’t want to rehash all the reasons why we can’t be together. You made your choice.”

She stood motionless, her breathing becoming shallow as her nerves tightened her body. Could she make him understand? But first, she needed to do something else. “I’ll explain in greater detail later on, but I’m begging you to trust me and believe in us again. Aunt Miriam matched us, Sloan. We *are* soul mates and we *can* be together. I’m one of the very few, very fortunate matchmakers who can find their own match and love them forever. And I did. I found you.”

Sloan’s eyebrows rose in a questioning manner, his eyes at once lighting up with a spark of brightness not yet reflected in his words. “Oh, so now we can be together? How come you couldn’t trust *me* enough to stay, but as soon as your aunt talks with you—bam!—you’re willing to give us a try? Even if she convinced you, how can I trust you won’t change your mind as soon as the first problem gets in the way? And what about your gift? Has your ability come back or is love still an obstacle?”

Cally shook her head. “Whoa. Slow down. Give me a chance to explain. I don’t know if my power is back, but I’d like to find out. Aunt Miriam said the gift should return once I accept your love for me in my heart and know we can be together. And I have. So I should be able to use my ability again. All I need is someone who wants to be matched and I’ll find out.” Pressing her palms together, she pivoted to the crowd around her and peered into faces, praying for someone to answer. “Is there anyone here who wants to know who their soul mate is?”

“I do.”

Cally wheeled around to find Dorris standing behind her.

“I’d like to get matched.” Dorris looked around the lobby as if she expected someone to ridicule her for wanting a reading. When no one did, she returned her gaze to Cally. “Can you match me? Now?”

A tiny smile played with the corners of Cally's mouth. "No time like the present. Would you need some privacy or would right here on this couch be okay?"

The crowd's excited mutters floated around her as she gave Dorris time to think. The spectators moved closer, wanting to get the best possible view.

"This is fine if that's okay with the boss." Dorris threw a questioning look at Jim.

Taken by surprise, Jim paused before giving his consent. "Uh, sure. Why not? We might as well play this game out to the finish."

A spark of joy, along with a bad case of the jitters, clutched Cally as she checked with Sloan. "You won't go anywhere while I'm concentrating, will you?"

"Don't worry about me. I wouldn't miss this for anything." Studying the people around him, Sloan added, "In fact, I don't think anyone's going to miss this."

Cally waited for Dorris to get settled on the sofa with her. Once Dorris was ready, Cally ran down her usual list of information and instructions dealing with the reading and included, for the audience's benefit, the necessity of absolute silence. Then she asked Dorris to make certain she was comfortable before they got started.

Cally adopted a reassuring expression, took a big breath, and asked, "Do you understand everything I've told you? Are you sure you want to do this? I wouldn't want to push you into a reading just because I need to test my power."

Clasping her hands in her lap, Dorris peered at the people around her before nodding. "No, I really want to. I wanted to do this right after Sloan's article came out, but I was afraid people would make fun of me. I'm not afraid any longer."

Reassured by Dorris's words, Cally placed her hand on the woman's arm. Within seconds, faster than ever before, the warm, tingling sensation flowed up Cally's arm. Closing her eyes, she let the words form

in her mind. The answer was what she'd expected and, unable to control herself, she laughed in delight.

Cally found Dorris staring at her with a perplexed, but expectant expression. Removing her hand from the older woman's arm, she told Dorris what she assumed she already knew. "Dorris, I'm fairly sure you didn't need a reading to know what I'm about to say. In fact, I'll bet I'm simply confirming your deepest desire. Your soul mate's name is Jim Haley."

She paused for a big reaction yet wasn't surprised when none came. Instead, Dorris's lips lifted at the sides with the hint of a shy smile. In direct contrast, however, noises of surprise, delight, and humor echoed around them.

"Well, the cat's out of the bag now, isn't it? I've loved Jim for months." Dorris nodded and rubbed her hands together before locking her fingers together. "But I don't think he knows I even exist. Except as an employee."

Cally took the other woman's hand in her own and swiveled to the flabbergasted man. "Well, Jim. What do you say?"

Stunned from the revelation, Jim managed to stutter out a few words. "Dorris, I n-n-never..."

At his hesitation, the expression on Dorris's face changed from hopeful anticipation to dejection and, at last, to one of determination. With her head held high, she rose from her seat and pulled herself to her full height. Striding over to where he stood, she took his face in her hands and pressed her lips to his. Wild applause broke out when Jim took her by the arms and pulled her against him.

Another louder cheer broke out from everyone, catching the attention of the two new lovers. Jim turned toward the crowd, scowled at everyone, and led Dorris inside one of the open elevators. She waved to the onlookers while the doors closed in front of them.

With her heart beating an erratic rhythm, Cally bit her lower lip and prepared to face Sloan. "I guess that answers the question of whether or not my power has returned."

Sloan, his green eyes shining, gazed at her. "I'm very happy for you, Cally."

She reached out both arms, hands open, palms up, waiting for him to touch her. "Be happy for both of us. I know now I've been living a lie, believing in ideas that weren't really true. Sloan, please. If you don't believe my words, believe my touch."

A myriad of emotions rippled over his face before raw need filled his features. "Why should I? How do I know you won't take off again?"

"Please look at me. And I mean *really* look at me." Cally stared into those green depths and prayed their mental connection would work. "*Please, please trust me, Sloan. Trust me this one last time.*"

Sloan's brow furrowed, but his eyes remained locked on hers.

"Do you remember what you told me at the cabin, Sloan? Right before I walked out into the rain?" She searched and received recognition in his face. "You said, 'All that's left is for you to believe in us.' Well, I do and I'm asking you to believe in us again. Please. Take my hands."

Slowly, deliberately, he placed his hands in hers.

The wonderful trembling sensation, stronger than ever before, darted up her arms and into her shoulders. She watched his face and knew he experienced the same sensations. She laughed, welcoming the vibration sprinting down her spine. Thinking as one person, they gazed at each other and smiled similar smiles. Knowing he needed her assurance, knowing she owed him, and knowing she wanted to give it to him, she spoke the vow to join them.

"Sloan Janson, I accept your love now and forever. I accept your love into my heart. Will you accept mine?"

For an instant, he stood silent, staring at her and, for one horrible moment, she feared he would refuse her. But all the doubt dropped from his face, replaced by the gorgeous, too-many-teeth smile she loved so well.

"Good thing I hadn't planned on giving up on us. I was headed back to Lawson tomorrow morning. Looks like you saved me a trip." Drawing her into his arms, he joked, "Besides, since I happen to have an

engagement ring on me, I guess I shouldn't let it go to waste. You bet I accept."

Applause and cheers broke out around the couple, but they ignored the sound. With all the love she possessed, Cally gazed into Sloan's eyes. Reaching deep within her soul, she sent him a silent message. *"I love you, Sloan Janson. Always and forever, no matter what."*

About the Author

To learn more about Beverly Rae, please visit www.beverlyrae.com.
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group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Beverly Rae.
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Look for these titles by Beverly Rae

Coming Soon:

Wailing for Love

Even with her shaky past, Aislinn can't help but to secretly want Kyle. When she witnesses his death in a vision, how can she tell him without giving away her secret or her lust?

Two Sighted

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Available now at Samhain Publishing

Aislinn Campbell is a clairvoyant, the latest in a long line of first-born daughters to the previous first-born daughter. All of them have fiery red hair and a second sight. Hiding from her ex in the presence of a sexy ex-military millionaire seems the safest way to start over. Until she “sees” his death.

Kyle Turner III has been keeping a close eye on Aislinn. There's nothing he doesn't know about his personal assistant, including her secret and ugly past. He also wants her in his bed more than his next breath. When he receives an anonymous warning that something might happen at his annual Fourth of July bash, he doesn't take it lightly. He knows exactly who sent the warning and he knows she's being watched by her bastard of an ex.

After he's injured in an accident, Kyle isn't about to leave Aislinn unprotected for a second. He coaxes her into more than just tending to his wounds. Because making Aislinn believe in him and her together far outweighs anything her ex can dish out.

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Two Sighted*:

“Aislinn? Hey, yoo-hoo.”

Aislinn whipped her gaze to Chris. The fireworks had ended several minutes ago and the party was starting to disperse.

“Damn, girl, why am I always saying that to you?” Chris laughed. “You're always off in your own little world.”

Fantastic. Caught staring into the flames of the huge bonfire Kyle had created as a centerpiece for the party. Aislinn released the death grip she had on the lawn chair's armrests and swallowed back the repeat vision she'd had of Kyle. It hadn't helped. Hadn't given her any more information. She still didn't

know whose kitchen he was in or when it would happen. Hell she couldn't even see the attacker's face. What kind of clairvoyant was she?

"I heard what happened last night, Ais. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine, now," she murmured. Well-rested too, since Kyle hadn't let her out of bed until about an hour before the guests started arriving. So far no one had questioned her being the first one present.

"Why should they?" Kyle had asked her. "You're my PA. In every way now," he'd said huskily, kissing her breath away. She'd wanted to drag him into the bed she'd spent all day in and devour him like he'd devoured her next to the tub.

"Sheesh. Scary shit. You should have called me," Chris said.

"Oh, well, I—"

"Oowee. Would you look who just showed up. I swear that man could melt butter on those abs. Damn. Any time he wants to come sans shirt to work, I certainly won't complain." Chris whistled softly.

Why the hell was he naked from the waist up? He sure hadn't been like that when the party had started a few of hours ago. A sudden burst of jealousy shot through Aislinn and she tamped it down. Chris wasn't interested in Kyle. In fact... Yep, there they were. TJ and Jonathan were both within hearing distance. And both were glaring at Chris like they wanted to haul her into the trees and make her forget all about Kyle.

Aislinn had no doubt Chris knew they were there too, which is why she was making such a big deal out of Kyle's appearance. Why the woman wouldn't just take what was being offered, Aislinn didn't know. Perhaps she had issues with men similar to Aislinn's.

She glanced up and saw the longing in Chris's eyes. The desire was there, but something most definitely held her back.

"He is sex on two feet, doncha think?" Chris blurted.

Aislinn nearly choked. Couldn't be more obvious, could she? "The man is your boss, Chris. You see him every day." *Plus, he's mine*, she wanted to snarl, but knew Chris's aim wasn't Kyle.

"Who cares? Oh, good, his groupies are here too," she said, acting as if she'd just noticed them.

Aislinn chuckled.

“So what are you doing for your birthday tomorrow? The big three-oh, huh?” Chris planted herself on the ground next to Aislinn’s chair and dug into the plate of food she’d carried over.

Aislinn’s stomach turned. Whether it was the sight of food making her queasy or the thought that Kyle’s demise still loomed in his future, she didn’t know.

Trying to play cool, she shrugged. “Nothing.” There wasn’t anyone around to celebrate with except Kyle, and a birthday party wasn’t what she had in mind with him. She groaned and crossed her legs as her pussy throbbed in remembrance of the orgasm he’d brought her to.

“I bet you had a blast as a kid with your birthday on the Fourth of July. You must have had some awesome parties. Lots of fireworks and food and all that shit,” Chris mumbled around a hot wing.

Aislinn lifted a shoulder again. “It’s my mom’s birthday too. We sort of shared our party.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. My grandmother’s too.” Aislinn stared through the bonfire at Kyle who’d taken a seat opposite her, next to one of his managers. No doubt so he could keep an eye on her like he’d warned. Somewhere in this crowd of people were other security officers waiting for something to happen.

David wouldn’t show his face here though, she knew. Despite his treatment and stalking of her, the man was a coward in front of others.

She watched Kyle speak over his shoulder to TJ and laugh at whatever his friend said back.

“No shit? How’d that happen?” Chris asked.

Aislinn scrambled to remember what they’d been talking about before her mind had wandered. Oh, yeah, birthdays. *Some kind of freaky quirk of the time-space continuum, probably*, she wanted to say.

“Don’t know.”

In reality, Aislinn and her female ancestors *were* some kind of freaks. In her family, if you were the first daughter of a first daughter, you were born on Independence Day. You were also blessed with unruly red hair, moss green eyes—and a gift, as her mother called it—to see the future. How the traits had been passed through the females no one knew, since science had already

proven it was the male who determined the sex of children. So far no males had ever been born into her family. Maybe Kyle could change...

No! Good Lord, what was she thinking?

She returned her gaze to him. He had one hand suspended in midair, supported by his elbow on the armrest. His thumb and forefinger idly rubbed together, an action she'd seen him do numerous times. Aislinn swallowed back a groan. Her nipples tightened beneath the T-shirt she'd found at the foot of his bed when she'd woken. Sweat trickled between her breasts and down the small of her back. Ack. She hated being hot and sticky. The man across from her might be able to break her of that particular discomfort in bed—she gasped at the direction of her thoughts and swiped at her hot cheeks with her hands. The back of her neck tingled and she realized she'd been staring at Kyle all this time.

He returned her heated look with one of his own, as if he knew what she was thinking about.

A log shifted, crackling in the fire and drawing her attention, breaking the connection between them.

How much trouble can one small female be to a modern-day shapeshifting Viking? Well...it really depends on local gun laws.

Go Fetch

© 2007 Shelly Laurenston

Available now at Samhain Publishing

Conall Viga-Feilan, direct descendent of Viking shifters, never thought he'd meet a female strong enough to be his mate. He especially didn't think a short, viper-tongued human would ever fit the bill. But Miki Kendrick isn't some average human. With an IQ off the charts and a special skill with weapons of all kinds, Miki brings the big blond pooch to his knees—and keeps him there.

Miki's way too smart to ever believe in love and she knows a guy like Conall could only want one thing from her. But with the Pack's enemies on her tail and a few days stuck alone with the one man who makes her absolutely wild, Miki is about to discover how persistent one Viking wolf can be.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Go Fetch*:

She felt a presence next to her and turned with a smile to see...Troy. And just like that, her smile faded. "Oh. Hey, Troy."

"Hey, Miki." He sat down next to her on the stoop. She scooted over because he sat a little too close. "Where's your pit bull?"

It took her a moment to realize he meant Conall. "Inside. He seems to get along well with the skateboarders."

"I'm glad you're back, Miki."

She frowned at him. "Really?" She never thought the man even noticed her.

"Yes. I'm really hoping you'll take the job Conridge offers you."

"She hasn't offered me anything yet."

"She will."

Miki shrugged. "Whatever."

She stared at her boots. She had nothing to say to this man. In fact, she wanted him to go away.

“You know, Miki,” his hand landed on her knee, “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

Miki turned to look at him and, suddenly, Troy’s lips were on hers. She could taste the liquid courage he’d been guzzling to make this move, but he took her by surprise and that was always a mistake with her. She shoved him so hard he flipped off the stoop and landed in a heap.

Miki leaned over. “You okay, Troy?”

He lifted his arm. “I’m fine.” But it was muffled since he went face first in the dirt. “I’m just going to lie here for awhile. Don’t mind me.”

Christ, how did she ever think this guy was cute or sexy? Just the touch of his lips against hers made her want to spit.

As she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, a bottle of water appeared in front of her.

This time she didn’t even have to look to know it was Conall. He’d been taking very good care of her all night. Making sure she ate, stayed away from any cleverly hidden drugs, and that she was always hydrated. She grabbed the bottle and made room on the stoop so he could sit down beside her. She realized she didn’t mind him sitting close. Of course, with Conall she really had no choice. He took up a lot of space on the stoop. At least his shoulders did.

“Feel better now?” she asked as she opened the bottle.

“Yeah. I’ve recovered from my random act of violence.” He looked at her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I almost killed a man, though.”

“What?”

She pointed and Conall leaned over her to see. As soon as his body touched hers, she had that same damn reaction. Hard nipples. Wet pussy. It was getting ridiculous.

“What happened?”

She had to force herself to focus. “He kissed me. But it took me by surprise.”

She felt the growl before she heard it. Miki dropped her water bottle, accidentally hitting Troy in the back of the head, and grabbed Conall’s shoulders before he could leap off the stoop and tear Troy apart.

“Don’t you dare! Sara will kill me if you go to prison.”

He let her pull him back. His arm brushed her breasts and the gasp was out of her mouth before she could even think about stopping it. His eyes locked with hers. She still had her hands on his shoulders. On a whim, she slid them up his neck, cupping his chin. He was so gorgeous. She felt the strength of him under her hands. The power of the wolf just inside his skin.

He was a piece of ass and he was interested in her.

Maybe she'd been looking at this the wrong way. Maybe she should go to what she knew. Science. How did attraction work? Why could one man force her to knock him on his ass, while another made her want to drop to her knees? Well, there was only one way to find out.

She took a deep breath and pulled him toward her.

Conall stared at her mouth and it didn't seem like he was breathing at all. "Miki..."

"Shhh. I'm testing a theory." And then her mouth was on his. And, yeah, this was definitely different from when Troy kissed her. She'd felt nothing but panic and the slightest trace of revulsion with Troy. But when her tongue connected with Conall's all she wanted was for him to crawl inside her. She leaned back against the stoop, Conall right there with her. Over her. His hands sliding around her back. His arms wrapping around her. She realized he was keeping her back off the hard stone stoop. And every time his tongue stroked hers, she felt it all the way to her clit. She wanted this man. In fact, she had to have him. Preferably now.

She pulled her mouth away from his. She needed to say something sexy and romantic with a mere hint of her vast intelligence. Something that would entice him into bed.

But what came out was, "I wanna fuck."

Conall groaned and buried his face in her neck. "You're killing me, Mik," he finally managed. "Don't do this if you're just messing with my head 'cause you're still pissed or..."

She rubbed her cheek against his silky hair and decided to just go for it. So what if he probably wouldn't want her after all this was over? At least she could say she had a good time. And she knew Conall would be a good time. A *really* good time. She was tired of being respectable and normal. It was boring, and she *did* need to get laid.

So what would Miki the Bartender do here? Easy. She'd be honest. "Do you know what one of the wolves protecting my house back in Texas told me?" she whispered in his ear and she felt his entire body vibrate against hers. "He told me I moaned your name in my sleep. And I realized my hand smelled like I'd been masturbating all night long. No one's ever done that to me before you. No one but you."

Conall slowly untangled himself from her. He didn't look at her. Instead, he pulled away and sat on one of the lower stoops. He dragged his big hands through his hair and she watched him stretch out his big shoulders. Miki sat up and reached her hand out to touch him.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

Miki frowned, a little bit hurt. "Why?"

"Because I'm doing my best to control myself. And if you touch me I'll fuck you right on this stoop, and I don't want to do that to you in front of your friends. So, don't touch me right now."

"I see." She scratched her neck. "But you know, we can go back to the hotel and then you can fuck me anywhere or any way you want."

Yeah. That was clear. The next move was his.

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