



A Chance Worth Taking

Copyright ? 2002 By Kimberly Roberts

ISBN 1-58495-647-X

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Albany, IN 47320

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DEDICATION

To my beloved husband Richard and precious children Richie and Kristen. I love you.

I also want to thank Shannon Honea and Karen Dorman for the support and encouragement they have given me during this year of research and writing.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my parents who have given me more love than a daughter could ever ask for. I love you.

Kimberly Roberts

Chapter One

"Oh, Marilyn, I'm so excited!" Catarina sighed and spun in a circle, her shoulder length, brown hair twirling around her. "I didn't think I'd ever get to visit London."

Marilyn laughed and tried to keep little David from running off with his sister's bottle. She patted him on his bottom and shooed him towards his father. "I know what you mean. The first time David and I went to visit his parents, I was on cloud nine. It's a fabulous city; historical sights at every turn, the most delicious foods and you can dance all night at many of the nightspots, similar to their pubs. You'll have a wonderful time. I wish we were going with you."

"Me, too. It would have been perfect if you and David could have come at the same time, then I wouldn't be going alone." She turned towards the rose garden and tried to look her most innocent. "Please, David. Couldn't you get away for just a few days?"

"Sorry, Cat, but we're in the middle of a corporate wide audit and I really can't get away."

Catarina smiled. "I know. You can't blame me for trying one last time."

David picked up his son and carried him towards the women. He put him down on the bench next to Marilyn and picked up Mary, their three-month-old angel. "Maybe next year, we can all go together. The trip will be on us."

Catarina blushed. "I didn't mean it like that."

David handed Mary into Catarina's arms. "Don't worry, we'll find some way for you to repay us." His brows moved up and down alluding to his daughter. "Marilyn and I always need a sitter." He laughed and dodged Catarina's quick kick.

"More like Marilyn and I will leave the kids with you and hit the pubs she was talking about." Her dark brown eyes gleaming, she laughed and handed Mary back to him.

She looked at her watch. "Well, I'd better get my bags downstairs. I have to leave within the hour." Her pulse started beating faster at the thought of boarding the plane headed for London.

Marilyn stood and they walked into the house laughing. "Don't worry I'll hold David to his promise. Next year, we're all going to London, if you can get a break from that pediatric office of yours again. I didn't think Dr. Lennox was going to let you go this time."

"Neither did I. It took a bit of persuasion, like me saying I had to get away, or I was going to start looking elsewhere. That shook him up a bit."

"I'm sure it did. That office runs like a well-oiled machine. He'll see."

"I know." Catarina skipped up the stairs and turned into the first room on the right. It was done in buttercup colors and looked out over the massive flower garden outside. Catarina loved the view. The curtains were blowing and she walked over and pushed them open. "Thank you for letting me stay this weekend, but I wish we had more time together."

"I do, too. We'll make a trip to Dallas, soon. David hasn't been to the Dallas store the last quarter and I know he's anxious to see how things are going. We'll wait until you're back and settled before we come down. Then, we can get together. Mom and dad would be thrilled to keep the children while we visit."

"That would be nice." She turned back towards Marilyn. Marilyn and David had a wonderful marriage. It was hard at first, him getting over the accident and having to learn to walk again, but now things seemed to be normal. They'd only been married two short years and already had two beautiful children, a boy and girl. Catarina envied Marilyn her happy, full life.

"I'm so glad things turned out for you and David. I wish I could have been here for you when you were going through all your trials with his accident."

"Nonsense, it turned out perfect. David and I are ecstatically happy." Marilyn smiled.

"I know and I hope nothing ever interferes with your happiness." She took a deep breath. "Enough of the serious stuff. I'm fixing to leave for London, my dream trip." She laughed and raised her arms up high.

Marilyn took one of Catarina's bags. "Come on, let's load up the car. You can't be late for your flight. You'd never forgive me."

David met them at the bottom of the stairs. "Marie's going to watch the munchkins for us while we take Cat to the airport."

"Wow, an outing without diapers. Let's run while we can." Marilyn laughed and bolted for the door. David and Catarina followed behind joining in her laughter.

Catarina gripped the arms of the seat as the plane lifted off from J.F.K. Airport. She had a window seat, not that it really mattered since she'd be sleeping through most of the flight, but still it was nice if she wanted to look outside. Her two companions sitting next to her were an older distinguished couple. They had British accents, so Catarina assumed they were from England.

The plane adjusted and soon the seatbelt light went off. The sound of everyone unclasping his or her belts joined with hers and she relaxed back in the seat. The flight would take ten hours and she had everything she needed. A couple of magazines, her Rocket eBook in case she wanted to read her newest novels, and a journal to write any exciting events she might hear or see. She was equipped.

Catarina finished the two magazines sooner than she expected. She looked at her watch. *Only an hour. Maybe I'm not as prepared as I thought.* She slipped the magazines back into her small bag and pulled out her Rocket eBook. She clicked bookshelf and the eight novels she'd downloaded appeared. She picked the first one in line and sighed.

She felt the lady next to her looking over her shoulder. Catarina looked up and smiled. "Hello."

"Hello. I hope you don't mind me looking at your computer there. What is it?"

Catarina gave a short laugh. "I don't mind. Everyone asks about it. It's called a Rocket eBook. It can hold up to ten novels at one time."

"Ten, well that's a lot. How do you get them in there? Do you buy it already with the novels?"

Catarina proceeded to tell her all about the device and how to work it. The lady was mystified by it and Catarina soon found herself sitting without it as the lady read one of her stories. She laughed, closed her eyes and tried to rest. The time difference would throw her off and she knew she ought to get as much rest as she could. She went over her itinerary and checklist in her mind. Everything seemed to be in order and slowly she drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Dreams of Covent Garden and Piccadilly Square floated through her mind with flowers and vendors on both sides of the streets. Suddenly, she was walking towards Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Laughter and cheers were coming from within. She hurriedly walked through the great wooden doors and stopped as she saw rows upon rows of cheering fans sitting on wooden benches as Bards gaily reenacted Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

An annoying chiming sound kept interfering in her dream and Catarina slowly awoke. It was bright in the airplane and Catarina could hear the other passengers moving about. She sat up and saw the seatbelt sign was illuminated. She looked at her fellow passenger and the lady was buckling hers. "Are we there?"

"Yes, we're about to land at Heathrow Airport. Thank you for letting me use your eBook. It was interesting. I slipped it into your handbag."

"Oh, you're welcome. Thank you." Catarina hooked her seatbelt and checked her handbag to make sure everything was in it. She took a deep breath to try and calm her racing heart. She was thrilled to finally be in London. She'd dreamed of this day all her life.

The plane taxied to a stop and the stewardess came over the loudspeaker telling of their arrival. Catarina knew she was grinning like a fool. Tourist was stamped all over

her face, but she didn't care. She readied her passport for entering London and stood as the stewardess approached their aisle.

She followed the other passengers off the plane and down a never-ending hallway. Her carryon was beginning to feel heavy and she stopped to readjust it on her shoulder. Queues assembled as Immigration loomed ahead and she rushed to get in line behind everyone else.

Her line seemed to progress smoothly. When her passport was finally stamped, she was directed to the baggage pickup area. After retrieving her bags, Catarina rented a luggage cart and proceeded to customs.

The line took considerably longer than Immigration. Leaning against her luggage, Catarina's head began to pound. She took an aspirin out of her purse and swallowed it, hoping she wouldn't choke without something to drink. Finally she moved up to the counter where a customs inspector actually looked in each of her bags. Catarina couldn't believe it. Did they think she was going to sneak a bomb in and blow up the country?

With luggage in tow, she hastily exited the building. The cool breeze whipped her hair around her and she took a deep cleansing breath. It made her head feel much better to get out of the stuffy airport.

Catarina pulled her cart over to the line of taxis. She waited to see if someone would come to her first and they did. A short balding man with a black uniform and hat came forward. "Looking for a cab, luv?"

"Yes, please. I'm going to Blakely Hotel."

"Right. I'll put your things in the boot." He collected her luggage and stowed it away in his trunk.

Catarina climbed in the back seat and smiled as he pulled away from the airport. She was surprised the back seat was so large. There was enough room for four people. People walked up and down the crowded streets stopping and talking along the way. The traffic was moving at a snail's pace and Cat sighed. She was anxious to arrive at her hotel, get things settled in her room, and start out for the day. She leaned towards the window and gawked.

"Is this your first visit to the big city? Taking a holiday?"

Catarina was pulled back to reality as the cabbie started questioning her. She had to get her mind in gear for the difference in languages. She'd noticed him saying *boot* instead of *trunk* earlier and now he was asking about a *holiday*, which she knew meant *vacation*. "Yes, I'm so excited. I've never been out of the States before."

"Well, I hope you have a fine time. I bet you have an entire list of sights you want to see."

"Yes, I'm trying to fit everything into one week. I don't know if I can do it, but I'm going to try."

The taxi driver laughed. "I've heard it done before. I guess if you've got a schedule already mapped out, you can do it. You'll be beat by the time you leave, but you'll have a lot of memories."

Catarina smiled. "That's what I've got planned. Lots of memories."

"We've got more museums in this town than any city in the world I think. You can't walk up a street without running into one. Then you've got a castle on each side of town you can visit, too. You can even watch the changing of the Palace Guards if you like. We locals, try to stay away from the palace at that time, the traffic is horrendous, but you tourists love it. You can go to the Tower of London, Big Ben and one cathedral after another. You're going to be busy." He laughed. "Don't forget to try pig's ear and there's even a tour of Jack the Ripper's hideouts."

"Catarina quickly looked back at him. "Pig's ear?"

He laughed. "My cockney accent, pint of beer, luv."

"Oh." She joined in his laughter. "Yes, I want to see Jack the Ripper's hideouts. That'll be fun. There's so many to choose from, that I'm just going to head out each morning and see what I can make it to. Do you suggest a particular way to transport?"

"Well, me old trouble and strife likes to take the tube, it's the easiest. You can get around a lot faster that way, but if you like to walk, you'll find places you didn't even know existed. London has more attractions than they can advertise. Walking seems to be safer. Just make sure and

carry a bum bag, not one of those handbags a mugger can grab easily. If you do run into some kind of trouble, there's a copper on just about every street corner."

She was starting to understand his accent now and knew trouble and strife was wife, but was stumped. "I'm sorry, what's a bum bag?" She didn't remember the word.

"Let's see, what do you Americans call it? You know, one of those bags you strap around your waist and carry your wallet."

"Oh, yes, a fanny pack." Catarina laughed. "I've got one and I'll make sure I use it. Thank you."

Catarina zipped up her light jacket. She didn't think she would need anything heavier but was afraid she may have been wrong. "It's a bit chilly for this time of year isn't it? I thought May was one of your warmer months."

"It is, but the weather changes at the drop of a hat. It will warm up later in the afternoon. It being May, you actually have a few extra special shows you can see. We have the Royal Windsor Horse Show, Flower Show and the Festival Opera. You can even experience Shakespeare under the Stars. A lot of people are disappointed when they come out in the fall and winter and realize they aren't going to see Shakespeare under the Stars. It's only opened a few months out of the year. It gets too chilly for acting out in the open weather."

"Well, it looks like I picked the perfect time, haven't I?" Catarina saw the sign of the Blakely Hotel. It was a gorgeous, small, Edwardian-style hotel. Downtown, but still quiet since it was situated in a cul-de-sac. Lantern lights adorned the front to illuminate at night and there were men dressed as palace guards standing to the side at attention. The taxi pulled up front and a valet opened the door.

"Good morning, Miss." He assisted Catarina out of the taxi.

"Thank you." Catarina smiled at the young man. She watched as he collected her luggage from the boot, and then gave the taxi driver his fee and a nice tip. "Thank you so much for the suggestions."

He tipped his hat. "Have a wonderful time in London. Good day."

Catarina followed the valet into the hotel. He took her luggage to the front desk. A clerk looked up and smiled. "Hello, I'm Catarina Garcia."

"Yes, I see you'll be staying with us for seven days."

"Yes." Catarina gave him her credit card and signed the register.

The clerk snapped his fingers and another young man approached and took a key from him. "You'll be staying in room 202. It overlooks the St. James's Park, a lovely view. Room service is available at any time, so don't hesitate to ring if you need anything. Enjoy your stay at the Blakely."

Catarina smiled and followed the young man to the elevator. A sign to the side of the controls read *Lift*. Large lush sofas were placed throughout the lobby and paintings lined the walls in muted colors. Most of the paintings were of different men in formal and riding attire. Catarina was curious who the painting's subjects were, but didn't have time to investigate.

The elevator doors closed and it rose gently to the second floor. As the doors opened, Catarina gasped. The gleaming collection of armor before her was stunning. Silver and gold shined to perfection. "They're amazing."

"Yes, ma'am, they are. You wouldn't guess they were two hundred years old would you?"

"Are you serious? They don't look it." They were in such immaculate condition she could hardly believe it. "You'll find many more pieces throughout the hotel. The paintings downstairs are of various dukes throughout history. You'll see the same just about anywhere you go in London. Is this your first time here?"

"Yes, I'm so excited." Catarina's stomach was filled with butterflies as they approached her room.

"Here's your room. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ring the lobby." He walked in and set her luggage at the end of her bed.

Catarina retrieved a tip from her handbag and gave it to him. "Thank you so much." He nodded and backed out of the room. Catarina looked around in amazement. The bed was a four-poster upon a dais with lace draping from atop a canopy. She walked through a door that led to the

bathroom, or the loo as it was called. Marble-top counters and a large sunken tub would, no doubt, lure her weary bones after a long afternoon of sightseeing.

She walked back into the main room and approached the large window on the far side. Catarina pulled back the curtain and stared at the view of the Park. Couples walked hand in hand and children ran in between the profusion of flowers and trees. Catarina laughed at the sight of a mother chasing her child and stepping into a puddle. Memories of Marilyn with little Davie popped in her mind. She bet that was what Marilyn was doing at that very second and loving every minute of it.

Catarina let the drape close and stepped to the bed. Reclining, she sighed as her body was all but swallowed by the down mattress. "This is the life." The linens were cool to her skin and beckoned her to stay for eternity. The light illuminating from the clock at the bedside table reminded her that she was letting the day slip away. Catarina sat up and stretched. "No time for rest. London is calling. Eternity will have to wait."

She jumped from the dais, grabbed her handbag and then remembered what the cab driver had said about the bum bag. She unzipped her largest suitcase and pulled out the fanny pack, snapping it around her waist and putting her wallet inside. She would put her luggage away later. Now, all she could think of were the sights and thrill of the city. So many things to do and see and only a week in which to do it. She placed her room key in the outside pocket of the bum bag and closed the door behind her. The excitement was too much to conceal. She felt she was walking on air as she approached the elevator, eager to begin her journey of history and awakening.

Chapter Two

David picked up the phone and dialed Jax' number in London. After a long pause going through the international operator, the phone began to ring. His answering machine picked up and David growled, "Jax, I need you to return my call as soon as you get this message. If Marilyn answers, don't tell her you're returning my call. I'll tell you all about it when I speak to you."

David hung up the phone and turned, flinching when he saw Marilyn standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. "Um, I guess you heard me?"

Marilyn nodded. "Smart man, no wonder I married you. Now, are you going to tell me what that was about? I hope it's not what I think."

David took her hand and led her to the bed. "Jax isn't as bad as you think."

"Right. That's why you told him to stay away from me when you were in the hospital."

David laughed. "I just didn't want him getting any ideas about you, okay. You were mine and I'm not one to share."

"David, I don't want him messing around with Catarina."

"Darling, Jax isn't short for Jack the Ripper. He's my best friend and Cat can take care of herself. All I'm going to do is ask him to ring her and maybe take her around to some of the sights. I know London is pretty safe, but I'd feel better knowing she's not wandering the streets alone."

"I guess you're right, but make sure Jax knows she's not his usual easy-going woman. She actually has morals she abides by and I don't want to find out he's ruined her."

The phone rang and David jumped from the bed. "Hello."

"Hi, David, it's Jax. What's up?"

David looked over at Marilyn and smiled. "Good day, Jax. What do you have planned today and this evening?"

Jax laughed. "Well, since you're in the States, there's no way you could be setting me up. Let's see, I'm taking it easy this afternoon, being Saturday, and then tonight I'm meeting some friends at a pub, why?"

David sat next to Marilyn and took her hand. "Well, one of Marilyn's friends arrived there in London this morning alone. She's taking a week on holiday and I wanted to know if you'd mind showing her around town."

"I don't mean to sound priggish, but tell me a little about this girl. Is she anything like that beauty of yours?"

David smiled impishly at Marilyn. "Oh, you could say that. They're about the same height, have a body that craves a man's touch ...oomph." David grabbed his stomach where Marilyn had just punched him. "Alright, back off Mari."

Jax was laughing into the phone. "You better watch it David. That wife of yours holds a mean punch."

David rubbed his stomach. "You don't have to remind me. Seriously, Cat is a nice package, but she's as pure as snow, if you get my meaning."

"Pure as snow. Are you telling me she's a kid?"

"No, she's the same age as Mari, but she's not your usual kind of woman. I know she wants to experience the pubs and night life in London, but I don't think she's ever stepped foot in one here in the States."

"Are you serious? And you want me to take her around, the man who taught you the ropes. A wolf in sheep's clothing, as Marilyn likes to refer to me."

"Jax, I trust you. I know you wouldn't take advantage of her and I'm afraid that's what will happen to her if she's out at night by herself. She has this picturesque image of London and no matter what I said, she wouldn't change her mind."

Marilyn jerked the phone away from David. "Jax, I'm trusting you to take care of Catarina, not seduce the girl. Got it?"

"Marilyn, you can trust me. I'll take her out and show her the city she's looking for. Now, where is she staying?"

"She's staying at the Blakely Hotel on St. James River. She should have arrived a few hours ago and knowing her she's already on the streets."

"I know where it is. That's a nice place, she comes from money?"

"Her family aren't paupers if that's what you're asking. Otherwise, she's a nurse and makes it on her own. She's saved her own money for this trip and is thrilled. I'm afraid she's going to try to fit in every tourist attraction she can in this one week."

Jax groaned. "The things I do for you and David. Sure, I'll give her a ring and don't worry I won't deflower her."

"Thanks and I'm not worried. You're a great guy and I don't know how I would have made it a couple of years ago without your support."

"Don't bring that up again, okay? You're family."

"Alright, so when we hang up, call her room and leave a message if she's not there. David was right, I'd rather her not be out at night by herself."

"Will do. Tell David to keep in touch and I'll talk to you later."

"Bye." Marilyn pushed the button to disconnect and set the phone on the bed. She stretched out next to David. "He said he'd call her and leave a message at the hotel."

Rolling on top of her, David brushed the hair from her forehead. "Don't worry about Cat, she can take care of herself. I have a feeling Jax will be eating out of the palm of her hand." He laughed and nipped the underside of her chin. "The same as you had me doing when you first arrived in Sherry."

"Right." Marilyn laughed. "You just better pray that Jax is on his best behavior or you're both going to be fulltime tourist guides when we all go next year. I'm not letting you forget about your promise to Catarina."

"I never make a promise I can't keep." David kissed her gently on the lips. He would make every wish of hers come true, even if it meant spending a week taking her and Cat from London to the castles of Scotland. "Come on, let's

enjoy this short time of peace while the munchkins are asleep."

Catarina walked in the front doors of the hotel and pulled her jacket off. It had warmed up like the taxi driver had predicted. Someone at the front desk waived her over. "Good afternoon, Ms. Garcia. How was your walk?"

"Wonderful. I took the tube, which was amazing in itself, to The House of Parliament and then to Big Ben. I don't see how in the world I can get everything done that I have planned in only a week. I'm going to have to reschedule several tours." She laughed. "You know what? I think I liked riding on the tube, more than seeing The House of Parliament."

"I think a lot of people would agree with you." The young man pulled a slip of paper from a board behind the counter. "You have a message."

"Thank you." Catarina took it and walked to the lift. As the doors shut, Catarina looked down at the message. At first she thought he'd given her the wrong message, but it was addressed to her. Once in her room, she sat on the edge of the bed and read the message carefully.

She laughed out loud. David and Marilyn had a man call her. Would they never stop? He left his number so Catarina picked up the phone and asked the operator for an open line. She dialed the number and waited as it rang four times. Just as she was about to hang up, a voice hastily answered the phone. "Hello?"

She cleared her voice. "Hello, this is Catarina Garcia. Is this Jax?"

"Yes, I'm glad you rang. Marilyn called and told me you were on holiday. How do you like our city so far?"

"Oh, it's beautiful. I didn't expect to see so many gardens and flowers about."

Jax laughed. "I think the rain has a little to do with that. You want to make sure you take a small umbrella with you everywhere you go."

Catarina spotted hers lying next to the door. "Oh, I figured that one out right away. I forgot mine and had to buy one from a vendor." She joined in his laughter.

"Since you're here on your own, I thought I'd invite you out for a bit. I could show you around. It would be a little simpler than taking a cab or riding the tube."

"Actually the best time I had today was riding the tube. It was great."

"Well, it's not the safest. I think that's one of the reasons David and Marilyn called me. I could tell you about some of the places to stay away from and maybe we can make it around to a few of the spots you have penciled in to visit."

"I don't want to inconvenience you. I'm sure you had other plans this weekend, without having to become a tour guide."

"Nonsense, its no problem at all. Do you want to rest a bit before I pick you up?"

Catarina looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was plastered down from the rain and she needed to freshen up after all her walking. "I don't really need to rest, but I do need to clean up a bit. What time would you like to start?"

"I'll give you two hours and I'll meet you in the lobby of the hotel. How does that sound?"

"Fine. I'll see you then and thank you." Catarina hung up the phone and sat looking at herself in the mirror. She definitely needed a shower, but first she was going to call Marilyn and see what type of man was picking her up.

She dialed the international number and waited as the phone rang. Marilyn was the one to pick up. "Hello."

"Marilyn, hi."

"Catarina, how's the day going? Have you already been out and about?"

Catarina laughed. "You know me. I've already been to see Big Ben."

"I think that was also one of my first stops the first time David and I went to London. I didn't know it was just the clock."

"Same here. I was a little surprised, too. I was calling you because your friend Jax called. Tell me a little about him."

"He's one of David's best friends. They're more like family, Jax grew up with David and they were inseparable when they were young. He works for Midwest Viking, too. He helps run the London store and the one in Paris."

"Soooo, he's young? Does he look anything like David?"

Marilyn laughed. "Quite the opposite. Everywhere David's blonde, Jax is dark. I guess you could say he's the typical tall, dark, and handsome type. Still, you want to be on your guard. He and David were quite the lady killers during their time, and I have a feeling Jax still is."

"I knew you would be honest with me. Well, he's picking me up in a couple of hours so I guess I better get ready. Should I wear anything particular? Will he show up casual?"

"I have a feeling Jax' casual isn't quite ours. I'd wear something comfortable but not too casual, no T-shirt and jeans."

"Got it. Well, I better hang up. This call is costing me a fortune. Thanks for setting me up with a personal tour guide."

"No problem, just remember to be safe in everything you do. Don't look like your typical tourist, okay?"

"Okay, mom." Catarina laughed and hung up. Her luggage was still sitting at the foot of the bed. She pulled the cases up on top and started to unpack. "First thing's first. I've got to get this stuff put away before I can get ready." She hung her dress in the closet and put her other clothes in the drawers provided.

Catarina turned on the tap to get the shower warm and sighed as she looked at herself in the mirror. "A rich good looking man is taking me out on the town. Now, what should I wear?" She remembered the silk blouse she had tucked away for one of the nights at a pub and decided on that. She wanted to look her best. Maybe he would take her to a pub and she wouldn't have to go to one her first night

alone. She stepped into the warm fragrant shower to prepare for the evening ahead.

Jax pulled his Azure to a stop in front of the hotel. A valet offered to take the keys and Jax assured him they'd be directly out. He walked inside and looked around, the lobby was exactly what he'd pictured. The basic tourist hotel, oil paintings of anonymous dukes, tea and brandy set-up on a side counter, and flowers adorning all tables. He walked to the front desk. "I'm waiting for Ms. Catarina Garcia."

"I'll ring her room for you, sir. If you'd like to have a seat in the lobby."

Jax walked to the counter and poured himself a brandy. It could be a bit before she came down so he'd relax in the meantime. He made himself comfortable and waited patiently. He saw a young woman coming out of the lounge and watched as she seductively glided across the lobby to a chair. Jax tried to straighten in his seat. She was very becoming.

She sat and crossed her legs. Even though she was wearing pants, the way they fit snugly across her legs was enough to make him want to invite her to dinner instead of the prim Ms. Garcia. She wore a pink silk blouse that draped across her breast and hinted at a view that was actually hidden from all. Seductress in the making, Jax was sure. Her dark hair was pinned up on the sides, but a few tendrils fell lazily across her cheeks. Jax had an urge to walk over and introduce himself.

As he stood, he heard someone call Ms. Garcia's name. He looked over and to his astonishment; the clerk was addressing the woman sitting in the lobby. Jax cleared his throat and thought there was no way he could be so lucky. He adjusted his tie and smiled. "Excuse me, are you Catarina?"

She stood. "Yes, you must be Jax."

"The one and only. Funny, we were sitting across from each other and had no idea. They said they were going

to ring your room. When I saw you come out of the lounge, I assumed you were someone else." He was glad she wasn't.

"I was ready early, so I decided to sit in there and listen to the music." Catarina smiled.

Jax cleared his throat once again. Marilyn had to be wrong about her friend. With a body like that, and that smile, there was no way she was an innocent. He vowed to find out and hoped he was right. He didn't make it a habit to mess with innocent women; they were always looking for a relationship, one thing he had neither the desire nor the time for, especially with a woman from the states. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Catarina slipped her small black handbag over her shoulder and walked towards the hotel entrance.

Jax walked beside her and placed his hand gently on her back. Her body was small and he liked the way his hand spanned her waist. He opened the front door for her, leading her to his car. His Bentley Azure never failed to impress women. Apparently women from the states were no different. Her eyes were wide and smiling.

"You're going to drive. I don't know why I assumed we'd be taking a cab. The streets are so full of them, I assumed everyone used cabs."

Jax laughed as he opened her door. "Leaving my life in the hands of the cab drivers has never appealed to me."

"I hope you don't mind if I close my eyes from time to time. Driving on the left side of the road still has me a bit shaky."

"Don't worry, close your eyes and leave everything in my capable hands. I used to be the same way when I'd visit the states. I'd stay for months at a time, and therefore had to learn to drive on your motorways. I know where you're coming from." He laughed and pulled the car out of park.

The motorway was ahead and he glanced over at her. The top was down on the car and wisps of hair were blowing behind her lovely face. He wanted to place his hand along her cheek but kept one firmly on the steering wheel and the other on the gearshift. "If you're going to close your eyes, now would be the time." He accelerated and quickly pulled

onto the motorway moving in between two other cars. He looked over and laughed as she'd done exactly as he said.

Jax sleekly moved into fourth gear, then took his hand and covered hers tightly as she was gripping the edge of the seat. "You can open your eyes now, you're safe." Those dark brown pools opened and she turned her face toward his and smiled. Jax took a deep breath and wondered why his heart was suddenly pounding like a marathon runner. He noticed he still had his hand atop hers and removed it. He placed his hand back on the gearshift to try to hold onto the warmth from her skin once again but it was gone.

He returned her smile. "I know you have an itinerary, but what say we see Stonehenge first? It's outside of town."

"Sounds fine to me. The more we do outside town, the less I'll have to take the cab to see."

"Right." Jax faced forward as they traveled quickly through the city. He didn't like the idea of her riding in a cab out of town and understood why David and Marilyn had called him. She was definitely an innocent if she didn't think harm could come to her taking cab out of town alone. He would have to convince her to join a tour group.

Chapter Three

Catarina was awed by the landscape before her. The grounds were covered in rich green grasses, and small streams flowed under several passes. Trees were full with shades of green and a proliferation of flowers dotted the landscape as far as she could see. It was simply breathtaking, so different from the ancient downtown of London with its rock castles and winding roads. She breathed in the delightfully fragrant smells of nature and sighed. Nothing could compare in Dallas. This was God's country.

She scanned the interior of the car, richly covered in light tan leather. The center console of cherry wood shined to perfection. Catarina wondered how much a car like this would cost. Considerably beyond her salary, she knew.

The man sitting next to her was a mystery. Surely anyone who drove something like this would be cool and aloof, but Jax didn't give that impression. He'd been kind and open when he'd introduced himself. He didn't have to offer to take her out of town to Stonehenge; he could have just taken her around downtown. Instead here they were, alone in each other's company.

She peered at him through the corner of her eye. He had a kind face. Sure he was gorgeous like Marilyn said, but he didn't use it to his advantage, at least not with her. Wait! Maybe there was something wrong with her. Did he not like her? Did he think she was a snobbish American? Surely not. Marilyn said he and David were the closest of friends. She knew she wasn't bad looking, it must be something else. Maybe he had a girlfriend. He didn't add up to Marilyn's warnings.

Catarina pushed Marilyn's warning to the back of her mind. She could make her own assumptions, and right now Jax was a perfect gentleman. She closed her hand and remembered when he'd rested his on top of hers those few

short seconds. Had he felt the same electrifying current that she'd felt? Those seconds seemed to last for eternity, until he removed his hand and acted as if nothing had happened. Maybe the whole romance of London was causing her to lose reality. She needed to get control of her emotions. Jax was only trying to be friendly.

She saw a sign, Amesbury and the direction of the route to Stonehenge. She picked up her camera from the floorboard and opened the shutter. In the distance as they circled down a hill, she saw the ancient ruins nearing. Jax parked the car, and Catarina quickly took three pictures.

"Anxious?" Jax jumped out of the driver's side and came around to open her door. "Let's go in and pay. There's a fee to see the ruins now."

Catarina walked beside him. She felt her hair falling out of the clip and pulled it back, trying to secure it, but had too many things in her hands. "Jax, do you mind?" She held the camera out to him.

"No, let me hold it for you." He took the camera and stopped as she tried to clasp her hair.

The wind pulled at the strands and she tried to hold tighter. She laughed. "Really, I'll get it."

"Don't worry on my account. It looks beautiful down." Jax smiled as she continued fighting the stubborn curls.

Catarina's heart began doing little cartwheels at the compliment. "Thank you, but if I don't pull it up now, with all this wind, I'll have hair the size of a melon soon." She tried one last time to pull it back and thankfully was able to clip it in place. "There, all done."

Jax smiled down at her. "Come on, let's go in." He opened the door, letting her enter first. She walked up to the counter and stood in line behind other tourists. "Turn around," Jax said, "and I'll take your photo under the picture of the ruins."

"Here let me show you the zoom." She leaned close to his face and pointed to the buttons to zoom in and out and couldn't help but smell his sandalwood-scented after-shave. She closed her eyes, memorizing the smell. It was wonderfully male and Jax. She slowly opened her eyes and

saw Jax looking at her. Embarrassed, she stepped back and smiled.

Jax raised the camera and when he had her centered took the shot. "See, another reason to have a tour guide, they can be pretty handy at times. Imagine you trying to take your own picture."

Catarina couldn't tell if he was flirting with her or just being his comical self. She preferred to think the later, not wanting to get involved in a relationship that wouldn't last beyond a week. "Oh, I don't know. I bet I could somehow manage to take my own picture."

They were next and Catarina stepped up to the teller. "Two to see Stonehenge."

The teller asked, "Are you wanting to go with the tour group or yourselves?"

Catarina looked at Jax, arching her brow inquisitively. "What do you think? Are you educated enough to answer my many questions?"

Jax laughed. "Oh, I'm educated enough to answer any question that may pop into that beautiful head of yours."

Catarina knew there was an underlying statement but chose to ignore it. "Right." She turned back to the teller. "Just two tickets." As she handed him the money, Jax suddenly dropped the money into the teller's hand. She tried to take it out of the clerk's hands but he closed them. "No, Jax, I'll pay. You're the one taking me around."

"It's my pleasure and I'm not about to let you pay. It's on me." He gave her one of his seductive smiles and Catarina felt her toes curl. Man, he was marvelous. "Well, if you're paying for this one then I'm paying for lunch."

Jax only smiled and took the tickets from the teller. Catarina had a feeling this was his way of saying, "No way, lady." She followed him to the door as he opened it and they walked outside together. They walked around the store and followed a pathway underground to the other side of the street. As they approached the ruins, Catarina slowed her pace. It was amazing. The stones were much larger than she'd expected.

Jax took her arm and helped her over a ditch encircling the ruins. "It's assumed these were modeled in

3000 B.C. There's nothing dating back that far, but that's the estimation."

"You mean all these stones are 5000 years old?" She couldn't believe they were that old and still standing.

"Actually, only those stones in the far distance are the original ones. These were modeled in phase two and three. Still, they're thousands of years old."

"What was the purpose of these stones? Are they the remains of a city?" She walked under a combination of three.

"No one really knows. It's assumed Druids used them for ceremonial purposes." He shrugged his shoulders. "Still, it's anyone's guess."

"Wow! This is amazing. Your country has so much history. The U.S. has only been around a couple hundred years. We don't have anything like this." She turned in a circle and opened her arms. "Ceremonial services, huh." She batted her lashes at him. "Like virgin sacrifices?"

Jax choked. "I really couldn't say."

She gave him a sly smile. "I thought you said you could answer any of my questions. I guess you're not as brilliant as you think."

Jax cleared his throat. "And you're a smarty-pants." He scratched his chin. "Let's see, I do know they have revived Druid ceremonies during the summer. I wouldn't suggest attending unless you're into that weird stuff, but I guess enough people believe in it. It's also believed that Winston Churchill was a member. I like to believe it was first built to study the sun and moon and count the days of the year and so forth." He shrugged. "Like I said, anyone's guess."

"I agree. Any information dating back to 3000 B.C. must have gone through changes over the years. It's still amazing. Look how large these pieces are and they didn't have cranes to move them. If you asked someone to move them by hand today, he'd laugh and quit."

Jax pointed to the top of the ruins. "You know, I saw a picture in the papers one day where there were twenty four men sitting up here. That was before they placed it under government control in 1984. Now it's Parliament's

responsibility to look after the ancient site and they don't allow people to climb on them."

"You mean people could climb on them at will? I'm glad they finally got that taken care of. It would be horrible to see it desecrated after all these years."

Catarina walked out of the ruin and started taking pictures. "Jax, stand closer to the stones. I want to get a picture of you." She watched as he casually leaned against the stone, one foot crossed before the other. He had that sexy half smile across his face, like he knew something she didn't. Which she knew he did. "Alright, show off. I think I got it."

Jax walked up close to her. Would you like to have lunch? I know of a small place on the way back to London."

The thought of getting back in the car and leaving with Jax was maddening. She wanted to be alone with him, but knew it was dangerous. She'd never felt quite so comfortable with a man, and Marilyn's warnings kept humming in the back of her head. This was definitely a man who could hurt her. She could fall for him. However, there was no way around it. She had to leave with him and they'd be alone anyway, so why not? Her heart was beating an age-old tune. "Sure, but only if I can pay."

Jax laughed and took her arm. "This is my treat. Let me enjoy it."

"But, Jax." He silenced her with his finger on her lips. His finger was soft and it gently rubbed over her mouth. She couldn't speak. The intimate touch was not what she expected. It sent warning bells ringing through her mind, but she tried to ignore them. This was dangerous.

"I said it's my treat. Okay?"

All she could do was nod. Jax smiled and dropped his hand. He once again took her arm and escorted her back to his car. Once he opened her door, Catarina entered and watched as he rounded the front and got in, expertly pulled his car out of the lot and returned to the motorway.

They drove in silence as they passed lush green rolling hills and small towns. Soon, Windsor loomed ahead. Catarina broke the silence. "Is that where Windsor Castle's located?"

Jax looked at her as if he'd forgotten she was there. "Yes, would you like to stop?"

She knew he was taking her somewhere to eat and didn't want to make him go out of his way. "Well, if where we're going to eat is on the way, we could just drive by. Otherwise, I can wait."

Jax smiled. "Yes, actually it is on the way. We'll drive by and if you want to come back and see it after we eat, we can."

"Okay, thank you." She relaxed and left the driving to Jax. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the fresh air as it blew around them in the convertible. Catarina pictured herself walking arm-in-arm with Jax into a quaint little inn for lunch. Only a few people sitting and enjoying a late afternoon meal, quiet and romantic. She gave a short silent laugh. Right! Like Jax would be interested in her, an average girl from Dallas, Texas.

Catarina felt someone brushing the hair away from the side of her cheek and turned her face into their hand. It felt like the natural thing to do. The hand cupped her cheek and brushed a hair from her eyelashes. Catarina slowly opened her eyes and thought she was still dreaming. Jax' face was close to her own, his eyes looking into hers with a boyish smile spread across his face. Her heart pounded so loudly in her chest she was afraid he could hear it.

Catarina closed her eyes once again and then opened them. Yep, he was still there, it was no dream, and it was for real. She whispered, "I guess I fell asleep. I'm sorry."

Jax didn't remove his hand. "No problem, your body probably needed the rest after the time change. We're here. Are you ready to eat?"

Catarina hated to end the moment but she knew she'd have to be the one to do so. She turned her face from his palm and sat up. Her heart began to beat even faster at the loss of contact.

The restaurant looked almost the same as her dream. Small quaint cottage beside a river. It was beautiful. She looked back at Jax. "How do you know about this place? It's beautiful."

Jax smiled. "I'm glad you like it. David's parents used to bring us here on weekends when we were growing up. They know us here, we're like family." He got out of the car and came around to her side and opened her door. "Come on, the inside is even more impressive. You'd better bring along your camera."

"It was actually an inn back in the eighteen hundreds for weary travelers. Dukes and ladies would stop here on their sojourn into London. There are eight rooms upstairs where the privileged could rent for the evening before continuing their trek in the morning for the royal court." He opened the front door and allowed her to precede him.

It was dark and the tables were lit by candlelight. A man approached them. "Mr. Blair, how nice to see you again. It's been too long."

"Thank you, Jonathan. Yes, it has been a long time." He shook Jonathan's hand.

Jonathan picked up two menus. "If you two will follow me."

Jax led her through the restaurant with his hand gently placed on her back. They were guided to the rear of the restaurant to a secluded table. "I hope you enjoy your meal." Jonathan bowed and left them alone.

Jax pushed in Catarina's chair as she sat. "They have the best grilled rabbit with black olive polenta. David would be disappointed if I didn't stop here and make sure you tried it. It's his favorite."

Catarina's stomach turned at the thought of eating rabbit anything. "Are you sure? I've never had rabbit and to tell you the truth I'm really not all that keen on the idea."

Jax laughed. "Trust me, you'll love it."

She shrugged and smiled, thinking, *when in Rome ...* She took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm going to trust you, but if I don't like it, then you owe me a burger in town."

"It's a deal." Jax ordered for them both.

When their glasses of ale arrived, Catarina quickly drank hers and waited for the waiter to refill her mug. "There aren't many people here. Is it not well known?"

"Actually it caters to a select group of elite. If you're into people watching, this is the place to be. You'll find more

royalty or stars stopping here for a peaceful luncheon than in the city. As you see it's secluded so the public isn't crashing in on them."

"I see what you mean. I know I couldn't make it back here if I wanted too. I have no idea where we are." She smiled and looked around at the velvet tapestries lining the walls of the charming, mahogany paneled chateau. She could picture gentlemen standing against the walls drinking brandy and talking over the day's events. A large crystal chandelier hung at the center of the room and she could see where chairs could easily be pulled away for dancing.

The waiter soon arrived with their rabbit and Catarina prayed it wouldn't make her sick. It looked marvelous, no beady little eyes staring back at her. She hesitantly picked up her fork and tore a piece of the meat away from the steak. She took a bite and closed her eyes trying not to picture a happy little rabbit hopping over the green grasses of Great Britain. "Mmm, delicious." She opened her eyes and smiled. "You were right."

Jax laughed. "I always am. Eat up, it may be a while before you get to enjoy a meal as wonderful as this again."

"More like *never* again." Catarina took another bite and savored each flavor. "Delicious."

After they finished the rabbit, they were served hot apple crumb pie and snifters of brandy. Catarina enjoyed the meal and conversation. Jax was really a wonderful person. He didn't ask questions too personal, just the basics-- how long she was staying, what her plans were and so forth. Soon, the meal was over and Jax insisted on paying the bill. Catarina wasn't about to argue, not having a clue of how much a meal in a restaurant like this would cost.

Before they left, Catarina asked the waiter to take a photo of her and Jax. He was more than willing and afterwards wished them luck with their happy marriage. They both laughed, but when Catarina started to correct him, Jax stopped her and shook his head not to bother. She complied and followed him back to the car.

Soon, they were speeding on their way to the Blakely. Catarina had enjoyed the afternoon with Jax and wished it didn't have to end. She was thankful for his help and didn't

want to impose, so didn't mention about possibly doing it again. As they pulled up to the front of the hotel, the valet opened her door. Catarina expected Jax to waive and pull away, but instead he jumped out and threw his keys to the boy. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Catarina smiled and walked into the lobby with him. She was a little apprehensive about him following her into the hotel. She wasn't about to invite him up to her room, but didn't want to sound priggish. "Jax, I've had a wonderful day, thank you so much for everything."

Jax took her hand. "You don't have to thank me. I had a great time, too. May I pick you up later and take you out to a couple of nightspots in the areas I know? You mentioned earlier you wanted to experience the night life of London."

Catarina didn't know what to say. He was asking her out. "You don't have to do that. If David or Marilyn told you to baby-sit me, you don't have to. I'm a grown woman and can take care of myself."

He tightened his hold on her hand a bit. "David isn't big enough to make me do something I don't want to do. I'm asking you out to the pubs because I'd like to spend more time with you. I thought perhaps you wanted the same."

Catarina knew this was the time to break the tie before she got in too deep, but she couldn't--or maybe it was she didn't want to. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, but if it's that you don't want to go out with me, then just say so."

"No, no, it's not that. It's just that I don't want you to think you have to ask me out. Today was wonderful."

"Catarina, I don't have to do anything. Now, do you want to go or not?"

"I'd love to."

"Good." Jax looked at his watch. "It's already six, how about I pick you up at nine?"

"That would be fine. I can rest a bit and take a nice bath. Nine's perfect."

"I'll see you then. Wear something loose but warm. It gets a bit nippy at night."

"I have just the thing."

Jax lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers. "I'll see you at nine." He released her hand, turned, and exited the hotel.

Catarina's knees were shaking. She was afraid if she didn't walk to her room now, she wouldn't be able to make it. "Cinderella and the prince." She shook her head to clear it. As she walked to the lift, she felt as though her feet barely touched the floor.

Chapter Four

Catarina twirled in front of the mirror; her black velvet dress loosely swaying with each turn she made. The bottom of the dress rested half way down her thighs and swirled around as she spun in another circle. It was loose enough to allow her to move, but thick to help her stay warm in London's weather.

The phone rang and she picked it up from the bedside table. "Hello?"

"Catarina, are you ready?"

Her heart beat quickly and she swallowed, his masculine voice sending delightful shivers down her back. "Yes, I've just finished."

"Great, I'm in the lobby."

"I'll be right down." Catarina replaced the receiver and looked at herself one last time. Her mauve lipstick was perfect and her eyes were shining. She'd pulled her hair on top of her head and pinned it in place. She was afraid the humidity would make it frizz so she sprayed it to keep the curls in place, allowing just a few hairs to fall loosely down the side of her face.

She closed her eyes, remembering when Jax had cupped her face and brushed the hair away from her cheek. She opened them again and took a deep breath. "He's only being nice ... just being friendly." Catarina found herself wishing there could be more. She picked up her small handbag from the bed and slipped her lipstick and room key inside. "Time to go."

As the doors of the lift slid closed, Catarina leaned back against the silver walls. She could feel her hands shake a little; she clasped them, willing them to stop. She didn't understand why she would be so nervous; they were just going to a few pubs, what she'd already planned to do. She stepped out of the lift and saw Jax standing next to a potted tree. He was facing her with a smile spread across

his face. Her hands stilled and she suddenly felt calm. Jax would be with her and she'd have a wonderful time just being in his company.

He looked wonderful. Black slacks, gray shirt with the top few buttons unbuttoned, and a black sports coat that looked to be tailored made for him. His dark hair was brushed back from his face and looked soft, calling for her fingers. She gripped her hands and told her heart to quit beating so hard. He was just a friend. But his warm smile conjured up thoughts in her mind of him holding her close as they danced.

She saw his gaze sweep over her from head to foot, causing her heart to beat even faster. She had to force her feet to move forward and as she did, he extended his hand. She placed her hand in his and felt his warm fingers gently enclose hers. She smiled. "Hello."

"Good evening. You look beautiful, Catarina."

Were her eyes playing a trick on her or were his eyes actually darker? "Thank you," she whispered.

"Are you ready for your evening of fun and thrill?" He pulled her closer to him.

Catarina looked up in his eyes and tried to keep herself from leaning into his body. "Yes, as ready as I can be."

He smiled. "Good, let's be on our way." He let her hand go, placed his arm around her waist and escorted her out the front doors.

Catarina felt as if she were in one of her dreams. She couldn't believe this was happening. The most gorgeous man she'd ever seen had his arm around her waist and was escorting her into London's downtown. The Azure was parked and waiting for them. The top was up and when the valet opened the door for her, she could feel the warmth from the heater settle around her legs. The door closed and she watched as Jax walked around and got in on his side.

He looked over and smiled. "The night's just beginning."

Those short words had Catarina feeling tingly all over. The lights of the town flashed by as Jax drove the car through the crowded streets. She watched his hands as he

shifted from one gear to another remembering when he'd placed his over hers earlier in the day. She craved the warmth of his touch again.

Shortly, they pulled into a car park and Jax came around to open her door. After depositing an amount into the pay booth's machine he turned and took her hand. It felt completely normal to walk up the street side by side holding hands like old friends. Catarina took a deep breath and then let it out, watching as it fogged in front of her. "It's really cold out tonight."

Jax laughed. "Actually, this feels quite warm for us. Don't worry you'll warm up after a couple of drinks."

Catarina remembered he was driving. "Jax, isn't there a law forbidding drinking and driving?"

"Don't worry, I don't plan on drinking much. This isn't new to me. You enjoy yourself. Who knows how long it will be before you return and get to experience this again." He laughed. "You never know, after tonight you might wish you'd never stepped foot in a pub."

Catarina shuddered and hurried them along. "I'm not a drinker, so I won't have many." The street on which they were walking was well lit with many signs showing advertising specials of the night. She let Jax pull her across the street into one pub called "The Emperor."

Catarina was amazed at the number of people there. From diverse backgrounds, some people dressed in suits and others dressed in chains with pink and orange hair. Jax pulled her through the crowd towards the bar. She didn't know how he'd actually managed to get her through the masses.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked with a smile.

"You tell me, it's your town." Catarina had no idea what all the many names where that people were throwing at the bartenders.

Jax handed her a shot of a green liquid. "What's this?"

He placed his finger on her lips. "Shhh, trust me."

Catarina stopped and looked deep into his eyes. She knew she could trust him, but there was more to it, a feeling

she couldn't shake. She took the shot glass and smelled it. The sweet fragrance made her even more curious. "Alright, but I better not regret it." She closed her eyes, tilted the shot to her mouth and quickly drank it down.

She opened her eyes surprised. "That was really good. What was it?"

"Something they only sell here. It's called the duchess." He picked up another that was red. "Now, this is called the duke." He handed it to her and waited.

Catarina put it under her nose and sniffed. This one was strong. It resembled whiskey, but had a sweeter scent. She cautiously lifted it to her lips and looked at Jax again. He lifted a brow, silently reinstating, "Trust Me."

She closed her eyes and quickly drank the liquid. It burned down her throat and felt as if liquid fire burned all the way to her stomach. Catarina gasped and tried to bring in a cool breath. She heard Jax laugh and looked up. With daggers shooting from her eyes, she said, "You said trust you!"

Jax continued to laugh. "Thank you. I'm glad you did. It's just one of those pub experiences that you can't miss."

Wearing her heels, she was almost as tall as Jax. She stood closer to him, rising to her toes so she could look him in the eyes. "Don't do that to me again, Jax, or you'll be sorry."

Jax wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her closer and whispered, "I'm shaking, Cat dear."

Catarina paused; she could have sworn her heart had stopped. David called her Cat, but it didn't sound anything like it did coming from Jax. She prayed it was the alcohol going to her head making her feel light headed, but knew it wasn't, it was the man standing so close to her, touching her.

He turned her towards the music. "Come on, let's dance."

Catarina let him lead her through the throng of people to the crowded dance floor. She didn't recognize the music, but it had a distinct beat and she found herself pressed between Jax and about four other bodies. She couldn't help but jump up and down and join in the revelry. She could tell

the song was ending, but instead of the music stopping it continued into another so that everyone could continue dancing.

After about four changes, she found herself trying to catch her breath. She needed another drink but was afraid to ask Jax, not trusting him one bit. There wasn't really a person she danced with; everyone was dancing together. She watched as women surrounded Jax; all touching and feeling him. He didn't seem to mind and smiled at each one. This must be one of the warnings Marilyn had tried to give her. He definitely was a lady's man.

Someone grabbed her around the waist. She wasn't surprised at first, because people couldn't help but touch each other, but this person was holding her waist and not letting go. Forcibly turned around, Catarina found herself pressed up against a large man. He wasn't bad looking; blonde hair and deep green eyes, but his breath reeked of alcohol. Catarina tried to push herself out of his arms but he held tighter, smiling down at her. She looked over his shoulder at Jax, but he was so busy enjoying himself that he didn't see what was happening. Catarina told herself not to panic. She pushed at his shoulders. "Let me go."

He laughed. "Come on, babe, dance with me."

Catarina pushed harder. "I said let go of me, you brute!" She recognized his Cockney accent like the cab driver from the airport, but that was where the similarities stopped. This man was disgusting.

Suddenly she was spun around and she looked up in time to see Jax throwing a punch, which landed square on the oaf's face. Blood spurted from his nose and he fell back grabbing his face. The dancers, oblivious to what was happening or not caring, continued to dance, blocking him from her view. She turned around, her mouth gaping. "Jax!"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the throng of dancers. When they were off the dance floor he turned her to face him, grabbing both her arms. "Did that guy hurt you?" he demanded.

She was shaking from the anger emanating from his body. She shook her head. "No, he just wouldn't take no for

an answer." The anger pulsing through his body made Catarina shrink from him.

Jax looked down and realized he was holding her arms too tightly. Easing his hold, he said, "Are you sure. I want to know."

"Yes. I'm fine, really." Jax dropped his hands from her arms and she rubbed them trying to ease the sting. "I'm sorry, Jax. I don't think I did anything to encourage him."

Jax looked down at her dress now wet with perspiration and plastered to the curves of her body. "I'm sure you didn't intentionally."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?" Catarina demanded. Sure she'd danced, but so had he. Isn't that what they were there for?

"Oh, Cat look at yourself." He brushed her curling bangs away from the side of her face. "You look a bit too becoming for your own good. Any chap would want to take you home."

The anxiety of the fight on the floor was nothing compared to how Jax made her feel. His looks alone melted her reserves. She yearned to fall into his arms and lose herself. She took a breath and tried to look away from him.

He took her chin in his hand, turning her face back towards him. "Cat, let's get out of here. I shouldn't have brought you to a place like this. It's not your style."

All Catarina could do was nod. He took her hand and pulled her through the crowd at the bar and out the front doors. The crisp breeze felt good on her heated skin this time. She tried to calm her frantic heartbeat as Jax slowed his steps. The Thames was behind the pub and Jax led her in that direction. The steady crashing of the water against the rocks calmed her.

Jax continued to hold her hand and pulled her close. He draped his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to his warmth. "You must be freezing."

Catarina loved the smell of him. She didn't speak, only shook her head no. She liked being in his arms as they walked together. The moon reflected off the water, providing a soft glow. Jax stopped at a bench and they sat together in

silence. He slipped off his jacket and used it to cover her shoulders.

"This will help." He put his arm back around her and pulled her close.

"Jax, I'm sorry about what happened in there," she whispered.

He continued to look out over the Thames. "It's not your fault. I should have kept a closer eye on you."

She thought back to the sight of him dancing with the other women and obviously enjoying it. She had to remember there was nothing between them. "No, you shouldn't have. I'm the one who wanted to go to the pubs. I'm only glad I didn't go by myself. It would have been hard to get away from him. He was pretty determined."

Jax' jaw tightened. "You don't need to go to the pubs by yourself. If you decide to go again, I'll take you."

"Well, you don't have to worry. That was experience enough for me." She wanted to block the memory of that disgusting man from her mind. She knew Jax was looking at her and she turned to see his eyes. They were confused and a bit angry and she wondered why. His jaw was clenched and she reached out to touch it. "Don't be mad, it's over."

Jax blinked long and hard. "Cat, I'm sorry it happened."

He leaned forward and before Catarina knew what was happening, his lips brushed softly across hers. She instantly took a deep breath and held it not believing what was happening. His kisses drifted from her mouth to under her ear and Catarina shivered. She knew it wasn't from the cold. She whispered his name before she could stop herself.

His mouth returned to hers and she felt his tongue gently trace across her lips. She slowly opened her mouth and then there were no thoughts at all, only the pleasure he was giving her. The desire that spread through her veins was so strong that all Catarina could do was surrender. The kiss seemed to last for an eternity, but slowly he pulled away.

Catarina was afraid to open her eyes, not knowing what she'd see. She cautiously opened them and looked up. Jax was gazing at her and she knew he was as confused as

she was. She didn't want to put him in an awkward position and ask questions. She remained silent and waited; not knowing what for, just waited. His hands continued to hold her face and his thumbs stroked her cheeks.

"Cat, I didn't plan that. You believe me, right?"

She nodded. There was no way it had been planned. It was spontaneous on both sides. "I know."

"Do you mind so much?"

She remembered the different women dancing with him, but didn't care. This was only for a week, it wasn't as if it was a relationship or anything. "No. Actually, I kind of enjoyed it." Smiling, she leaned forward and gave him a small kiss.

Jax laughed. "You're full of surprises, Miss American."

"Thank you. I strive to be."

Jax stood and helped her from the bench. "I think we'd better call it a night."

They walked in companionable silence to the car park. Jax opened her door and as she was about to climb in, he put both his hands up and prevented her from entering. He lowered his head and gave her a long searing kiss. Catarina could feel her toes curling in her shoes. When he broke the kiss, Catarina dropped her head on his shoulder breathing deeply. *What a kiss.*

As she looked up, Jax stepped back, letting her enter the car. He closed the door and got in on his side. As he started the car, the warmth from the heater flooded the front and Catarina soon warmed. She rested against the headrest and closed her eyes. After they were on the motorway, she felt Jax' hand cover hers. She opened her eyes and turned her face towards him. His eyes were focused on the road, but she knew he was aware of her gaze. She turned her palm up and curved her fingers around his. They continued to sit that way until they exited the roadway and Jax needed to return his hand to the gearshift.

When they arrived at the Blakely, a valet held the door open for Catarina. Jax handed the keys to the valet and walked with her into the lobby. Catarina didn't know if she should ask him up or not. She wanted him to kiss her again

but was afraid if she did so, it would lead further and didn't think she was prepared for that. She looked at him and smiled. She'd just have to control her raging hormones, that's all. "Would you like to come upstairs?"

Jax stepped closer, their bodies almost touching. "I don't think that's wise."

Had she taken everything wrong? Was he not interested? She took a step back to put some distance between them, but he closed ranks. What was he up to? She didn't want to cause a scene in the lobby, so she stood her ground and waited.

He gently cupped her cheek in his palm. "It's not that I don't want to. God, my body's screaming to go upstairs with you, but if I do I'll want more, Cat, and I don't think you're ready. Am I right?"

She closed her eyes, thankful that at least one of them had the commonsense to stop. She nodded, afraid she couldn't say anything else.

"I'll ring you in the morning." He brushed his fingers across the hair that had fallen out of her clip. "How about a picnic tomorrow in one of the gardens? I know the perfect place."

"That would be nice." She tried to still her racing heartbeat.

Jax leaned forward and softly brushed his lips across hers. "I'll call around ten. It will give you time to get a little extra rest."

"Thank you, I'll be waiting." She watched as he turned and left the hotel. Heaving a sigh, she entered the lift, doubting that she'd get much sleep tonight. All she could think of was how anxious she was for tomorrow to begin.

Chapter Five

As Jax shifted the Azure into gear, the night's events kept playing through his mind. "What was I thinking taking her to that place? I know the kind of low class that frequent there." Jax gripped the steering wheel tightly as he recalled seeing the man's hands gripping Catarina's body. If it weren't for the fact that Catarina was already so upset, he would have done more than just break the chap's bloody nose. Once Jax had finished with him, the guy wouldn't have been able to walk out of the place.

He pulled onto the motorway and giving wide berth to a drunk swerving on the road. Jax was glad that he didn't have Catarina in the car any longer. There were nuts on the road late on Saturdays. He tapped himself on the head. What was he thinking? *He was one* of those nuts. Hadn't he had a few drinks at the pub? God, he'd never given it much thought before.

His exit was fast approaching and Jax slowed down taking the winding turn with accuracy. He continued up Westchester Street and eased his Azure into the entrance of the exclusive housing development in which he lived. Recognizing Jax' car, the security guard waived him forward. Jax followed the drive towards his home and parked on the circular drive in front.

After setting the car's alarm, he jogged up the front steps, unlocked the door and punched his code into the security panel. . The lights automatically switched on and Jax tossed his keys onto the mail table. The foyer led to a sunken living area where Jax collapsed onto the leather settee. He propped his feet upon the table and leaned his head back, closing his eyes.

He pictured Catarina with her head tilted the same way in the car with her eyes closed. Her musk scent still lingered on his jacket and he breathed deeply trying to memorize it. It seemed her presence still surrounded him.

Jax licked his lips and tasted her. The sweet taste of the alcohol she'd drunk and the salty taste of her sweat as she'd danced.

Jax' body reacted instantly to the memory, so he unbuttoned his shirt trying to breathe easier. It didn't help. Her presence was too strong. "Cat, what am I going to do with you?" He knew there wasn't anything he could do about it. She was only going to be here for a week and then she'd return to the states and Marilyn.

Marilyn. That made him pause. She'd made him promise to be a gentleman, no seduction of her dearest friend. She was too dear to him; he couldn't let her down and give her reason to believe all the horrid things David had filled her head with to keep her from him when they were having problems. Jax rolled his neck on his shoulders trying to alleviate the tension.

He would enjoy tomorrow. A pleasant Sunday picnic and maybe a visit to one of the castles then they'd say goodbye. He couldn't get involved and chance hurting her. As he formulated his plans, Jax walked up the stairs to his first floor bedroom. As he readied for bed, images of Cat teased him. That gorgeous body ... the silken brown hair ... Of course, he seemed sure of things now, but how would he really react in her company tomorrow? That was the real question. He had a feeling he knew. He was a goner.

The phone rang and Catarina's stomach did a flip. Her nerves were already on end thinking of the day ahead. Yesterday had been wonderful, memories she'd cherish forever. She wished she had more time to spend here, but knew today may be their last together. He would return to work tomorrow and she'd be left to tour London on her own. Well, isn't that what she'd come here to do in the first place?

She picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Cat, how are you this morning? Feeling any after effect of last night?"

That was a loaded question. Was he asking about the pub or their time afterwards? "I'm fine. How about you?"

"Never better. I thought I'd call and warn you to wear something warm. There's rain in the forecast and I don't want you to get sick. Bring along a weatherproof coat and brolly, too."

"Brolly?"

"Oh, sorry, umbrella."

"Already planned on it, they're propped beside the door."

"Good girl. I'll be there in about half an hour. Will you be ready?"

She laughed. "Yes, sir. I'll be waiting in the lobby."

"See you then."

Dead space greeted her on the phone. Catarina placed the receiver down and sat on the edge of the bed. "It's beginning again." She studied herself in the mirror to make sure she looked fine. She'd chosen a thick beige sweater and black leggings. She was wearing her walking shoes for the park and had put on her *bum* bag. Still, she had those dark circles under her eyes. She'd tried to apply a little extra foundation to cover them, but it didn't work. Images of Jax' body floated through her mind the entire night and had her tossing constantly. She'd taken a long hot bath trying to relax, but still she could see him, just out of reach. Even though she had poured scented oil into the tub, his sandalwood scent still overcame her senses.

Catarina lay back on her bed and closed her eyes. She had to get control of her emotions. Jax was just a friend. Sure, they'd shared some intimate moments last night, but it probably meant nothing to a debonair man like Jax. She'd only opened herself up to a few people in her short thirty years and each time only a fraction. This time, she was afraid she might open up all the way and then where would she be? She'd just be leaving herself open to heartbreak, knowing she was to return to the U.S.

The phone rang and she jerked upright. She glanced at the clock and was shocked. She'd finally fallen asleep. "Great." She grabbed the phone. "Hello."

"Cat, what's keeping you?"

"Jax, I'm sorry. I feel asleep. I'll be right down." She hung up and jumped out of the bed, hastily jerking on her

raincoat and picking up the umbrella as she ran from the room. As the doors to the lift slid shut, she leaned against the wall, trying to still her racing heart. Before she was prepared, the doors slid open and Jax stood waiting with a smile on his face.

"I thought you said you weren't having any ill effects from last night." He laughed. "I just didn't sleep well last night. I'm sorry." She liked the way he was dressed casually in jeans, navy blue T-shirt and bomber jacket.

He lifted her chin with his finger. "I'm joking. It's no problem. You weren't sick were you?"

The images of him that ran through her mind all night floated back and she blushed. "No, I guess I'm still trying to adapt to the time change."

Jax smiled. "Right and I guess the same thoughts that kept me awake most of the night didn't haunt you at all." He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

Catarina sighed and leaned into him, her thoughts spinning out of control. Had he just said that he'd been awake last night, too? No way, not for the same reasons. However, here he was holding her in the middle of the lobby kissing her senseless. She heard the chime of the lift opening and pushed away from him. Her eyes were as large as saucers.

He said huskily, "Let's get out of here." His hand at her back, Jax led her to his car. Once they were seated, he turned to her and said, "Are you ready?"

Words failed Catarina. Was she ready for what? A day of joy and memories she'd cherish for the rest of her life? Of course she was ready. She nodded and smiled as he pulled away from the hotel and onto the motorway. Well, so much for taking it safe. She'd fallen straight into his arms like a lovesick maiden. The taste of him still lingered on her lips as she licked them.

His hand gently took hers and he brought it to his lips. Catarina's gaze followed to his mouth and then to his eyes. She saw that he was watching her too, and she sucked in a quick breath. She had no idea what to say. She couldn't form one complete sentence if her life depended on

it. When he turned to focus on the road, Catarina tried to get her thoughts in order.

Their clasped hands rested next to her hip on the seat. His hand dark and strong, hers small and pale. It was a contrast she could live with, Catarina decided. The thought jerked her back to reality. *Live with? Get a grip girl!* She tried to slip her hand from his, but he held tight. She looked forward and tried in vain to concentrate on the scenery as the warmth of his hand sent tingles shooting up her arm.

When they reached their destination, Jax released her hand. Catarina turned hers over and closed her palm, keeping the warmth they'd created. He pulled the car into a public garden that was overflowing with tourists and children. She noticed a zoo to the right, where most of the children flocked. As they turned a corner, she found herself surrounded by the most fantastic profusion of flowers and gardens she'd ever seen. Once Jax had put the car into park, Catarina opened the door and stood, drinking in the sweet scents surrounding them. She took a deep breath and turned to face Jax. "It's exquisite." She gazed in every direction, awed by the magnificence of nature. "I guess this is what you get when it rains nearly every day of the year."

Jax laughed. "You could say that. London is full of beautiful gardens."

"You British don't appreciate what you have." Catarina couldn't believe he was so casual about the whole thing.

"We're appreciative, believe me. Sure, we may take it for granted at times, but I did chose this spot to bring you didn't I? That should say something for me."

Catarina smiled. "I guess you're right, sorry."

"Apology accepted. Now, do you want to help me with this stuff?" He held up a blanket.

"Oh, yes. Let me help." Catarina took the blanket as Jax carried the picnic basket. They walked down one of the many trails leading into the garden.

Jax stopped in front of a monument. They were surrounded on all sides by yellow, red and purple flowers. "How about here?"

Breathlessly she answered. "Yes." Catarina opened the large blanket and placed it on the rich carpet of grass. Jax set the basket in the center and started to pull different containers from its depths. "What did you bring?"

"Nothing fancy this time, I'm afraid." He opened the containers. "Butties, crisps, my favorite and hopefully yours, courgettes, biscuits for the sweets and last but not least, Lemonade."

Catarina laughed. "Let me see here." She knelt on her knees and examined the foodstuffs. "Butties, these are sandwiches. Crisps are your basic potato chips." She took a whiff of the courgettes and wrinkled her nose. "Hmmm, zucchini. Maybe your favorite, but not mine." She laughed. "Biscuits--we call them cookies. Mmm, chocolate chip, my favorite. And Lemonade." She laughed again when she saw the lemonade was in fact Sprite. "You've done an excellent job, Jax. I would have chosen the same, except for the zucchini of course."

Jax laughed and lay on his side facing here. "You've picked up on the language difference quite quickly."

"Thank you. Most of it has been quite easy, except for brolly and bum bag, I'm afraid." She laughed. "I think I could get used to this place." She looked again at their surroundings. "It's beautiful here and the people are quite nice actually, except for our little friend last night of course. I think that broke me of my desire to visit the pubs." She smiled.

Jax didn't. "They're not all that bad. I should have taken you to a more sophisticated place, not a dive."

"Oh, but that's what I was looking for--local flavor. I actually had a wonderful time. I don't regret going a bit." She sat on the blanket next to him. There was plenty of space and he looked far too inviting lying there. She knew that was definitely dangerous ground. "Would you like to eat?"

One brow went up. "Are you hungry?"

"Well, that is what we're here for isn't it?" She'd left herself wide open for that one. She cleared her throat as he looked at her again, his gaze traveling from her face to her

curves. She felt like an idiot. "If you're not hungry we could always explore the grounds."

Jax propped himself up on an elbow. "Do you want to walk?"

That was the last thing she wanted to do, but she knew it was the smartest. She grinned and nodded. Jax stood and extended his hand to her. She placed hers in his and he pulled her up. She was close to him, too close. Their bodies would touch if she breathed too deeply. She took a small step back and he followed. She looked into his eyes and saw that certain look again. The same look he had earlier when he'd kissed her.

"Are you afraid of me?" His arms slipped around her waist and pulled her close.

Catarina shook her head no. "I'm sure you're used to women falling all over you and I completely understand, but Jax I'm not like that. I don't take relationships so lightly. There is no relationship here, and there never can be. You live in London and I love in the states. End of equation."

"Cat, I know you're not like that and I hope I haven't made you feel that way. I just want to get to know you."

"Why? I'll be leaving at the end of the week. I'll never see you again," she whispered, afraid he could read her every thought by looking into her eyes. She licked her lips. The taste of his kiss still lingered.

"Never is a long time." A few strands of hair had blown across her lips. Jax brushed the wisps aside and gently kissed her. "Don't think of tomorrow, only today."

It was heaven being held so close in his arms, with his hands caressing her back and waist. Catarina leaned her body against his and placed her hand against his chest. She could feel his muscles tightening beneath her touch. She explored the contours of his chest and then allowed her hands to travel behind his neck. She ran her fingers through his dark soft hair and sighed.

He deposited a trail of kisses across her face to below her ear and she shivered. His touch never failed to excite her. She'd felt more desire in the last two days than she had her entire life. Giving in to that desire, she turned her head

to give him better access to her neck. Her fingers tightened in his hair and she whispered his name. "Jax."

Cool air greeted her skin as Jax raised his head and looked into her eyes. She swallowed hard, feeling like a lamb caught in a wolf's snare. He cleared his throat and spoke gruffly. "Cat, we'd better take that walk."

She closed her eyes and nodded. He was right. It was Jax again stopping when she couldn't or didn't want to. She would have let him do as he pleased; she had no willpower when it came to this man. He took her hand and they walked together around the gardens, neither speaking, only enjoying the other's touch and presence.

They made a complete circle and arrived back at their picnic site. The stroll had calmed them to the point where they could now gather their senses. Catarina handed Jax a napkin and then his portion of the picnic lunch. They shared and ate in silence as they watched other couples walking by hand in hand. When they'd finished the meal, Catarina helped Jax put the remnants back into the basket. She folded the blanket and carried it back to the car as Jax carried the basket.

After stowing them in the trunk, Jax took her hand. "Come on, I have a surprise."

Catarina didn't think she could stand another surprise but followed anyway. They walked towards the zoo and then stopped in front where a man with a top hat stood. Jax spoke to him and the man left soon to return with a horse driven carriage. Catarina gasped. "Jax? You don't have to do this."

He laughed and took her arm. "Your carriage awaits, My Lady."

Catarina smiled and curtsied. "Thank you, My Lord." She preceded him into the carriage and then Jax stepped up and sat across from her. "What do you think you're doing? Get over here next to me." She patted the seat beside her.

Jax smiled devilishly. "If you insist." He sat next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close to his side.

"You were right. I think it's a bit colder than it was earlier." Catarina enjoyed their closeness and pressed a

little closer. His arms were warm and strong. He would make some lucky woman a wonderful husband. If only ... she shook the thought from her mind. She would just enjoy their time together as long as she had it. And she didn't want it to end quite yet.

"I'll keep you warm." He laughed, raising his brows suggestively.

She laughed back. "You know, David does that same thing with his eyebrows, except with him it usually means he's fixing to rope me into babysitting."

Jax smiled. "Something we leaned early on. Our trait I guess you could say."

"Well, I think I like it best on you."

"I'll keep that in mind." He did it again and quickly kissed her on the nose.

Catarina lit up as she watched the many children running from behind trees around the zoo's picnic area. They were so full of life, laughing and screaming. The mothers, on the other hand, had their hands full as they tried to keep an eye on each child. They rounded the garden area where they'd shared their picnic. The carriage couldn't fit into the gardens but drove around at a slow pace. Catarina had a feeling this was going to be the highlight of her holiday.

The ride ended too soon as far as Catarina was concerned, but it was wonderful nonetheless. Jax helped her down from the carriage and they headed back to the car. They'd spent about three hours at the park and time had flown by. As they drove back to the hotel, Catarina remembered the times they'd spent together during the last two days. Was it really going to end this way? She supposed it was a perfect ending, a carriage ride in the gardens, but still she hated to see it end.

Jax took her hand again and Catarina's heart seemed to break a little. This was going to be goodbye. She knew it had to end, but tried not to dwell on it. Catarina knew it was the cause for her sleepless night. She didn't turn to look at him and tried to swallow around the lump that had formed in her throat. The landscape seemed to speed by without any

notice, everything melding together. She saw the exit ahead, but Jax didn't exit, he continued.

She glanced up at him finally, only to see that he was ignoring her. If he hadn't been holding her hand, she would have thought he was oblivious to her presence. She looked straight ahead again, trusting him. Wherever he led, she'd go.

Chapter Six

Catarina watched as they exited into an elegant, upscale area. Trees overlapped the roads as they drove down a shaded rock street. It was weird, almost as if they were traveling through another time. An exclusive housing area loomed ahead and Jax slowed down at a security booth. The man waived at Jax and let them enter. The homes were unbelievable. Edwardian in style, they could have doubled as charming bed and breakfast establishments.

Jax pulled into a circle drive and got out of the car. Catarina remained where she was and waited for him to round the car to her side. When he opened her door she looked up questioning where they were. Surely, this wasn't his home, a bachelor. "Don't tell me this is your place."

"I won't then." He took her hand and helped her out of the car. They walked up the steps together and Jax unlocked the door. After turning off the alarm, he turned around and took her into his arms. His mouth descended on hers and he took all she would give.

Catarina felt her knees buckle and had to lean into him for support. This was more than she could handle, being in his arms and in his home. Her bones felt like molten lava and she was suddenly burning. She couldn't get her body close enough to his. The heat from him seemed to radiate through her clothes and she craved it even more.

Jax lifted his face and looked in her eyes, his lids half closed. Passion exuded from his every pore, burning the blood that flowed through his veins. "Catarina, do you feel it?"

All she could manage was a slight nodding of her head. She felt Jax lift her into his arms and she found herself being whisked up the stairs. He stopped outside a bedroom door and questioned her without words. She swallowed and closed her eyes. It was now or never. She'd

never have this chance again with him and she wasn't willing to let it slip away. She couldn't. In answer, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him, hoping he would understand. He did.

Jax opened the door to reveal a richly masculine room. The walls were covered in greens and brown. The dresser, bed and nightstands were gold-trimmed mahogany. The carpet a deep burgundy. She felt like she was floating. Jax carried her five-foot-eight frame across the room as if she weighed no more than a feather. He set her down and she watched as he pulled back the covers on the bed revealing sheets in a rich shade of burgundy. Suddenly, the realization of what was about to happen hit Catarina. She'd waited all her life for this moment and now she was going to experience it with a man she would probably never see again. She knew she should feel ashamed, but she wasn't. It felt right. This was her destiny, to share herself with this one man even if it was only for a short time.

Jax finished with the bed and stood in front of her waiting. Waiting for what she wasn't sure, but she let nature take its course. Catarina reached up and let her hands roam across his chest, glorying in the feel of his muscles rippling under her fingers. She traveled up and around his neck and brought his face towards hers. She wasn't frightened. She was full of desire and wanted this man with all her soul.

Jax lifted her from her feet and gently placed her in the middle of the bed. Catarina waited and watched. Not taking his eyes from her, he unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it aside. Neither were smiling, nor talking. No words were needed, just the fulfillment of two bodies awaiting passion's promise. He lay next to her and pulled her close. His hands exploring from her waist to her breast. Catarina took a deep breath as he slowly pulled the sweater up and over her head. She lay beneath him with only her bra and panties.

She blushed, feeling the heat spiraling up from her chest. He didn't say a word and she studied him searching for any sign of rejection. There wasn't any. He looked into her eyes and she knew this man desired her as much as she longed for him. He unclasped her bra and pulled it away as he lowered her panties. There was nothing separating her

from his penetrating gaze. Catarina swallowed and watched as he lowered his head to kiss the tops of her breasts. Her breath came in little gasps. She wasn't experienced, but she knew the incredible sensations shooting through her body were special. Jax removed his clothes and pulled her into his arms. Catarina swooned as their bodies fused. There was no other word for it. She pressed closer and closed her eyes. It was wonderful. A delicious heat flowed between them. Jax captured her mouth in a drugging kiss and she gave in to it, craving more each time their mouths parted. As he rose above her, Catarina nearly found herself saying, "I love you," but stopped herself.

When she opened her eyes, there was a soft glow in the room. Catarina closed her eyes again, not wanting to wake from her dream world. The smooth coolness of the silk sheets caressed her bare skin. She stretched like the proverbial cat and had to refrain from purring. As she stretched her arm to the side where Jax had fallen asleep after they had made love, she came across a cool empty side. Catarina jerked her head around and looked. He was gone.

She quickly scanned the room and saw the glow that was coming from the fireplace. Jax was sitting in a large leather chair and concentrating so hard that he didn't notice when she rose from the bed. She walked over and gently rested her hand upon his shoulder. He looked up and placed his atop hers. She remained there, waiting for him to speak.

He smiled and pulled her around to sit on his lap. The sheet she'd draped around herself covered them both as she joined him. She laid her head against his shoulder and gazed into the flames. Fire. Exactly what she felt just hours ago in his arms. Flames of desire so strong that everything she'd ever planned for her wedding night had been thrown to the wind. Still, she wasn't sorry, and never could be. Jax was *the one*.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to his chest. The robe he wore, opened a little at the contact

and Catarina slipped her hand inside, resting it over his heart. She could feel the strong steady beat as it matched the rhythm of her own heart.

He tilted her face up to his. "Cat, about earlier--"

Catarina placed her fingers over his lips. "Please, don't say anything. This is our last evening together. I know it. Let's just enjoy it."

"But, it's not the same."

"Shhh, yes it is. Please, no questions." She pleaded with him. She didn't want the night to be ruined by her having to give him reasons for being a virgin. She didn't think she knew anymore. Maybe it had all been fate, adding up to this one moment in time.

She turned her gaze back to the fire and placed her head on his chest. The sound of his heartbeat would forever remain in her memory. She'd memorize every moment they shared until he took her back to the hotel. She sighed and relaxed. She wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of the evening in his arms, where she belonged.

Jax pulled her closer to his chest and stood. He carried her back to the bed where he stripped away the sheet and proceeded to present Catarina a side of him she was sure no other woman had ever glimpsed. The true Jax. Not just a lady-killer, but also a tender, caring, magnificent lover.

The hotel loomed ahead as Jax pulled onto the drive. The valet came around and opened her door, leaving them alone again when he saw Catarina turn away. Fighting against tears, she leaned forward and kissed Jax softly on the lips, one last time.

Jax gripped her arms, pulling her close across the console. His hold was tight ... almost painful ... but Catarina didn't pull away. She felt as strongly as he and didn't want to part. As he crushed his mouth to hers, Catarina succumbed, vowing to memorize the taste she would never again savor. When she didn't think she could take another minute without bursting into tears, she pulled out of his

arms. "Good bye, Jax." She knew he didn't need a messy, wet parting. She saw he was about to say something, so she hurriedly got out of the car and shut the door.

Catarina raced inside the lobby and ran for the lift. She reached it just as the doors were about to close. She slipped in and noticed another couple inside. Now wasn't the time to fall apart, she took a deep breath and pushed the button for her floor. When the doors slid open, she rushed across the hall and unlocked her door. As the door closed behind her, Catarina threw herself on the bed and cried. It was over. Her holiday had come to a screeching stop.

Jax crawled out of the bed and looked at the alarm clock. Six a.m. "Damn!" He paced the floor of his room. The smell of Catarina still covered his sheets and he couldn't sleep. He'd never been affected this way before. What was wrong with him? He walked to the closet, jerked the door open and pulled out a suit. Work was what he needed. He'd go in early and get her off his mind. There was no way he could do it in his room. She was everywhere.

He took a cold shower and shaved, hoping that would help. What was it about Catarina that made her so different, besides the fact she was a bloody virgin? He slammed down the electric razor. What had he done? Jax grabbed his coat on the way downstairs and stopped in midstride. There by the door was her brolly. "Now, how is she going to get around London without her damn brolly? She'll catch her death."

He picked up the brolly as he walked out the door. He'd arrange for it to be delivered while he was at the office. He drove into town and pulled into Midwest Viking's lot. The sun was creeping over the horizon and he breathed deep, trying to clear his mind. He walked through the security gate and into the elevator. His third floor office overlooked downtown. Jax looked toward the south. He couldn't see her hotel of course, but peered in that direction anyway.

He sat at his desk and began going through messages. He organized them in degrees of importance and

began returning the calls to the states first, knowing they'd be in their offices. As the morning passed, Jax still couldn't shed his thoughts of Catarina. It gnawed at him until he finally pushed all else aside. This was stupid. Why was he trying to keep her away? They had the entire week to themselves. It didn't have to end last night.

As he left his office, Jax told the receptionist, "I'm going out for the afternoon. If you need me call me on my mobile."

"Yes, sir."

Jax quickly left the building. He felt like a fool. Why had he thought that last night had to be it? Maybe because his subconscious knew if he didn't cut ties now, it would be even harder at the end of the week, but he didn't care. He couldn't let things end this way. He owed her more. Damn it, she'd given her virginity to him last night. How many thirty-year-old virgins had he known? None! He hit himself in the head. "You bloody jerk!"

He pulled up to the front of the Blakely and jumped out. He ran inside and grabbing the house phone, rang her room. There was no answer. Damn, she was already out. He'd never find her. He approached the front desk. "Excuse me, but could you tell me when Ms. Garcia left?"

The clerk punched something on the computer and answered. "Two a.m., sir."

Jax gripped the counter and knew he had to have been mistaken. There was no way he'd just said two a.m. "Repeat that."

"Two a.m., sir"

Jax slammed his hand on the counter. "You're telling me she left in the middle of the night and you let her?"

The clerk looked stunned and a little harassed. "I'm sorry, sir but we're not in the business of refusing our clientele when they ask to check out."

"She checked out!" Realizing his voice was beginning to carry, Jax tried to lower it. "She checked out. All right, did she say where she was going?"

The clerk stood taller. "I'm sorry but that's confidential."

Jax lost all patience. He reached across the counter and grabbed the clerk by his collar. "Let me explain something to you. I'm going to ask you one last time and you better answer me. Got it?" The clerk nodded and swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "Now where did she go?"

"She said she had a flight to catch back to the states."

Jax released the clerk who quickly stepped back out of his reach. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. She'd left. She'd not told him and just left. Well, what did he expect? They'd made no commitments to see each other again. He was a fool. A virgin wouldn't just jump in bed with someone and then say, "It's been nice, see you around." He should have said something last night. He hadn't been thinking clearly, more like stunned was the correct word. He'd been given the world on a platter and was afraid to accept it.

Jax left the hotel and drove home. He'd call Marilyn; she would know how to reach her. God! Marilyn was going to kill him. No, he wouldn't call her; he'd call David. When he arrived at the house, he poured himself a shot of vodka and sat on the settee. Taking a deep breath, he picked up the phone and called the international number for Sherry, Maine. He'd reach David at the office; he had to be there.

"Midwest Viking," the receptionist said.

"Hi, Cindy, is David available?"

"Hi, Jax. He's in a meeting right now, do you need me to interrupt him?"

Jax hoped it wasn't important, because he couldn't wait; he had to speak to David now. "Yes, Cindy if I can."

"Please hold."

Jax tapped his fingers on the shot glass. He walked over to the bar, poured himself another and drank it down--and coughed. Russian vodka could kill a man.

"Jax, what's up? Cindy said it was urgent."

"I hope I didn't interrupt something important."

"I was looking for a reason to get out of there, hoping Marilyn would call. Thanks for rescuing me. What can I do for you?"

"Before you go off, let me finish okay?" There was silence on the other end of the line. "Cat left for the states last night. Has she contacted you?"

"Now, run that by me again, there's no way I heard you correctly."

"You heard, friend. I take it that means she hasn't called."

"Not unless she's spoken to Marilyn, and if I know my wife, she'd be down here in a heartbeat brandishing a weapon at my head. What in the hell did you do to her? That girl has saved for over a year for this trip."

Jax rubbed his hand over his eyes. "It's all my fault. We had a great weekend. I've never felt this way before, I think she's cracked my reserve, brother."

"I don't get it. If you had such a great weekend, then what went wrong?"

"Last night I took her back to my place."

David interrupted him. "You didn't. You did, didn't you? Damn, Marilyn's going to kill me. I swore to her you wouldn't seduce her friend and now you're telling me you did."

Jax yelled into the phone. "Shut up and let me finish! Yes, I made love to her. I can't take it back, it happened. It was great. She loved it, too. That's not the problem. It's what happened afterwards."

"And...I'm listening."

"I didn't know what to say when I took her back to her hotel. I wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come and she told me not to say anything. She knew it couldn't last either. I let her walk away, man. She got out and the last I saw was her running though the lobby and getting on the damn lift back up to her room." Jax stopped, trying to get his breathing under control.

"I went back to the hotel this morning and they informed me she checked out and was returning to the states. I've got to find her and talk to her. I don't know what I'll say but I can't leave it like this."

David laughed. "Man, you've got it bad. Listen I'll call Marilyn and try and find out if Cat has called. You sit tight and I'll ring you back."

Jax hung up, leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. He couldn't stay around here and wait; he had to do something. He ran up the stairs, pulled out his suitcase and started throwing clothes inside. The phone rang and he grabbed it off his dresser. "Hello?"

"Jax, she hasn't checked in with Marilyn. I don't know what to say. I'll let you know when she does. I'll even give her a call at her place this evening without Marilyn knowing."

"Well, don't bother calling me. I'm coming there." Jax heard David shouting in the phone but he ignored him and slammed the phone down. He would see her one way or another. This wasn't the way it was going to end. He shook his head. What was he doing chasing a woman all the way to the states? He must be crazy.

Chapter Seven

The taxi pulled up in front of Midwest Viking the next morning and Jax got out, throwing the driver a bill. As he walked in the front door, the lead security man spotted him. Jax walked over and shook his hand. "Nice to see you again, how are things here in Sherry?"

Mike smiled and laughed. "The business has taken off like a shot. I don't think Mr. Lang ever expected it to grow this quick. It keeps us all in a job."

Jax patted him on the back. "That's the important thing isn't it? Did David mention me coming by today?"

"Yes, sir. I have your badge waiting at the front desk. Follow me."

Jax affixed the badge then crossed security to the bank of elevators. As the third floor door slid open, Jax saw Cindy the receptionist. "Good morning, Cindy."

Cindy looked up. "Jax, David mentioned you might be by today. What brings you out to the states?"

"Oh, more of a holiday this time. Is David available?"

"Yes, I'll let him know you're here."

"Thanks." Jax walked down the hallway and stopped outside David's door. The gold plaque loomed before him. Jax knew David was angry and he was about to get an ear full. He entered, closing the door behind him.

"Jax, good to see you." David remained seated behind his desk watching Jax closely. "You look like shit."

Jax sat in one of the chairs facing David's desk. "I feel like it." He and David had been as close as brothers all their life and he waited patiently for David to begin. He didn't keep him waiting long.

"I had to tell Marilyn last night. She's not happy."

"I'm sure that's an understatement."

"Yes."

Jax stood and paced. "She's not a child. Marilyn needs to chill. If she's mad because we made love, then she needs to get over it. I didn't force her. I didn't seduce the girl and I sure as hell didn't mean to hurt her."

David rose and walked to the wet bar in the corner. He poured a couple of drinks and handed one to Jax. "She got over that. She's mad because Cat hasn't run off like this before. They're as close as we are and there's no way she would have left and not called Marilyn. Women are different; they're not like us. Like I need to tell you that." He raised his glass and laughed.

Jax drank the scotch in one swallow and returned to the chair. "Give me her address and I'll straighten this all out."

David shook his head. "No, she's not there. I don't know where she flew to, but it wasn't home."

Jax looked up at David. "She didn't come home?"

David shook his head.

Jax swallowed and closed his eyes. "What have I done?" He felt about as low as a man could get. She wasn't like the women who ran in his circle. He knew that and didn't take heed of it. Now, she'd disappeared to God only knew where. "Do you know her flight info? We can check to see if she used her tickets."

"Marilyn has already checked into that. She didn't use the return ticket."

"So, she could bloody still be in London?" Jax demanded.

"I don't think so. She would have remained at the Blakely. I think she's taking her time coming back since she doesn't have to return to work for a week."

Jax felt even worse now. He realized after all the time they spent together during their trips as well as their more intimate moments, he never once asked Catarina about herself. He didn't know her occupation, the music she liked, her favorite food or anything else. All he knew is that she was a friend of David and Marilyn. Throughout the quiet time they'd shared, he'd only thought of himself.

He looked at David. "I'm a bigger fool than I thought. I never bothered to ask her anything about herself. I'm surprised she didn't tell me to jump in the Thames."

David laughed. "That's Cat, she's quite unselfish." David walked over and placed his hand on Jax' shoulder. "Take your bags out to the house. You'll stay with us. This way, you'll know as soon as we hear from her."

Jax nodded. "Thanks." He rose and breathed a sigh. "I might as well head over there now and get it over with. I'm sure Marilyn's ready to tear a hole in me."

"Do me a favor. Just let her get it all out. I'd rather not come home to it again."

"Deal." Jax left the office and had one of Midwest's drivers take him to David's home. It was a large colonial styled residence. Flowers and ponds circled the front drive. Jax smiled. He could see Marilyn's touch everywhere. As he stepped out of the car he could hear little David's laughter. He followed the sound around the side of the house and saw Marilyn with David on the ground tickling him.

The child was squealing at the top of his lungs and loving every minute of it. Jax walked up behind Marilyn and smiled. The child noticed him and gasped for breath. "Mommy, its Uncle Jax."

Marilyn instantly let the child go and turned around. David flew into Jax' arms and Jax pulled him up as a shield. "You wouldn't hurt a man with a child would you?"

"I would if he's as big as you and I knew the child wouldn't come to harm." She glared at him.

"Marilyn, I'm sorry." She'd already been through so much during her shaky beginning with David and Jax certainly didn't want to cause her further anxiety. Her eyes softened. "I know, but that doesn't mean I'm not angry. Come on let's go in the house."

She led him through the back garden and into the double French doors. Jax released the squirming child and sat on one of the leather sofas. Turning to face Marilyn, he said, "Okay, let me have it."

"Jax, I'm not going to let you have it. I think I knew if you two spent any time together, this would happen. I just didn't expect her to take off like this. I'm more angry at

myself than you. Do you have any idea why she reacted this way? It's just not like Cat."

"Well, it didn't really hit me until a bit ago. Marilyn, I really messed up. You know what? I don't know a thing about her. I never asked her questions about her personal life. I was so wrapped up in just spending time with her I didn't think of anything else, not even after we made love."

"Oh Jax, she was still a virgin. You mean after you made love, you didn't talk to her, no expressions of feelings or anything?"

"It wasn't crude if that's what you're asking. We just lay there together and fell asleep." He stood up and ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated. "I can't tell you why. I've not done that before. God, at the time, I couldn't think of anything else, only having her. I was crazy with desire and she was too. It was mutual, Marilyn."

"I'm sure it was, Cat wouldn't have given in otherwise. I'm sure you're very persuasive, but Cat's stronger than that."

Jax fell back onto the sofa. "You still haven't heard from her?"

Marilyn shook her head. "No. She's disappeared and I think that's the way she wants it. She'll be back by the weekend and then we'll get this settled."

"David said I could stay here until then. Do you mind?"

Marilyn raised her brows. "Here? Why?"

Jax stood. "If you don't want me to, it's not a problem. I can stay at a hotel."

"No, no, it's not that. It's just that Catarina's not going to come here. She's going to go home. She has obligations, the pediatricians."

"I know she's not going to come here, but as soon as she calls I can go to her place and settle this." Jax didn't understand what Marilyn was saying. He had a feeling he didn't want to know.

"Jax, didn't David tell you where Catarina lives?"

He shook his head afraid he was getting the picture. "Please don't tell me she doesn't live in Maine."

"She lives in Dallas. We're childhood friends, Jax."

"I can't believe this! Dallas?" He began to pace. He would have to stay in Dallas until he heard from her. He hadn't come this far to give up."

"At least there's a Midwest there. You can work at that office this week."

"Right, Marilyn I'm on my own with this aren't I? You and David won't be there to help push her into forgiving me."

She shook her head. "You got it. You're on your own. You made your bed, now you have to lie in it."

"Right. Well, I guess I'd better get on the phone and make more plane reservations." Jax shook his head and smiled. "I guess my player days are over."

Marilyn smiled. "I guess they are. You know what? I'm glad it's with Catarina, too. My two best friends falling for each other seems pretty good to me."

"You just better pray that she forgives me and gives me another chance."

"No, I think you better be the one praying."

"I am," Jax said as he left the room in search of a phone.

Jax walked into his hotel room at The Adolphus and dropped his luggage. May in Dallas, Texas was too much. The place blazed like Hades. He pulled his jacket off, flinging it onto the chair at the desk and then went to the refrigerator. Dr. Pepper, Texas' favorite drink was already chilled as he pulled one out and popped the top. The drink was cool and refreshing as it slid down his throat.

He picked up the phone and asked for an international operator. He called Midwest in London and told them they could reach him at the Dallas office the rest of the week. There was nothing pressing so he wasn't too worried. His office could handle any situation. And if they needed him for some reason they could find him. He then checked in with the Dallas office and they assured him they had an office he could use during his stay.

Jax removed the tie from his neck then walked into the bedroom. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and sat on the bed, reading the information he'd received from Marilyn. He had Catarina's address and the number at his office. He knew she wasn't supposed to return to the office until Monday, so he didn't call there.

He did call Catarina's house, but there was no answer. Her recorder picked up and Jax hesitated. Did he want to alert her to the fact that he was in Dallas? No, but he had no choice. If he wanted to speak to her as soon as she arrived, he'd have to leave a message. "Cat." He paused. "It's Jax and I'm here in Dallas. I'm staying at the Adolphus on Highway 35 in room 812. Would you please call me? I need to see you."

He hung up the phone and sat back. His heart was beating erratically and he knew it was due to nerves. Surely she'd be back by Friday, if not sooner. Sooner was better. He needed to get this settled and return to London. London, where it had all started. If she hadn't run off, he would be there now. They could have taken care of this there. He was starting to get mad. Sure, he'd messed up, but she was acting like a child, running away.

Jax walked into the office and was surprised to see Mr. and Mrs. Lang, David's parents. "David, Hillary what are you two doing here? I thought you were in Paris?"

David smiled. "We were, but some things have come up here so we decided to come out and tend to them. Why are you in Dallas?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you over lunch. So, what's going on that you had to leave Paris?"

"We're being audited by the State. They're to arrive tomorrow and stay who knows how long. Hopefully this won't take longer than a week."

"Well, I'm going to be here for a couple of weeks, so I can take care of it for you. The London office is running smoothly so I'm taking a holiday."

David raised his brow. "Right and I'll get the true story during lunch."

Hillary laughed and hugged Jax. "Well, I'm glad to see you Jax. We don't see you enough anymore. Even though you're in London, we seem to be busier than ever. We'll get together this evening."

Jax kissed Hillary on the cheek. "Yes, ma'am."

The receptionist interrupted them. "Mr. Blair, they have your office ready now if you'd like to follow me."

Jax smiled. "I guess it's work time. How about we go to lunch at noon?"

"Sure, son. We'll meet you in the lobby." David watched Jax walk down the hallway and turn at the end. He looked at Hillary. "Now, what's the boy gotten himself into?"

"We'll soon know." Hillary laughed and she and David walked down the hall to their offices.

Jax heard his name hailed over the intercom. "Yes?"

"Mr. Blair, David Lang in Sherry is on line three."

"Thank you." Jax quickly picked up the line. "David, have you heard anything?"

"Are you sitting?"

"Yes." Jax gripped the edge of his desk waiting for the news.

"Cat called this morning and she and Marilyn had a nice long chat. Apparently she joined one of those all night tour groups and went to Scotland."

"What! Scotland? And I'm here in this blasted hot state."

"Seems so. You might as well stay there because she'll be returning Saturday to Dallas. Marilyn didn't tell her you were there. She did tell her that you'd asked about her, but that was it."

"She hadn't said anything about Scotland. I didn't even know she was interested in the place. Apparently I didn't know a lot of things, did I?"

"When it comes to women it's a learning game that never ends." David laughed. "Trust me, I know. So, what are you going to do?"

"Your parents are here. We're going to be audited by the state, so I told them I'd stay around until it was finished."

This way they can go back to Paris. I'll be here until Cat gets back and try to settle the whole thing."

"What do you mean by settle? You're not going to just placate her and then take off for London are you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you'd better know before you talk to her and screw things up even more. I thought you'd realized there was more here than just a casual fling. Man, she's the one for you. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"David, I know I need to talk to her and that there's more here at stake than at any time before, but I still don't know where it's going to lead. She lives here, while I live in Europe. It's not your everyday relationship. Hell, we don't have a relationship." He rubbed his head and shoulders trying to ease the tension.

"Jax, if you screw it up this time, you may not have another chance. You'd better be sure by the time she gets back. If you're not, then don't contact her. She doesn't need this, okay?"

"I know you're right. Why is it I always have to learn the hard way? Why can't things be easier, fall into place? Why couldn't I have found a girl like her back home?"

"I can't give you the answers you're looking for, brother. But, I can tell you from experience that if you love her, you better do everything in your power to let her know. You were there when I almost lost Marilyn forever. Learn from my mistakes. Don't take a chance."

"You're right, like always. Thanks for understanding." Jax loved David like a brother and knew that if he ever needed him, David would be there in a second, no questions asked.

"I'll give you a call if we hear from her again. I doubt we will, but I'll keep in touch just in case."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon."

Jax replaced the phone receiver and lay his head in his hand, his elbows resting on the top of his desk. A week ago his life was all mapped out. Bachelorhood for at least another ten years and then maybe, if he found the right woman, marriage. Then here comes Cat with her deep soul searching eyes and soft willing mouth and he's lost. He's no

good to anyone, not himself, not his job and especially not to any other woman.

He looked at the clock on the wall across from his desk. Noon, time for lunch with Hillary and David. He'd have to tell them the real reason he'd left his post in London and came to Dallas. They weren't stupid. They'd practically raised him and knew there was a lot more to the story. He pulled his jacket back on and walked down the hallway. He refused to return to London, he was staying here until this was settled.

Chapter Eight

Catarina stepped out of the shuttle-van and sighed. She was back to blistering heat; nothing compared to London or Scotland's frigid, chilly winds. Her duplex was a welcome sight, with its flowerbed and weeping willow standing in front. She dragged her two suitcases toward the front door, unlocked it, and stepped inside.

The heat hit her as soon as she entered. She blew her bangs off her forehead. "Jeez." She switched on the air and dropped the bags. Catarina walked into her bedroom and fell on the bed face first. "This is Heaven." She was so tired from the long flight that she didn't want to move. She could hear the message beep from the machine in the living room but ignored it. They could wait until tomorrow. All she wanted to do was sleep.

As usual, as she was falling into a deep slumber, pictures of Jax floated through her mind. Memories of his touch, smell and taste were always prevalent. She hadn't had a full night of rest since she'd left London. Thoughts of his soft warm lips gliding across her neck and down her chest made goose bumps rise on her arms. It was as if he were actually touching her instead of being a thousand miles away. Rather than fighting the dreams this time, she gave in to them. She'd learned the best way to get any rest at all was to just let the dreams take control. Her only wish was that their time together had lasted longer, but she knew longer wouldn't be enough.

Catarina jumped up in the bed as the phone rang. Her heart was beating as fast as a drum and she took a deep breath trying to get control. Every time she woke up from a dream about Jax, she found herself this way, totally disconcerted. She grabbed the phone from her headboard. "Hello?"

"Hey, brat. You're back."

Catarina rolled her eyes. "No, I'm not. My body may be back, but my mind is fifteen hours behind. Call me later." As she started to hang up she heard Mark still talking. "Mark, I'm tired, what do you want?"

"I've left you three messages. Haven't you listened to them?"

"No. As soon as I walked in, I collapsed on the bed. What's so important?"

"I'm going to be a papa."

Catarina's mind cleared at that statement. "What?" She knew something wasn't right here. Mark wasn't married; he didn't even have anyone special in his life at the time. "What are you talking about?"

"Susan's going to have a baby."

"And..." She waited for more.

"I'm going to be the godfather."

"Oh, I think I'm starting to understand. You had me going for a minute." She laughed and pulled a pillow up against her stomach.

"I want to go out and celebrate. You up to it?"

"No. I haven't even had the time to check my messages. Give me about an hour and then call back." She hung up before he could talk her into going out. She was too tired to answer all his brotherly questions.

Catarina walked into the living room and saw she had thirteen messages. "I didn't know I knew that many people." She pushed the button and listened. First her office called to check in, Marilyn called twice wanting to know how she was and ... She stopped and froze. It was Jax. The room began to spin and she crumpled onto the sofa. She hit repeat and listened to the message again. Jax was in town and staying at the Adolphus.

Catarina couldn't believe it. How had he found out where she lived and her phone number? What in the world was he doing in Dallas? She wouldn't let herself think it could possibly be because he wanted to speak to her. No way, a man wouldn't fly across the ocean when a phone call would do just as well.

The other messages played, but she didn't hear them. Marilyn's voice intruded on her thoughts and she listened.

Then, another message played from Marilyn and finally Catarina realized how he'd found her--Marilyn.

Catarina tried to calm herself and picked up the phone. She dialed Marilyn's number and listened to the continuous rings. As she was about to hang up she heard Marilyn's anxious voice. "Marilyn? What are you doing? You sound like you've run a marathon."

"Don't worry, when you have children of your own, you'll understand. Catarina, I'm so glad to hear from you. You're not going to believe what's been going on."

"You're right, I'm not. I do know it has to do with Jax, because he's already left a message saying he's in Dallas. Did you have to tell him I live here?"

Marilyn breathed an audible sigh. "Catarina, I'm sorry if you're upset, but you obviously know a little about him now and he's not one to be put off. Before David had a chance to tell him you didn't live in Sherry, he'd already grabbed a flight and was headed here. I've never seen him this way. What did you do to him in London?"

Catarina leaned her head back. "Marilyn, I can't tell you what happened. I don't understand it myself." She slid back on the sofa. "We just hit it off. It was weird how fast it all happened. One minute we were strangers and the next we were holding hands and touring the ruins."

Images of their time together filled Catarina's thoughts. She saw them walking hand in hand through Stonehenge, sitting together at the chateau where they'd shared lunch and then the dancing at the pub. How she wished they could go back and experience it together again, feel the electricity their touches created.

"Catarina? Are you still there?"

"Yes, Marilyn. Can I tell you something and ask you not tell David? Because apparently your husband can't keep his mouth shut."

"Yes, you know you can."

"Marilyn, Jax is like no one I've ever met before. He's a dream come true," she whispered into the phone.

"Then what's the deal? Why are you running from him?"

That was the million-dollar question. Why was she running from him if he was so perfect? She didn't know. She just knew that it wouldn't work out. He's from London and she was from Dallas. He was suave and debonair. They had nothing in common. The time she spent there was a vacation. He actually lived it, the bright nightlife, the classy dining establishments. She would never fit into that lifestyle.

She was a girl who worked in a pediatrician's office. Dealing well with children was her forte, not adults. She threw the small pillow across the living room. Why she put herself through this she didn't know. It was just one of those weekend flings. A Woman goes to a foreign country, meets someone, has an affair and then it's over, no strings attached. Why couldn't she do this? Why such feelings of loneliness?

"Marilyn, it just wouldn't work out. Trust me, okay?"

"Catarina, I just don't want you to make a mistake the way David and I did. Don't let him go, if you love him. Look, he's flown from London to be with you. He's desperate to talk to you. I wouldn't put him off too long. He's not stupid, all he has to do is look up your address in the phone book."

Catarina hadn't thought of that. What was he doing in Dallas! She didn't understand. "I'll call him."

"Okay, but call me and let me know how things are going. I don't want to worry about you. I feel like it's my fault you're going through this. I knew better than to let Jax take you around, he's a lady killer."

"In more way than one." She laughed, trying to make Marilyn feel better. "Funny, but I'm glad we had that time together. I'll cherish it forever."

"Oh God, it's worse than I thought. Should I come down there? Mom's been wanting to see the kids."

Catarina laughed. "Give me a break. No, stay there with your husband. I'll be fine. Talk to you later." Catarina hung up and looked at the answering machine. She knew Jax was message five and she forwarded to that spot. She wrote the number down and then called the hotel. "Might as well get this over with."

They rang his room and Catarina waited, her heart feeling like it was going to hop right out of her chest. What would she say? She knew it had been childish to run away, but Jax never said he'd see her again. Why would she stay around, she had every right to leave.

After six rings the front desk picked up. "Would you like to leave a message?"

Catarina took a deep breath. "Yes, please tell him Catarina called. He has the number." She hung up and sank against the back of the sofa. She didn't know what she'd say, but there was no way she could avoid him--not after he'd flown all the way here from London.

Someone knocked on her front door and Catarina jumped. "Oh, great! He's here." She ran into the small bathroom under the stairs and checked her hair. It didn't look too bad. She placed her hand over her heart and willed it to calm. "Alright, here goes."

She placed her hand on the doorknob and slowly turned it. When she looked up, it wasn't whom she'd expected. Large hands grabbed her and hugged her tight. "You're home, brat. It's good to see you up and out of bed."

Catarina laughed and hugged Mark back. "You jerk, I told you I'd call you."

"I know what that means. No." He walked past her into the living room. "What have you been doing?"

Catarina followed him, retrieving the pillow she'd thrown earlier. "Sleeping, just like I said." She sat on the sofa and he sat next to her. She wanted to laugh at the little boy expression on his face. Mark knew how to get what he wanted and right now he wanted her to go out and celebrate. She laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You are. Mark, there's so much you don't know. I really don't think I'm good company. Why don't you call Shelly?"

"I did, but she and Carl are going out tonight." He took her hand. "Alright, we've known each other since, when?"

"Junior High."

"That's right, so tell me what's wrong. I can tell it's more than jet lag."

She took a deep breath and squeezed his hand. They were as close as any brother and sister. She wished they really were but it didn't matter. She could tell Mark anything and he'd help her through it. But, this was something Mark couldn't fix. This was something she had to handle on her own and deal with like an adult. She looked him in the eye. "I met someone."

Mark grinned. "About time. Do I know him?"

She shook her head and looked away. "No, I met him in London."

"What?" Mark laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

He turned her face so she would look at him. "What happened, are you okay?"

Tears started running down her cheeks. She hadn't cried since she'd left, but Mark being here with her gave the support she needed. She nodded. "Yes, I'm okay. It was just wonderful, Mark."

"Then what's the problem? You didn't fall for this guy did you? Come on Catarina, long distance relationships are one thing, but another country?"

She wiped her tears away and tried to calm herself. "I know, I know, but it was just wonderful. I've never felt this way before."

He sat up straighter. "Catarina, how far did this go?"

She knew she couldn't lie to Mark. All she did was look at him and let him draw his own conclusions.

"Shit! You finally did it and with someone you don't even know."

"It's not like that. He's a friend of Marilyn and David's."

He knocked on her head. "Right and remember what those two went through."

"I know, Mark. I'm not stupid."

"Right and that's why you're so upset. Come on Catarina, you'll never hear from this guy again. You're just upset because it's your first time."

She looked up at him, shook her head and said slowly, "When I got back today there were three messages from him. He's here in Dallas."

"What? Tell me this guy is in town on business and not some freak chasing you."

"It's not like that. I left London last Sunday night, actually ran out around two in the morning."

"Wait, I don't think I'm understanding all this. Did this guy hurt you? Is that why you ran away?"

"No! He was perfect. I just knew it couldn't last and I ran, like the child that I am. I don't know why I did it. I should have stayed, but I didn't see any reason to. I just left."

"So, he contacted David and flew here to make sure you're okay. Couldn't he do that over the phone like normal people?"

"Jax isn't like other people, but I thought the same thing. Why is he here? We never mentioned a future. I don't understand."

He brushed her hair off her shoulder. "Tell me, do you want a future?"

"Oh, Mark, more than you know, but there can't be one with Jax. I'm way out of his league. He's loaded. The guy lives in a small mansion and dresses in Armani."

"You think you're not good enough for him?"

"No, it's not that. It's just I wouldn't feel comfortable with a life like that."

He shook his head. "Give me a break. You've never felt that way before. This is Mark you're talking to. Now, tell me the truth."

She closed her eyes. "He doesn't feel the same. I can never ask him for more than what he's already given me. I care about him too much."

Mark stood and crossed the room. "I just don't get it. This isn't like you. Have you talked to Marilyn about all this?"

"Yes, she just called. She understands where I'm coming from."

"Well, I think you're both nuts. I'm calling David later and finding out just what this guy is really like."

"Whatever, I don't care." The phone rang and she looked at it. It continued to ring and by the fourth ring, when Mark was reaching for it, she grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Catarina, it's Jax."

Catarina felt lightheaded. She looked at Mark and nodded. He sat down and watched her from across the room. "Hello, Jax."

"When did you get back?"

"This morning. I went straight to bed and didn't know you'd called until just a bit ago." There was silence on the line and Catarina swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. "Why are you here, Jax?"

"I could say business at Midwest, but you'd know it was a lie. I had to see you. When you left that night I didn't know what to think. I was worried sick. Couldn't you have at least told me you were leaving?"

"Why? We never spoke of tomorrow. We both understood it couldn't lead anywhere. It was over."

"No, it didn't have to end like that."

"Jax, let's not lie to ourselves, okay. I'll never forget the time we spent together, but it can't lead anywhere. You live in London and I live here."

"We need to talk. Tell me where you live and I'll come over."

Panicked, Catarina looked at Mark. "No, we don't need to see each other."

"Catarina, if you don't tell me where you live, I'll get the address."

She had no doubt he would. "I'll meet you. Where?"

"Meet me here at the Adolphus. We can have dinner at five."

Catarina looked at the clock. It was already at four. How could she get her thoughts together in one hour? She couldn't, but knew there was no way to hide from him. "Alright, I'll be there."

"Thank you, I'll see you in an hour."

The call disconnected and Catarina stood there holding the phone in front of her. She looked at Mark. "I'm meeting him in an hour."

"Well, there goes my celebration." He laughed. "Come on, there's no reason to look like your dog died. You've already done everything you can with the guy. There's no secrets between you two."

"I know. I guess I better get ready." She walked with Mark to the door. "Thanks for coming over. I needed to talk."

Mark pulled her in his arms and held her. "Any time, girl. Call me when you get home so I won't worry." He raised an eyebrow. "That is ... if you come home."

She hit Mark on the shoulder. "Don't play like that. I can't let that happen again."

Mark kissed her cheek. "Go on, get ready. Talk to you later." He turned around and headed to his car. "Bye."

Catarina watched Mark pull away and knew she was now on her own. Time to face Jax and tell the one man she'd ever loved that she didn't want to see him again, that she couldn't. She walked into the house and shut the door behind her. She could do this. She had to.

Catarina went up to her room and showered. The misty spray of the water reminded her of London and she closed her eyes resting against the glass door. Why did she still smell the sandalwood scent of his cologne? Why could she still taste his lips on hers and hear his whispers as he made love to her? Why couldn't she forget?

Chapter Nine

Catarina exited onto Commerce Street and saw the Adolphus looming ahead. It reminded her of the beautiful castles she'd seen on her tours through Scotland. It was a magnificent stone building; there was nothing else like it in Dallas. She pulled up in front and handed the keys of her Mustang to a valet.

Taking a deep breath, she adjusted her black skirt and walked to the front door. A man opened it for her and she noticed his quick appraising glance at her body. She'd worn a short-sleeved, soft cream-colored blouse, and a tight,

short black skirt. Confident that she looked as chic as possible, she felt at ease walking into the elegant hotel. She only wished she could feel that same sense of ease about seeing Jax again. She stiffened her spine and pulled all her courage to the forefront. She could do this.

As she walked through the door, she saw Jax standing at the opposite side of the lobby. The room was paneled in rich mahogany, the same as his home. He looked like the lord of the castle, comfortable in such elegance. Swallowing hard, she lifted her chin and walked straight toward him, ignoring the urge to turn and bolt.

Jax stood in front of her, not lifting a finger. She didn't know what to do or say. She stood, waiting for some kind of sign from him. Slowly, a smile creased his face and she closed her eyes in relief. "Jax," she whispered, her voice sounding a bit shaky to her own ears.

He took her hand, pulled her close and leaned forward to give her a kiss. Catarina quickly turned her face and the kiss grazed her cheek. She kept her eyes closed and stood for a second praying for courage. She could feel the tension in his body as he suddenly stiffened. She pushed away from him, smiled and proceeded to put on the biggest front she'd ever done.

"Jax, I'm surprised to see you here."

"You shouldn't be."

He continued to watch her, which made her even more uncomfortable. She pulled her hand out of his and stood in front of him. She wondered if he could see her heart thumping under her shirt. Surely he could, she couldn't make it slow down. Catarina turned her face, avoiding the intensity of his gaze. "Do you want to talk?" she asked.

"Yes." He took her by the elbow and led her to the elevator.

Catarina didn't want to cause a scene but knew if she went up to his room she'd be lost. There was no way she could deny the desire spiraling through her body. His hold on her arm was biting and her legs shook. "Jax, what are you doing?"

"We're going to talk and we're going to do it in private." He pushed the button for his floor as the doors closed.

Catarina stood straight and stiff as the elevator raced upward. When it stopped, he led her down the hallway and stopped in front of his room. As he unlocked the door and ushered her inside, she tried to get a hold of herself. Her jaw dropped when she saw the elegance of the room. There was a separate sitting and dining area and a door leading to the bedroom. That was one place she was going to avoid like the plague. She was tempted to raise her hands and make the sign of the cross. There was a large bouquet of roses atop the table and the luscious scent perfumed the room. She stepped further away from Jax, but he followed her. She kept inching back until her legs hit against something. She looked behind her and saw she'd ran into a chair.

"Sit, Catarina. We need to talk."

She could see his eyes darken, swimming with emotions ready to erupt. Catarina collapsed into the chair and watched as Jax walked to the wet bar and poured them both a drink. She didn't know what it was and didn't care. He handed the crystal glass to her and she took a drink, choking on the strong liquid.

"No more lies, why did you leave?"

She didn't know what to say. Should she tell him the truth? That she was so in love with him that she couldn't stay and break in a million pieces when the vacation ended? Should she tell him that she still felt his kisses as she lay in bed at night? Or that she could still smell his masculine scent and feel his hands in her hair? No, she couldn't--not unless she wanted to risk seeing Jax run for the nearest exit to get away from her. "Jax, I'm sorry for leaving in the middle of the night. I wasn't thinking clearly or I would have waited until daylight." She held her hand up so he wouldn't interrupt her and looked into his eyes. "We never spoke of tomorrow. I had such a wonderful time, that I didn't want to wake to a day and know you weren't going to meet with me, that I wouldn't hear your voice again. I left." That was about as close as she could get to telling him the truth. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see the pity in his.

"Cat, I couldn't stay away. I went back that morning and you were gone. No note, nothing. What was I supposed to think? I was worried sick something had happened to you." He ran his fingers through his hair and paced the room. "I called David and he said they hadn't heard from you either. To say that Marilyn was pissed is an understatement."

Jax stopped in front of her. "I know there's no commitment between us, but I still don't want it to end this way. Can't we be friends, keep in touch?"

Friends! They could never be friends. She wanted so much more. Her heart was shattering at his feet. Why did it have to be this way? If he felt for her just a fraction of what she felt for him, she'd give him anything he wanted. But, obviously he didn't. "Jax, there's no reason for us to ever see each other again. I'll never return to London. Dallas is my home."

He leaned down in front of her chair and took her hands in his. "Cat, we have a connection. I can't forget you."

She closed her eyes as a tear dropped. She didn't want to cry in front of him and took a deep breath trying to control her emotions. "Jax, I can't do this. You know I'm not like you. I can't make love to a person and then just forget about them, like you do. I'm not like that. It means too much to me."

He stood and pulled her with him. "Trust me, Cat. That's all I ask." Jax leaned forward and took her mouth in a consuming fire.

Catarina couldn't refuse him. She'd craved his touch for a week now. She felt like kindling being thrown on a fire as she melted in his arms. Her arms encircled his neck and she leaned her body close to his, trying to feel every inch of him. This would be her last chance to taste his kisses and hear his whispers. She shivered as he pulled her blouse up and over her head. She felt vulnerable and wanted to cover herself, but didn't. She would take all she could to hold and cherish it for eternity.

Catarina loosened his tie and slipped it over his head. She felt his muscles ripple as she unbuttoned his silk shirt and tugged it down over his arms and hands. She rested her

cheek against his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart as it echoed hers. She let her hands lower to his pants and unfastened them. Jax ran his hands down her arms and encircled her waist. He reached behind her and unzipped her skirt, watching Catarina step out of it as it fell to the floor. He scooped her up, carrying her to the king size bed. The down comforter was already pulled back and he lay her gently upon it.

Catarina closed her eyes and waited for Jax to join her. The feel of his skin brought chills to hers and she gloried in it. She ran her hands through the hair on his chest and watched as it curled around her fingers. The brown hair was so soft as it spun a web around her finger. She wanted him desperately and couldn't wait. "Jax?" She looked up at him, her eyes pleading.

"Catarina." He leaned over and took her mouth devouring the essence of her taste. Glorifying in her scent and touch. He whispered words of encouragement and love, as he loved every inch of her body. He wanted her completely, body and soul. "I can't let you go."

Catarina raised her fingers to his mouth and silenced him. She didn't want promises he couldn't keep, only the moment they were living now. When it was over, she knew it would have to end. She would get up and leave never to see or hear from him again.

Jax woke and reached to pull Catarina close, instead he met with cool sheets. Frantic, he sat up and looked around the room. She was nowhere in sight, and her clothes were gone. He checked the dining room and saw she wasn't there, either. Then he saw the note on the side table. He snatched it up and saw that it read only, "Goodbye." Angry, he crumbled the paper in his hand. "Who does she think she is? This isn't over!"

Jax stormed into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He would go to her house and talk to her. He steadied himself as the realization set in. It hit him like a rock. He was in love with her. And he'd be damned if he was

going to let her give up on them. There was no way they could make love the way they did and her not love him too. He stepped into the shower and leaned his head against the wall. He couldn't lose her again. She would see for herself that he loved her and they could make it. One way or another, they would work everything out.

Jax thought of Cat's soft sighs and cries as they joined in ecstasy time after time. He turned the water to cold, running it full blast and stood directly under the showerhead. He hadn't come to Dallas to be put off like this.

Jax turned onto her street and scanned the house numbers, looking for her address. He saw her townhouse and stopped. This was it. Her car was parked in front so she couldn't pretend not to be home. He walked to the door and rang the bell. He heard the sound of footsteps approaching and then the door opened. She stood in front of him with swollen eyes and a tissue in her hand. He didn't wait for her to say anything. "Cat, is running away the only way you know how to cope with anything?"

Catarina stood in front of him with her mouth open. He reached up and closed it.

"How did you find my place? I forbid either Marilyn or David to tell you."

"It wasn't hard, darling. Think about it. You have these yellow pages that have everyone's phone number and address."

"That's a little underhanded don't you think?"

"I do what I have to." Jax walked in, forcing her to the side. "Thank you for asking me in." He walked down the hall and into the living area. He saw a sofa and recliner on one side of the room and TV and VCR on the other. Classical music played quietly in the background. He turned to face her. "Want to tell me why you left without waking me?"

"No." She stood her ground with a defiant look across her face.

If Jax didn't know she'd been crying he'd think she didn't care about him, but the pile of tissues on the table proved otherwise. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"No, believe it or not, I didn't drink until I met you."

He laughed. "That, my dear is hard to believe. Not just anybody can drink the way you did at the pub and not be affected by it."

"Well, it's the truth. If you want anything to drink it will have to be water, juice or milk."

"Water, please."

Catarina stormed from the room and Jax sat down. He wasn't surprised the room was so comfortable; it suited her, soft beige, fluffy pillows, and a cozy fireplace. She returned and handed him the glass of water.

"Jax, we really don't have anything else to say to each other."

He watched as she nervously ran her fingers through her hair, the curls falling loose from her hairclip. "Sit down, Cat."

She sat and waited. Jax balled his left hand into a fist. This wasn't going at all the way he had planned. He'd hoped she would be glad to see him and agree they had more between them than just a brief fling. "Do you really want it to end this way?"

She straightened in her seat. "Jax, it has to be this way. Why are you making it so difficult? Do you like to torture people? I'm starting to think you do. I'm not stupid, you probably have a woman on every continent and I don't care to be added to the list." She held up her hand to keep him from speaking. "I think you're a wonderful man and if we lived closer together, we could be the closest of friends, but we don't"

Jax flinched at the word *friend*. "Cat, we could never be just friends."

"Jax, I wasn't completely honest."

He knew he didn't want to hear this. She was honest; he could read people well. What was she trying to pull? He took a deep steady breath. "I'm waiting."

She hesitated. "Jax, there's someone else, here in Dallas. I've been seeing someone for over a year." She looked away.

Jax straightened and felt an overwhelming urge to strangle someone, preferably her. Did she think he was a fool? No healthy male would date a woman for a year and not make love to her. It didn't add up. "You were a virgin."

"And? Is that supposed to mean that I can't have a relationship with someone without having sex? Jax, not every man is after sex like you."

He felt like she'd just slapped him. Is that what she thought of him? That he was only after sex. "I can get sex anywhere I want to, Cat. I'm not in the habit of seeking out virgins just to have sex." He knew it sounded crude but what did she think she was trying to pull?

The doorbell rang and Catarina rolled her eyes. "Now, who could it be?"

"Your mysterious man perhaps?" he asked snidely.

She stormed out of the room and opened the front door. "Mark!" She took his hand and yanked him in the door. "Go with what I say, okay?" She turned and walked back into the room with Mark following at her heels.

"Jax, I want you to meet Mark. Mark this is Jax Blair." She watched Mark and Jax shake hands and saw Jax' jaw twitching.

Mark smiled and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jax."

Jax took his hand, but instead of shaking it, he gripped it tight and was surprised when Mark returned the grasp. "You, too. So, you and Cat known each other long?" He watched as Mark looked at Catarina and returned her smile.

"Yes, we've known each other since we were kids. And you?"

"Just recently. We met in London." Jax watched as Catarina stepped closer to Mark and took his hand. He had to hold himself back from stepping forward and jerking her to his side. Obviously she was telling the truth. How could she be with this man and then come to London and sleep with him? He knew the man before him didn't know the

touch of her skin or the scent of her desire. He swallowed and stepped closer to them both. He had to get away before he exploded. "I'd better go."

He turned to Catarina and took her hand in his. He brought it to his mouth and lingered over her fingers. "It was nice seeing you again, Cat. I wish you all the best in your future." He lightly kissed her hand and then let it slip from his. He didn't miss the tears shining in her eyes and it made him want to pull her close, but he couldn't.

He turned to Mark. "Nice meeting you, Mark. Take care of this woman, she's one of a kind." Jax turned and walked out of the house without looking back. He started his car and took a last glimpse at her townhouse. This was the biggest mistake he'd ever made. He'd finally lost his heart to a woman, and she was out of his grasp. Jax put the car in drive and raced away.

"What was that all about?" Mark demanded. "That's the guy from London, right?"

"Yes." She ran her fingers through her hair and paced the floor. "It's the only way I could think to get rid of him. I'm sorry."

"Catarina, I've never been able to figure you out. This guy has traveled across the ocean to find you and you're booting him out the door." He shook his head. "I don't get it."

"Mark, Jax doesn't love me. There's no way he can. I'm not like the other women he's had in his life. I'm common."

"Common! If that's what you really think, then you need to see a shrink."

"Mark, he's a very prominent man. I don't run in those circles, besides he lives in London."

"So, what's wrong with London? If I remember correctly, you just saved for a year to visit that place. Now, you don't want to step foot there again."

"It's not that, Mark. I want a man that loves me, not one who's just after sex."

He tapped her on the top of the head. "Hello, is anyone in there? The guy doesn't need to fly across the

ocean to get sex. He looks like he could get it anywhere he wants."

She rolled her eyes. "You don't understand. How can you? You're a man, too. Listen, I want what David and Marilyn have, stability, love, family and children. I can't have that with Jax."

"Why not?"

She couldn't answer, she didn't know why, she just knew. "Mark, please support me on this. I need you."

He walked to her and took her in his arms. "I'm here for you, but just for the record I think you're making a big mistake."

Catarina punched him on the side. "I don't want to hear it again, okay."

"Never again. If this is your decision, then that's the way it's going to be."

Chapter Ten

The audit went quickly and Jax was ready to fly out of Dallas by Wednesday afternoon. He boarded the plane headed for J.F.K. Airport, where David was meeting him. The plane landed smoothly and when Jax departed the craft he saw David waiting in the lobby. He walked over and David hugged him. David's friendship was one thing he could always count on.

"Thanks for meeting me, David." He held tight to David's arms and grinned.

"No problem, brother. You ready to get back home?"

Home. It wasn't going to be the same now that he knew he loved Catarina. He thought he was immune to these sorts of feelings, but clearly that wasn't the case. It was a dismal thought, knowing he'd never see her again. They had a connection with Marilyn and David but there was no reason to ever see each other. He knew David had a pretty good idea why he wanted to meet, and he didn't beat around the bush. "I've been hit pretty hard."

David smiled. "I know what you mean. When it happens you're stunned for a while. Just think, Marilyn was my employee." He laughed. "Don't worry, it'll work out."

Jax frowned and shook his head. "Not this time, we're too different." They walked to the bar down the hall and Jax ordered them vodka. It bit going down, but that was how Jax liked it. The bartender asked if he wanted another and Jax pushed the glass away. If he didn't watch it, he'd get hooked on the stuff trying to forget her. "No thanks."

David watched in silence. "You know, Marilyn didn't fill me in. She only said you and Cat decided not to carry it any further."

Jax laughed. "Right. More like, Cat decided it shouldn't go any further. You know, I never saw myself being in this predicament. I'm pathetic, David. I'm like one of

those damn puppies with their ears dragging the ground-- and I can tell you it's not much fun."

David was laughing. "Well, maybe it's not fun, but it sure is funny. To finally see the notorious Jax Blair fall at the feet of a woman is well worth the cost of a flight."

"I think I will take another drink."

"No, I was joking. So, are you just going to let it end this way?"

"What choice do I have? I'm headed back to London and she's here, or actually in Dallas. There's no way we could make it last from two different countries. She's right on that account."

"And she wouldn't even consider relocating?"

"No, she was pretty adamant on the issue. I couldn't ask her to do otherwise, she'd have to leave her job and everything she knows."

"Well, that doesn't sound like Cat to me. It just doesn't add up. She may have been an innocent, but she's not naive. She takes off like a light in the middle of the night, hides away in Scotland so you can't reach her, meets with you in Dallas and you have another night together. Something's not right here. I'm going to find out."

"Tell me something. If you two knew she was seeing someone then why did you set us up?"

David jerked his head. "What? That's news to me."

"Well, I thought it was a ploy until the guy showed up. There's definitely someone else."

"You met him? What's his name?"

"Mark. Listen, if you do find out what's really going on, let me know. God knows I've tried all I can." He stood. "My flight is about to take off, I'd better go."

"Keep in touch and I'll let you know what's going on." David hugged Jax again.

"I will, but if you don't hear anything that will make a difference, don't tell me, okay? I'd rather move forward."

"I understand."

"I'll call you later in the week and let you know how things are going in the London office. If you talk to your parents, tell them thanks for letting me stay in Dallas."

"Will do. Take care."

Jax turned and left David in the bar. He wanted to put as much distance between him and the states as possible. The only thing he wished for more was to be able to erase Catarina's presence from his mind, the taste, smell and feel of her. If he didn't, he'd never make it through this.

David watched as Jax retreated. "Mark." He shook his head. "What are those two up to?" David left the bar determined to find out exactly what was going on. Cat and Mark were pulling a good one with Jax and he wanted to know why. Marilyn would tell him.

Catarina handed the little girl a lollipop. Tears clung to her blond lashes as she tried desperately to be brave. "Shots are never fun, but they keep you healthy. Really." Catarina tried to make the girl smile, but who wanted to smile when they'd just received two shots?

She took the youngster by the hand and walked her to her mother. Her mom held open her arms and blonde curls bobbed as the little girl rushed into her mother's arms. Catarina swallowed as she watched the love and trust between the two.

She wanted so desperately to have a child and give the same love as that woman did. But every time she pictured her child it had dark brown hair, large brown eyes and hair that curled above its little ears. Jax' child was the one she wanted and none other. She sighed as she walked back down the hall to the next patient. She had to keep her head out of the clouds and get to work, no sense wishing for something that would never happen.

She pulled the paper off the examination table and straightened the counter. The day had been hectic, filled with children getting their immunizations for the coming school year. She wished they would discover a way to give painless shots. Catarina straightened the magazines and leaned over to pick one up that had fallen to the floor. It had a picture of Trafalgar Square on the front and her hands faltered. Everywhere she turned she was reminded of Jax.

She thought that once she returned to Dallas everything would be normal again, but she was wrong.

She set the magazine down and turned away. She heard the office door open and turned to see Mark. "Hi, you mean they let you out of the x-ray Department?"

Mark laughed. "Well, I do get a break from time to time." He laughed again. "Get it, a break?"

"Right, you need to get better lines. That's getting old."

"Okay, Miss Perfect. What are you doing for dinner?"

"Nothing, I'm going home to eat in solitude."

"No you're not. We have a date. I'm taking you to The Olive Garden."

She didn't feel like going out but didn't want to disappoint Mark again. She'd only been back a couple of weeks and he'd tried to get her to go out with him several times--and she would always turn him down. She didn't have the heart to do so this time. "Okay, what time?"

"Our last appointment at x-ray is 6:30, so I should be able to get out of here by 7:00. I'll pick you up at your place at 7:30."

"You don't have to do that, I can meet you there."

Mark shook his head. "No, I'll pick you up. That's the only way I'm sure you'll show up."

"Ha, ha, Okay I'll be ready." She watched Mark walk out of the office and close the door behind him. He was such a good friend. She hated that she'd been putting him off but she just didn't feel like having fun. Life wasn't fun right now.

"Catarina, are we ready to get out of here?"

Catarina turned to Betty the other nurse on duty. "Let's run while we can." She and Betty laughed as they gathered their purses. Catarina didn't know exactly how old Betty was, but she guessed she was in her late fifties. She was a grandmother of seven and was wonderful with the children. Betty always had a smile for anyone. They walked out of the building together and Catarina let herself forget her troubles for a while as she enjoyed Betty's bright conversation.

The restaurant was full, but Mark's charm soon secured them a table. "Mark, the way you talk and flirt with women should be outlawed." Catarina rolled her eyes.

Mark laughed. "You just wish you had it so good."

"Right, I want women falling at my feet."

"Not women, but you do need a few men." Mark ordered them both a glass of red wine.

"Men are the last thing I need in my life right now. Let's change the subject. So, how's the x-ray business?"

"Busy as you know, since your office sent three patients down this afternoon. I wished parents would make their children wear helmets and pads when they're riding bikes."

"I know what you mean, but unless someone they know gets seriously injured it doesn't happen."

"Let's not talk business."

"As long as you don't want to talk personal."

"What else is there? Now quit beating around the bush and tell me what's up. This is Mark, not some stranger. I knew you before I was shaving and you were wearing bras." He raised his brows.

Catarina laughed and threw a piece of her bread at him. "Mark, get a grip. I swear your testosterone runs rampant even now twenty years later."

"Seriously, what's up? You know Marilyn's called me every other day and she's driving me mad. It's getting to where I look at the caller ID box and not answering."

"I know. She's been calling my place too. She wasn't too happy that I used you against Jax."

"Tell me about it. I didn't have anything to do with it and she gave me a ripping I haven't had since I was a kid."

"Well, she'll just have to get over it. It's over and done with, besides it accomplished exactly what I wanted it to. Jax is back in London and I haven't heard a peep from him." It wasn't what she really wanted, but she couldn't change things now. It was over and he was gone.

"I don't think it's going to be that easy. How long has it been since you've talked to Marilyn?"

Catarina thought for a second. She hadn't talked to Marilyn for four days. "Why, what's up?"

"That answers my question. I hope you're ready for this one. Guess who will be arriving tomorrow morning at D.F.W.?"

"No, not Marilyn."

"You guessed it. You shouldn't have put her off like that. You know she already feels responsible."

"I know, but good grief. Why is she coming here?"

"She said she promised her parents to visit and this would be the perfect time."

"Great." No more hiding. Marilyn would walk right in her house, or come crashing into her office, whatever it took. "What time tomorrow?"

"Bright and early, her mother's picking her up at ten."

"Thanks for the warning." She wanted to see Marilyn but wasn't ready to answer the multitude of questions she knew she'd ask.

Their salads and plates of lasagna arrived and they talked about nothing more important than the weather. Catarina was thankful that Mark had given up harassing her about Jax and enjoyed the peaceful company.

On their way home, Catarina smiled and asked, "Mark, do you think Marilyn's really just coming here for me?"

"She didn't say so, but I think that sums it up. She'd do anything for you, Catarina and when you wouldn't return her calls I think she planned the trip. Be honest with her."

"I will. I know I shouldn't have done it, but I didn't want to talk about Jax. You know how she can be."

"She only cares, the same as I do. We hate to see you this way, it's not normal."

"What do you mean not normal? Do you think I'm a nut?" She was getting angry again and didn't want to.

"No, but it's not like you to run from your problems."

Was that what she was doing? She hadn't thought of it that way. It was true, she didn't want to talk about Jax, but that was her way of healing. Did everyone think she was hiding in silence? "Is that what I'm doing, Mark? I didn't mean to."

He pulled in front of her duplex, jumped out and opened her door. "Let's go in. We can talk there."

Once inside, Catarina sat in the living room on the couch. Mark sat next to her. "Tell me."

"Alright, remember you asked."

She nodded and swallowed. "Go on, tell me what you think."

"You're hiding and I don't understand why. Jax seemed like a pretty nice fellow. He didn't look like a descendent of Jack the Ripper. So, what's the problem? Not every guy will cross an ocean for a woman and you turned the guy away. What's worse, you used me to do it. You know I'm always here for you, but it put me in an awkward position, not only with Jax but with Marilyn and David."

"I know, I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to say. He wasn't going to be put off. He wanted to know why I left London so abruptly. What was I supposed to do?"

"How about telling him the truth. You love him, right?"

She swallowed the lump that had gathered in her throat. "Yes, but you don't understand."

"Don't give me that crap, Cat. I know what you're getting at, the guy's a lady-killer, all he has to do is walk into a room and women fall at his feet. So what? Just because women like him doesn't mean he can't make a commitment."

"I know but I can't let myself open to that chance. What if it doesn't work out?"

Mark took her face in his hands and turned her it towards him. "You'll end up an awfully lonely woman if you never take a chance."

She looked down and a tear dropped from her eye. "I know." Mark pulled her close and hugged her. "Thank you for everything, Mark. Seriously, you've been there for me all along and I appreciate it."

"Just do something about it, okay? I don't like to see you this way. So what if it doesn't work out? At least you'll know and can move on with your life. Look, it's been two weeks already."

"You're right." She pulled out of his arms and rose from the couch. "You want some coffee?"

Mark shook his head and stood. "No, thanks though I'd better head out. I have an early start in the morning. I told one of the guys at the clinic I'd work for him." He lifted her chin. "Get some rest and think about everything."

She nodded. "I will." She stood on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Mark."

He tapped her on the nose. "Nothing to it, little sister. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She locked the door when Mark left and turned out all the lights. When she lay on her bed the phone rang. "Hello?" No one spoke. "Hello?" There was light static in the background and Catarina held her breath, her heart beating frantically. She heard someone hang up and then there was nothing. She whispered, "Jax."

Catarina pulled the sheet over her body and lay quietly listening to the crickets and creatures outside her window. It was peaceful. She closed her eyes, picturing her room in London. The soft down comforter, feather mattress, it had been wonderful. Then her dream was interrupted by the memory of Jax' touch, his gentle persuasion and her compliant body. She'd given everything to him, holding nothing back.

There was no keeping the memories at bay; they intruded when she slept, while she examined patients, and as she ate. There wasn't a moment during the day when she was immune to thoughts of him. Jax was everywhere; his touch, smell and taste. Catarina closed her eyes and finally fell into a haze of rest, giving into the urges her heart so earnestly desired.

Chapter Eleven

Catarina picked up the phone. "Nurse Garcia speaking."

"Catarina, its Marilyn."

"Marilyn, I was wondering when you'd call. I almost expected you to walk through the door." She laughed happy to hear her friend's voice.

"Well, mom has kept us going from one toy store to the next." She laughed, too. "Are you free for dinner?"

"Yes, do you and the boys want to come to my place?"

"Are you kidding? I'm taking full advantage of grandma. I'm coming to your place for the night and the kids are staying with my mom and dad."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course, so where are we going?"

"You pick and meet me at my place at five thirty."

"Will do. I'll see you then."

Catarina hung up the phone and smiled. She had been dreading the phone call all afternoon and now wondered why. She and Marilyn had always been the best of friends. She didn't know why she'd been acting the way she had, hiding from her friend. Things would be fine.

She hurried to straighten as Betty gave all the messages to the doctor. Catarina picked up her purse, waived at Betty and then left. She was anxious to see Marilyn.

She stopped by the store to pick up popcorn and when she pulled up she saw Marilyn's mom's car parked in the drive. She jumped out and ran up the steps to greet her. "Marilyn." They hugged each other and laughed. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad, too. I was about to start digging in the flower pots for a key."

"You wouldn't have found one there. I keep it under the mat." She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "Surely a burglar wouldn't think I'd be stupid enough to leave it under the mat, so that's exactly where I keep it. Smart huh?"

"Or dumb, I don't know which." Marilyn followed Catarina inside and dropped her bag by the door."

"So, how did you get away from David?"

"It wasn't easy. The kids and I had to beg, but of course we got our way. He'll be down Saturday to spend the weekend, and then he's heading back to Sherry. I'm here for two whole glorious weeks."

Catarina shook her head. "I don't see how you can spend two weeks away from that wonderful husband of yours. You're the luckiest woman alive."

"Right, and he's all mine, so keep away." They laughed together. "So, what do you have planned tonight? I saw the popcorn."

"I thought after dinner, we could come back here and watch "Urban Cowboy" and have a girls night, just like we used to."

"Sounds good to me. We have to eat Mexican. I've been about to die up there. Marie tries, but it's nothing like here. Man, I'd give my right arm for a real tamale."

"Well, then we're off to eat Mexican." She picked up her keys. "How about we take my car tonight? It's hot and we can keep the top down."

"Let's go." Marilyn followed Catarina out and they drove to Pappasitos Mexican restaurant off I35. The restaurant was lit up in festive colors and Spanish music played in the background. The waiter seated them in a booth away from the bar, as Catarina requested.

"How's Mark?" Marilyn asked.

Catarina wasn't fooled, she knew Marilyn had been talking to Mark but wasn't about to start something by telling her Mark had already told her everything. She smiled and played along. "He's doing fine."

"Does he have a new woman in his life?"

"Nope, he's playing the field as always." Catarina was going to make Marilyn work for the information she wanted.

She wasn't going to just give it to her that easily. She sat smiling, waiting for the next question.

"So, have you been seeing someone?"

"Nope." She picked up her iced tea and took a sip. The waiter brought their bowl of queso and guacamole. Catarina dipped a chip in the cheese and ate, ignoring the questions. "This is good. Try one."

"Catarina, tell me what I want to know." Marilyn laughed and tasted the queso she loved so much.

Catarina laughed at the frustrated look on Marilyn's face. "Alright, no I'm not seeing anyone and you know it. If you want to know about me and Jax, then ask."

"Tell me about you and Jax. What really happened in London?" She put another chip in her mouth, this one with guacamole.

Catarina's heart started beating fast and she could tell she was blushing. She could never hide anything from Marilyn. She closed her eyes and began. "It was wonderful. The city was beautiful; Jax took me on a picnic in a magnificent garden, to lunch in an ancient inn, and to a bouncing pub one night. We made love while the sounds of London drifted in the room and we whispered sweet words that I'll never be able to erase from my mind. It was a dream come true."

She opened her eyes and saw Marilyn's figure swimming through her haze of tears. "I know you warned me about European men, but I didn't listen. You see, I fell for that suave routine of his. I acted like the naïve American I am and fell in love with him."

Marilyn put her chip down and took Catarina's hand. "Oh, Catarina you may have fallen into the scenario that I warned you against, but it wasn't a mistake. Jax loves you."

Catarina pulled her hand out of Marilyn's and straightened. Her heart was breaking into a million tiny pieces. She'd cried so much over the last couple weeks she didn't think she had another tear to shed. She whispered, "Please, let's not ruin tonight. Don't bring him up. I know Jax is a wonderful man, he truly is, but he doesn't love me. I was the one there. I was the one he was holding and

kissing. I know how he feels, so please don't try to tell me otherwise."

The waiter approached and took their order. When he left, Catarina smiled. "It was a time I'll never forget. Still, I don't believe in fairytales. You are the lucky one, you found Prince Charming. There's not another one out there for me. I'm fine. Really." She took Marilyn's hand in hers. "Really."

"I didn't mean to upset you, I'm sorry. I wish you'd listen to what I have to say."

"There's nothing else to say, Marilyn. It's over and I don't want to continue dwelling on it, alright?"

"Okay, we'll do what you say, at least tonight."

"Thank you. Now, let's enjoy tonight, no more sad thoughts. It's not every day I get to see my dearest friend in all the world."

Catarina pressed the doorbell and waited for someone to answer. She could hear the joyful voices through the door and then it opened. She smiled and looked up to see David standing there, looking at her like a child. Her face fell. "Hello to you too, David."

"Catarina, would you like to come in?" He didn't step aside.

"Yes, thank you, since I was a part of this family before you were." She pushed her way past him. "What's your problem?"

"Like you need to ask. I'm not going to be put off like Marilyn. I want to know what happened in London. Did Jax do something to you to make you act like such a shrew? The guy left Europe, tracked you down from Sherry to Dallas, and you played him for a fool. And that little stunt with Mark? Hello, like that was going to work once it got to us."

She jabbed her finger at his chest. "Now you listen to me David. I'm not a child any more and I'd appreciate it if you didn't treat me like one. You know what happened in London and you want to know what else? I loved it." She reveled in the shocked look on David's. "Jax is a wonderful

guy and I'm glad I got to know him but that's where it stops. There is no future for us. Now, if you're going to pout about it, then next time don't set me up."

She turned on her heel and followed the voices to the dining room. Marilyn and her mother were laughing over something little David was doing and she walked in, trying to ignore the stares coming from David. "Hello Davie, come give Auntie Cat a big kiss." When the child ran to her and threw his arms around her neck, Catarina fell to her knees and held tight. He was so soft and loving, no questions or demands. She opened her eyes and caught David watching her. He knew she loved Jax with all her heart. He was just as smart as his meddlesome wife.

Dinner was a boisterous time and Catarina loved every second of it. She watched as Marilyn and David managed to play with both their children and still carry on a conversation. They were such a happy, close-knit family and she was delighted for them. Someday she'd have the same, she prayed.

After the dishes were finished, Catarina found Marilyn sitting in a rocking chair, holding Davie. "He still likes to be rocked sometimes."

Catarina smiled. "I'd do the same. I better go, it's getting late."

"David's returning to Sherry tomorrow, so I'll call you in the evening after his flight leaves."

"Okay, tell him to take care." Catarina picked up her purse and walked out the door. She leaned against one of the porch posts and sighed. This was the perfect family. Grandparents who loved their grandchildren to distraction and parents that totally adored their children. She heard someone at the side of the house and turned. "David, what are you doing out here?"

He held up a cigar. "Marilyn won't let me do this in the house, so I have to come outside."

"You know it will kill you quicker than a cigarette."

"Aw, Cat, don't believe everything you hear," he said, laughing. "Why are you leaving so early?"

"I have church and a luncheon afterwards tomorrow, so I need to get home."

"Want me to follow you?"

"No, of course not. I'll be fine. David, please, I know you want to talk about Jax and what happened in London, but I'm not ready, okay?"

"If you're not ready, then that should tell you something, Cat."

"I know, David, but please give me time."

He shook his head. "I don't understand why you need time, but okay, you've got it. Just don't take too long or you might lose everything that God has given you."

She knew he was right, but pushed the advice aside. "Thanks." She hugged him. "Thanks for letting your family come down here for two weeks, I can't imagine what it feels like for you to go home in the evenings and not have your munchkins and Marilyn there to greet you."

"Don't remind me, or you might find yourself alone tomorrow." He laughed. "Go on, I won't harass you this time but I can't promise the same when I see you next."

"I know, thanks. I'll talk to you soon." She got in her car and waived as she pulled away from the house. She'd made it without having to get in a debate with David and was relieved. She didn't want to put a strain on his and Jax' relationship.

Marilyn hugged David as they waited for the boarding announcement for his flight. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me, too. I hate going into that house and finding it empty." He hugged her close and kissed her neck.

"It's only for another week. Mom and Dad love spending time with the kids. Davie is becoming quite the little vegetable gardener. We'll have to make one at home."

David rolled his eyes. "Great, a garden of flowers and now a garden of vegetables. My son will be known for plants."

Marilyn punched him in the arm. "David behave."

"I'm joking dear. Davie can be anything he wants. I'll give him the entire blasted backyard for his garden if that's what he wants."

"I know." She kissed him on the lips. "They'd better call your flight, or it's going to get mighty hot in this airport."

"That will be just fine with me." He gave Marilyn a playful wink. "So tell me, what's going on with Cat?"

"Do we have to discuss that now?"

"Yes, because every time I try to bring it up, you change the subject."

"She loves him, that's obvious, but for some reason she doesn't trust him. She thinks he has only one thing on his mind and once he gets his fill he'll be on his way."

"That's not true."

"You know it and I know it but Catarina doesn't believe it and she won't talk about it. It's driving me insane. I've let her put it off long enough. It's time for her to pay the piper."

"Let me know how things go. Jax isn't the same, he's grouchy and won't even let me bring her name up. How are we going to have a birthday party next month if the godparents can't attend?"

Marilyn shrugged her shoulders. "We'll get it taken care of, don't worry. If Jax wasn't such a looker and Catarina wasn't so darned stubborn we wouldn't have to deal with this. They're acting like two kids." She shook her head. "Well, I'm getting sick of it and I'm going to put a stop to it." David smiled. "God, you're beautiful when you get angry." He heard his flight being called. "There it is. All right, give the kids a kiss from Daddy and enjoy your last week here. I may never let you come without me again. It's driving me insane."

Marilyn laughed. "Poor baby." She hugged him back. "I love you, darling. Call me when you get home so I don't worry."

"I love you, too and I will." David turned and carried his case onto the plane. Marilyn watched as the baggage handlers loaded the luggage into the baggage compartment, and then stayed as the plane taxied off. She was determined to get this thing between Jax and Catarina settled so she could get back home with her husband where she needed to

be. She didn't need to look after two grown adults. This was getting ridiculous.

Chapter Twelve

It was Friday and Catarina couldn't wait to get Marilyn on the plane headed for Sherry. She loved her friend dearly, but she was tired of putting on a front all the time. She was miserable. All she wanted to do was sleep, and she didn't know why. The thought of a pillow and cool sheets would have her longing to leave the office and go home. She started taking extra vitamins Wednesday but it hadn't helped.

She sat on the rolling chair, rested her head on the examination table and sighed. Even the paper felt nice on her skin. She closed her eyes and relaxed. The music played lightly and lulled her into sleep.

"Excuse me, Catarina, but I'm afraid we need this room."

Catarina jumped at the sound of Betty's voice. "Oh my, I fell asleep."

"That's quite obvious. Have you been sick, dear?"

Catarina shook her head. "No, I feel fine, but I've been exhausted. I can't seem to get enough sleep." She stood and stretched.

"Do you take vitamins?"

"Yes, actually I upped them a bit this week. I think I just need to go to bed even earlier."

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd ask if you were pregnant." Betty laughed and walked out of the room.

Catarina didn't laugh. Instead she fell back onto the stool and stared across the room. Surely that wasn't her problem. Sure she was tired, but who wouldn't be after a glorious week in Europe and only a month to recuperate?

She thought for a moment. She'd been back from Europe for a month, and her last period had been two weeks before she'd left. "Seven weeks! Oh God, no. It can't be." How could she possibly forget for seven weeks? She

dropped her head back onto the table. "What am I going to do?"

She decided she'd have to go to the store and get one of those pregnancy tests that gave immediate results. Didn't women often miss their periods when they were under a lot of stress? Yes, that had to be it.

The rest of the afternoon passed by with Catarina in a dream-like state. All she could focus on was the possibility that she might be pregnant. What would she do, would she tell Jax and if so, what would he say? By the time five arrived, she was a nervous wreck. She stopped by the drugstore on the way home and bought a pregnancy test.

When she got home, she threw her purse on the floor and carried the test to the bathroom. She couldn't wait until morning as it suggested. Seven weeks was far enough along for the test to give accurate results. She followed the directions and waited the five minutes for the results. Perspiration beaded on her back as she watched. She didn't know if it was from nerves or the unbearable Dallas heat.

Her timer went off at five minutes and Catarina watched as the mark went from minus to plus. She swallowed hard and gripped the stick tighter, trying to turn it back to negative. It remained positive. Catarina sighed. She knew she was pregnant.

"Oh God, what am I going to do?"

How could she possibly tell Jax she was pregnant? He'd know that everything she'd said about Mark was a lie. He probably wouldn't believe her. Why should he?

The phone rang and she continued to sit there unable to move. Her whole life was crumbling around her. The phone continued to ring and she finally walked over to answer it. "Hello?"

"Catarina, I thought you were going to pick us up and take us to the airport."

Catarina jerked back to reality. "Marilyn was expecting her. "Of course, I'm on my way." She hung up and set the stick to the side. She'd get Marilyn to the airport and then she'd deal with this. She grabbed her keys and hurried from the house. It was the middle of summer and, as usual,

the airport was packed. Marilyn, Catarina, and the kids rushed through the airport and made it to the gate just in time. They called the flight number and Marilyn and Catarina hugged.

Marilyn spoke first. "You know we never did get things settled." Catarina smiled. "I know but I love you for trying."

"I'm afraid that's not going to placate David any." She laughed.

"No, I'm sure it's not, but David will get over it. Tell him everything's fine and Jax and I are big kids now."

"Right. I'll do that."

Catarina kissed both children. "Now you two take care of your mommy. She needs a little rest every now and then, okay?"

"Okay, Auntie Cat." Davie gave her a wet kiss.

Catarina almost burst into tears when he let go of her neck. She would have a child of her own soon and she couldn't wait. She just wished it wasn't happening like this, with all the secrecy and deceit.

Marilyn saw her tears. "What's wrong?"

Catarina shook her head. "Nothing, go or you're going to be late for your flight."

Marilyn crossed her arms. "I'm not budging and you can be the one to call David and tell him I'm not arriving if you don't tell me what's wrong this instance."

Catarina knew that stubborn look of Marilyn's. "Right. When you called, I'd just discovered I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm pregnant." She swallowed.

"All right, we can deal with this. Have you decided what to do?"

"What do you mean what to do? I'm having the baby of course."

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. Are you going to tell Jax?"

"I don't know."

"Girl, let me tell you one thing. You better tell him, because if you think things are bad now, trust me it will get a hell of a lot worse. That man loves you and if he finds out

about this without you telling him, there will be hell to pay. He'll probably drag you to a justice of the peace like a overbearing sixteenth century European."

Catarina could actually see Jax doing something like that and she laughed. "I've got a lot to think about and I'll let you know what's going on."

"Please tell him, Catarina, he really loves you." Marilyn took her hand and squeezed it gently.

"Give me time. I promise I'll tell him; I'm just not ready yet.

Catarina tried to hide her tears as they hugged. "Thank you for coming, I know it was for me."

"It was, but even though we didn't get things taken care of, I had a wonderful visit."

"Me, too. I'll call you this week."

"No more ignoring me calls. You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

They laughed and Marilyn and the boys walked down the long hallway towards the plane. Catarina hugged herself and prayed that she made the right choice. It wasn't just herself she was thinking about now, it was a child too, hers and Jax'.

Mark stared at her open mouthed. "Are you serious?" He looked at the stick on the table, not able to believe what he was hearing. Catarina was pregnant and not married. She was the last person he ever thought this would happen to.

He roughly ran his fingers through his hair. "Tell me how this happened."

Catarina laughed, trying to play it light. "Well, this happens when a man and a woman...." She was interrupted when Mark jerked around and glared at her.

"Don't play stupid with me, Catarina. You know what I mean. I know you were a virgin when you left for London and you told me you made love with this Jax character, but didn't you two use protection? Aren't the Europeans the ones who invented them?"

Catarina took a deep breath. Sometimes having a guy for a best friend wasn't such a good thing, and this was one of those times. Marilyn understood but Mark, well, he was another story. "Listen Mark, I made a mistake and now I'm pregnant, end of story."

"Cat, I don't think you understand. This isn't just some mistake. This is a baby."

She was angry and gripped her glass, afraid she might throw it at him. "Listen, Mark, I've had it. Do you hear me? I don't need the third degree. This is a crucial time and I need your support, not your overbearing male attitude. I know it's a baby, I'm not stupid. The baby is growing in me, not you!"

Mark sat on the loveseat. "I know, I'm sorry, Cat. I just don't know what you're going to do."

"I don't know either. I'm going to have my baby no matter what. It's not the baby's fault that I didn't use protection. I'll love him with all my heart and give him the best home I can. As far as Jax goes, I don't know. I haven't decided yet what I'll do. I know I have to tell him, but I'm not sure if I have the courage to tell him now."

Mark took Catarina's hand and pulled her down to sit next to him. He put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. They sat in silence for a few moments until Mark said, "I'm sorry I got upset with you. I just don't want to see you hurt."

She sniffed and brushed back a tear. "I know and I love you for it, but I have to do this my own way. I'm not prepared to jump in and call Jax." She shook her head. "He thinks we were having an affair. Why would he believe the baby is his?"

"I don't think the guy's as stupid as you make him out to be. I don't believe for one second that he fell for that crap about us when he was here. I think he just let you have your way."

"I never wanted to hurt him, and now look what's happened. I know if I tell him, he'll feel obligated to marry me."

"He seems like an up and up guy to me. And here you were trying to run him off. I'll never understand you, Cat."

She laughed. "You're right, you won't." She leaned her head back on his shoulder and gazed across the room. Mark had always been there for her, even though she knew he wanted to choke her at times or shake her until she would see his point.

"Cat, you know I'm going to stick by your side no matter what, right?"

"Yes, I can always count on you. That's what I was just thinking about. Hey, we should be the old married couple, we think like one." She laughed and felt Mark tense. She looked back and saw a strange look on his face. "I was just joking, Mark."

"I'm not. I'll marry you, Catarina. I don't want to see you hurt. We can make a life for the baby together."

Tears began rolling down her cheeks. "Mark I can't marry you. I don't love you like that, you're the brother I always wanted."

"I always will be, too. I just want you to know I'll do anything for you and that means marry you."

"I know and thank you, but I can handle this myself. I don't have to be married to be a mother; this is the twentieth century. You'll still be a part of our lives, Uncle Mark." She laughed.

"That's right and don't think that will change even if you and Jax get things settled."

"Don't worry, I know it won't. Jax will understand you were only trying to help and protect me. He'll understand. If not, then we'll let Marilyn take care of him."

Mark laughed. "That should take care of it then, Marilyn will have him running for the hills."

"I hope she doesn't tell David. He'll kill me and Jax."

"He does get a bit protective doesn't he? I thought he was going to kill me for my part in the whole mess you concocted, but living with Marilyn he understood how you two can get any man tripped up in one of your schemes." He laughed as Catarina tried to punch him.

With her back against his chest she was in the perfect position for him to place his hand over her stomach. He slowly lifted his hand and placed it there. He whispered, "Cat, you have a baby in there now. Isn't it amazing?"

She nodded and looked at his hand on her stomach. It was nice to share this moment with him; she just wished it was Jax she could be sharing it with. "Amazing. Just think I'm two months along now and in another two months I'll start showing. Then I'll get as big as a circus tent. Remember how big Marilyn got each time?"

They both laughed. "You'd better not let her hear you say that or she'll make you regret it when you start showing and your body does weird things. Gosh, your body is going to change all over. Are you ready for that?"

"I'm not even prepared for the beginning, how could I bet ready for everything else, but I guess it doesn't matter. It's going to happen so there's no point in crying over spilled milk." Mark's hand intimately tightened on her stomach and she closed her eyes. It was real, this wasn't a dream. She was carrying Jax' child.

Mark moved his hand and held hers. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, I guess I better get up or we might fall asleep here."

Mark laughed. "Right." He stood and smiled down at her. "Cat, call me if you need to talk. I don't care what time it is."

"Thanks, but you might live to regret it."

"Nope, never." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'd better go, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She watched as Mark walked out of the house and closed the door behind him. Life was so much easier when you had friends. She didn't know what she'd do without him. Catarina walked up the stairs and lay on the bed. She rested her hand on her concave stomach and imagined what she'd look like when she was seven months pregnant. She wanted to go shopping as soon as she could fit into maternity clothes.

A picture of Jax popped into her mind and the excitement and thrill of pregnancy disappeared. How would he react? He would probably be furious and think she did it to trap him. She wouldn't allow that to happen. No, she'd raise her child on her own and give it all the nurturing and happiness she could. She didn't need Jax.

Still, she knew she couldn't keep it from him for long. Jax was the father and he deserved to know he had a child. But when would she tell him? Now, or after the baby was born? She tried to imagine how Jax would feel if he found out he had a child and no one had told him. He'd most likely be enraged, never forgive her.

The thought of Jax never forgiving her was almost as bad as when she sent him away. She was reasonably certain he'd forgive her someday for that, but not telling him about his child was something else again. She had to tell him sooner or later and sooner seemed to be the most logical choice.

Should she call him on the phone or travel to London, as he'd traveled here to see her? If she called him, would he fly back to Dallas to race to her side, or would he just tell her to call him when she knew whether it was a boy or girl? No, Jax wasn't like that. He was a gentle, loving man. He would be a wonderful father and husband. Her heart clenched at the thought. If only they could be a family--a real family, bound by love and not merely by a sense of duty.

She rolled over and blocked out the thought. Tomorrow was soon enough to worry about Jax. Tonight she needed rest. Now that she knew she was pregnant, she would take extra care of herself and get the rest she needed. First thing in the morning she would make an appointment to see a doctor. A whole new way of life was about to begin.

Chapter Thirteen

Catarina held the vitamins in one hand and the three pamphlets the nurse had given her in the other. She was grinning from ear to ear and thought for sure the nurse must think she was an idiot. Catarina didn't care. She was belated at the prospect of becoming a mother.

Of course, she dreaded telling her friends at church. She hoped they wouldn't judge her too harshly. She'd always planned to wait until she was married, but life doesn't always go according to one's plans. Well, the deed was done and now it was time to face the future. She put her hand over her stomach and was amazed that a small human was actually growing in there. In seven months she'd have a beautiful baby of her own to hold and cuddle. Catarina couldn't wait.

After leaving the doctor's office, she walked to her car. She had another ten minutes left on the parking meter and that gave her just enough time to treat herself to a cup of coffee--well, decaf actually, now that she was pregnant--at the coffee shop across the street.

She made it to her car just as the flag popped up and she smiled. What a wonderful day, everything was perfect. Catarina pulled the visor down to block the sun's intensity and placed her coffee in the cup holder. She put on her turn signal and, after checking for other cars, emerged from her parking spot. As she crossed the intersection, a car came speeding towards her out of nowhere. She hit the breaks and swerved to avoid a collision, but the other car slammed into hers. The impact caused Catarina to jerk forward and hit her head against the steering wheel. As dizziness threatened to overcome her, she closed her eyes and rested her throbbing head on the steering wheel, fighting to catch her breath. She heard her door being pulled open and a man asking her if she was all right. She saw blood on the floorboard and closed her eyes again. She couldn't talk.

Suddenly, everything went dark and all she could think was, "Baby."

Catarina could hear beeping noises and tried to open her eyes. She squeezed them tight again trying to block out the bright light. Her head was engulfed in pain. She fought to get her bearings. What had happened? Where was she? She tried to move her head, but it felt as though it weighed a ton. She tried to speak but her throat was too dry. She felt a glass at her lips and opened them. Cool water dribbled down her throat. She whispered, "Thank you. Where am I?"

"You're in St. Paul's Hospital. You were in a car accident."

As her thoughts began to clear, Catarina remembered seeing another car and the impact. She tried to remember more but couldn't.

"You're okay, the doctor will be here in just a minute. Is there anything I can get you?"

She tried to shake her head no, but the pain was too much. She only mouthed the words. She heard the door open and footsteps approaching. "Good afternoon, Catarina. How are you feeling?"

She opened her eyes and saw a doctor at the foot of her bed. "Horrible, my head is killing me."

"I'll have the nurse give you something for that. I'm going to check your legs and arms would you move the ones I touch?"

"Yes." She did as the doctor said and then felt a great deal of cramping in her stomach. All of a sudden she remembered about the baby and gasped. "My baby, is my baby okay?"

The doctor looked at her and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, but you lost the baby. You're healthy and you'll be able to have more."

Although it still throbbed, she shook her head as tears rolled down her cheeks. "No, I want *this* one." She turned her face away. "I want this one."

Catarina began to sob and heard the doctor direct the nurse to bring a sedative for her. Her screaming thoughts echoed throughout her head. *My baby. Oh God, I've lost my baby. Jax' baby.* She was oblivious to everything else, even the shot the doctor gave her. Sleep soon took over and Catarina fell into dreamless void.

Mark sat in the chair beside Catarina's bed watching the IV drip medication into the tube leading to her arm. The doctor said she was going to be fine and that the medicine was only a precautionary measure. The miscarriage was going to be the hardest thing for her to get over. Mark knew how much she already loved the baby.

He took her hand in his and held it, gently stroking her knuckles. Mark placed a call to Marilyn as soon as he had spoken with the doctor. He assured her Catarina was fine, but Marilyn was determined to come anyway. He looked at his watch and expected her to walk through the door at any time.

Catarina's skin was very pale and it worried him. She'd been sleeping for two days now and he knew it was time for her to be up and about. Mark had questioned the doctor about her depression. He said it was normal and to give her a few days. Well, it had been that long now. Maybe, Marilyn could pull her out of it.

The door opened and he looked up as Marilyn walked in. She smiled at him and walked over giving him a hug. "How's she doing?"

"Physically, fine. Mentally, not very good. I'm hoping you can help her through this. I'm not much good at women stuff." He tried to laugh it off but knew he didn't sound too convincing.

"Mark, it's not you. She's going to have a hard time with this. Be patient." She walked over to the bed and lightly brushed back Catarina's hair.

"How long can you stay?" Mark would help anyway he could but knew Catarina needed Marilyn more.

"As long as I'm needed. David's parents are visiting, so they're going to help David with the kids."

"Good, well I think I'm going to go down to the cafeteria. The doctor is due here in an hour. I'll be back."

"Okay, get some fresh air."

Mark walked out of the room and shoved his hands into his pockets. He was frustrated that he didn't have the right words for his friend. No one would except Jax, and he didn't even know she was pregnant. With Marilyn here, he had no doubt David would inform Jax. Mark wouldn't be surprised if Jax showed up at the hospital too.

He walked out the hospital doors and looked up at the sun. He'd been cooped up in the hospital so long that he'd forgotten how hot it was outside. His thoughts strayed back to Catarina, so fragile and helpless.

Catarina heard her name being called and tried to open her eyes. The light was so bright that she closed them and turned her face away from the voice hoping it would go away but it wouldn't. It continued like an irritant. She noticed the voice and it wasn't Mark. "Marilyn?"

"Yes, silly wake up. I've been sitting here for fifteen minutes and the walls are starting to close in on me."

"Marilyn, you didn't have to come here. You're needed at home." Tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to wipe them away, but they wouldn't stop. "Did Mark tell you what happened?"

"Yes and it almost gave me a heart attack. I've had enough car accidents to last me a lifetime."

"I'm so sorry to have scared you." She knew how traumatizing car accidents were for Marilyn since she'd almost lost David to one a few years ago.

"Don't worry about it. Think how mad I'd be if Mark hadn't contacted me. I would have killed you both." She sat on the bed next to her. "Are you all right?"

Catarina shook her head. "No."

Marilyn drew Catarina towards her and held her tight. "There are no words that will make you forget this pain or ease it, sweetie, but know that I'm here for you."

All Catarina could do was nod. She wanted to roll up in a ball and forget everything. Forget Jax, her trip to London, the baby and even Mark. She didn't want to face anything. She felt like a failure. "I don't know what to do now," she said, choking back a sob. "I know it sounds crazy but I had plans already. We were going to be so happy." She broke into full, heaving sobs.

"I know." Marilyn held her rocking her back and forth. "You know some women don't even tell people they're pregnant until after the third month. Did you know that?" Catarina shook her head. "You know why? It's because the first three months are the most crucial. Many women miscarry and they don't want to have to explain it if they do. You're not a failure. It happens, Cat, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Although it was caused by the accident, miscarriages are quite common, there's always the possibility that it could have happened anyway."

"You mean anyone can have a miscarriage during the first three months?"

"Yes, I was just fortunate that it didn't happen to me, but some women have miscarriages during their first month and just think it's a particularly heavy period. I know it doesn't help with your loss, but at least you know it won't hinder you from getting pregnant again."

Catarina sniffed and tried to dry her nose with the tissues next to her bed. "Thank you. It does help a bit. I think another reason I'm so upset is because it was Jax' baby, too."

"I know and you love him. Trust me when I say if Jax knew, he'd be here by your side grieving with you."

"I'm sure you're right, but I don't want him to know. There's no reason for him to go through this too."

"I don't agree, but let's not talk about it now. Why are you still here? You could have been discharged by now, but because you've been hiding from everyone the doctor won't release you."

She nodded. "Yes, I just didn't want to go home and face it all."

"Well, it's got to be done sooner or later. Why not start now?" Marilyn fluffed the pillows behind Catarina's back. "We've got to get you strong enough to go home. You'll feel better when you get out of this place."

"You're right." Catarina took Marilyn's hand. "Thank you for coming. I don't know what I'd do without you. I wasn't even there for you when you were going through your problems with David."

"Only because I wouldn't let you. Gosh, that's three years ago. Get a grip girl. Focus on yourself."

"I am. Get me that banana over there. I'm getting out of here as soon as they let me." She smiled through her tears. Life would never be the same but she had to go on. She couldn't give up. "Where's Mark?"

"He went to get some fresh air. He said he'd be back before the doctor returns in about half an hour."

"I haven't been very kind to him. He's going to be mad when he sees me sitting up and talking. He's been bugging me for two days to do it and I've refused." She laughed.

"I think as long as you're smiling Mark will be happy. He's always been there for the both of us."

"You're right. He's a keeper. The woman that snags him will have a pretty good catch." They were both laughing when Mark walked through the door.

"Well, it looks like our patient is doing much better." He walked to the bed and brushed Catarina's hair from her forehead. "All you needed was another female. What should that tell me?"

"Nothing at all. I couldn't make it without you. Thanks for putting up with me. I'll tell you one thing. I'm ready to get you home. This place is depressing."

Marilyn chimed in. "That's for sure. When your doctor gets here, you'd better put on one fine show, or I'm going to kill you myself."

They were laughing when the doctor walked in. He stopped and smiled. "Well, Catarina, I see that you're doing much better. How are you feeling?" He walked over and

checked her vital signs. "Everything appears to be strong and normal."

He turned and shook Mark's hand. "Something worked, want to fill me in on it?"

Mark tilted his head to Marilyn. "It was all her doing. She needed a woman." He shook his head. "Don't ask, just accept it."

"Well, it's hard for us lowly men to understand, but it's true. Just one of those things that baffles modern medicine, I guess." He winked at Mark and smiled.

"So long as she's doing better, I don't care what it takes. This is Marilyn, Catarina's best friend from Maine."

"Nice to meet you, Marilyn. You must be a pretty special friend to fly out here for Catarina."

"She's more like a sister." She shook his hand. "When do you think I can take her home?"

"That's up to Catarina. How's tomorrow, Catarina? Are you up to it?"

She nodded her head. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Good, I'll have one of the nurses come in with the discharge information. I want you to stay overnight to make sure you're still doing well in the morning. If so, you can leave first thing in the morning."

"Thank you, doctor." Catarina was eager to get out now that Marilyn was there. It was going to be hard, but she could do it. She just needed time and rest, and she didn't want to get it here with everyone watching. Mark and the doctor were talking and Catarina watched them for a moment. Mark had taken control and the doctor treated him as if he was her guardian. She didn't mind and actually appreciated it. Mark must have noticed she was watching him because he looked up and smiled. She smiled back and then turned to Marilyn. "You know, he's been great. Even though I've been a total jerk, Mark hasn't given up on me."

"I think it will take a lot more than a few days in the hospital for Mark or I to give up on you, girl. We're all family. We stick together."

"I know. It's just he has better things to do than be stuck here with a crazy woman."

Marilyn looked cross. "I don't want to hear that again. You're not crazy."

"I just can't thank you two enough. You've always been there for me, no matter what the situation. Not everyone has friends they can count on like that."

"Well, you do, so let's forget about it, okay?"

Catarina nodded. Once the doctor left, she turned to Mark and asked, "What did he say?"

"He gave me information on a couple of places you can call for counseling. He wants you to start right away."

She nodded. Catarina knew she'd need help getting through the loss of her baby but she could do it. If other women survived this pain so could she, and she would. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." She held her hand out to Mark and he grasped it firmly. "I'll be with you all the way. We'll have time to talk about it tomorrow." He gave her hand a squeeze. "You haven't eaten much. Doc said that if you eat a good meal he'd have the IV removed. Are you hungry for anything special?"

Catarina looked at Marilyn and giggled. "Mexican. Could you get me a couple of tacos?"

"Your wish is my command." He bowed and left the room.

Both women laughed and Marilyn spoke up first. "Boy, you've got him wrapped right around your little finger now. I give him two days and he'll be running from your place."

"I bet it will only take him one. After tomorrow afternoon, he'll be begging you to stay forever." They both laughed and waited for Mark to come back with her tacos.

Chapter Fourteen

They checked out later than they'd expected. It was noon and the temperature had already risen above a hundred. They had the air conditioning blowing full blast in Mark's black mustang.

Catarina sighed. "So, how bad is my car? Was it totaled?"

Mark looked over at her. "No, actually the insurance company is having it repaired. You were lucky. They said it shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks. I had them deliver a rental car to your house. It's another Mustang, a red one."

"At least I get a rental. I'd be in a jam if I didn't have a car to drive. Did you say I was off work for the next two weeks?"

"Yes, your office wanted you to take as long as you needed and I didn't think you could handle longer than two weeks."

"You were right. I don't know how I'll last *that* long." She hoped her absence wouldn't add too much work to Betty's schedule. She made a mental note to call Betty later and check. They pulled in front of the duplex and got out. Mark carried Catarina's bag as Marilyn helped her from the car. "Marilyn, I can walk on my own. Remember, I'm fine."

Marilyn laughed. "I know, sorry. Come on, let's get you settled."

Catarina shivered. The house was cool; she knew Mark must have come by and turned the air on before he picked them up. She walked slowly up the steps and deposited her bag in the bedroom. The bedspread was pulled back and seemed to beckon to her. She sat on the edge of the bed and rested her head against the soft, cool pillow. It felt heavenly.

Marilyn walked in and Catarina smiled. "I think I'll take a short nap, this feels too good to pass up."

Marilyn placed the afghan across her legs. "Fine, when you wake up, I'll have some soup ready. You rest a bit."

Catarina closed her eyes and tried to forget everything. This was a time for healing and she would do exactly that. The past was over. Now it was time to focus on her future. She was still young had her whole life ahead of her. The difficult part was trying to imagine a future without Jax and their baby.

Mark sat on the couch with one foot propped casually on his leg. He could hear Marilyn's footsteps as she came down the stairs. "Is she sleeping?"

Marilyn nodded and sat on the couch next to him, placing her feet on the coffee table. "Yes, she needs rest."

The house was quiet. Mark rested his head against the back of the couch. "This reminds me of the old days with you and Cat. We were good for each other don't you think?"

Marilyn smiled. "Yes, I do. I'm glad we've stayed close over the years and that you're here for her." She sighed. "This is going to be terribly hard for her, no parents, no baby--no Jax."

"I know. I wish I knew what to do to make it easier for her."

"Mark, all you need to do is be there. We've got to make sure she gets counseling though, don't let her put it off."

"I won't. What she really needs is to talk to Jax. He is the father." He watched Marilyn to see how she'd react and he wasn't disappointed. She looked at him a little surprised but a smile spread across her face.

"What do you have in mind?"

"First tell me a little about him. Why does she have such a problem with the guy? He can't be too bad if he flew all the way to Dallas to find her."

Marilyn shook her head. "That's the problem, he's not bad. He's actually pretty wonderful." She laughed. "He's

sort of a Don Juan, like you." She winked. "He's a lady-killer, but he's also very compassionate. To be honest I didn't want David to call Jax about Catarina going to London. I had a feeling they would get a little too close."

"Guess you were right," Mark said with a warm smile.

Marilyn nodded. "It only took them one day in each other's company." She shook her head. "I don't understand why she's being so stubborn. David told me that Jax is miserable. He's finally fallen in love with a woman, and she doesn't want to have anything to do with him." She laughed. "If you knew Jax you'd understand why I'm laughing. He's always been so invincible."

Mark shifted his weight on the couch. "Hmmm. So, you're telling me I act like an invincible Don Juan?"

"You got it!" She laughed. "But I still love you, brother."

"Right."

"So, what's your plan?"

"Well, Catarina's got two weeks off and if she stays around here I know she's going to give in and go to the office. What better counseling than to go back with you and spend time with your family?"

"And..." Marilyn asked.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt if Jax suddenly popped into the picture. Let's face it, Cat's not about to make the first move if we leave it up to her."

"You know what, Mark? You're pretty smart. I take her to Sherry. Get her involved in taking care of the kids to keep her mind off everything and then, voila, Jax shows up and they make up! Do you really think it will work?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's worth a try. I mean, things can't get any worse, can they?"

Marilyn grinned. "You're right. Okay, I'll call David and set it all up. I just hope Jax is able to come to the states on such short notice."

"Oh, I have a feeling if the guy really loves Cat, he'll come." Mark prayed he was right. The look Jax had given Mark when they met was anything but friendly. He had a feeling the guy wanted to kill him. "I'm betting he'll be on the first flight."

Marilyn brought a bowl of soup up to Catarina's room on a tray. "Wake up sleepy head, time for dinner." Catarina sat up and brushed the hair out of her face.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Long enough for me and Mark to take a short nap. I hope you're hungry." She placed the tray on Catarina's lap.

Catarina took a sip of the broth and smiled. "Delicious, Marie must be giving you lessons in the kitchen." She laughed.

"I love it. Davie gets in the kitchen and helps, it's a lot of fun." She regretted bringing up Davie's name and waited to see how Catarina would react.

Catarina looked up and smiled. "I'm okay, don't worry. I know God has a plan for my life and He'll take care of me. It should have never happened and maybe this is God's way of ending everything." She wiped a tear away from her eye.

"No Catarina, you know that's not true. Sure, you made a mistake, we all do, but God wouldn't take a child away because of it. That was the speeding car, not God."

"I know." She blinked hard. "I just want to forget about everything and get on with my life."

"You can start by going home with me for a couple of weeks." Marilyn was prepared to fight her on this issue if needed. David had already agreed to get Jax to Sherry, now it was her job to get Catarina there, too.

She shook her head. "I can't do that to you. I'll be fine, you go home."

"No, I refuse. You're off for the next couple of weeks, so there's no reason why you can't come with me. I'm not giving in on this."

"Are you sure, I don't want to intrude?"

"Don't even argue with me. I've already called David and he's thrilled to have you too. We didn't get to spend much time together before you headed to London and now we will. Matter of fact, we're leaving first thing in the morning. I've already arranged everything."

"You don't waste any time do you?"

"Nope, not when it comes to my best friend." Marilyn was relieved Catarina didn't put up any type of resistance. She grinned. Time to put their plan into action.

Marilyn took the tray from Catarina when she finished. "You ought to get in the shower. You'll feel better and then we can pack."

"I think I will. Is Mark still here?"

"No, he left a little while ago. He'll be back later."

"Okay."

Marilyn left the room with the tray and Catarina's empty soup bowl. Once downstairs she brought the phone into the kitchen, out of Catarina's range of hearing. "David, did you call Jax?"

"No hello, I miss you or love you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sorry, sweetie. Hello, I miss you, I love you." She laughed.

"That's better and yes I called him. I told him I needed his help with a new client and he's coming Saturday. What did Cat say?"

"She argued a little, but gave in. We're leaving in the morning, so I'll need you to pick us up at one o'clock."

"Will do. The kids and I will be there with bells on our toes."

Marilyn laughed. "You're a goof! Thank you for helping with this. They're both so stubborn, I don't think either one of them would have made the first move. They're lucky they have friends like us."

"Right, I just hope they both feel that way after Saturday."

"Don't even think such a thing." Marilyn said a silent prayer. "Well, I'd better hang up. We've got to get her packed and ready to leave. By the way, Mark said to tell you hi."

"Tell Mark hi and thanks for everything."

"I will. Kiss the babies for me."

"Already have. Love you."

"Love you, too, bye." Marilyn hung up the phone and stood looking around the kitchen. It looked pretty lonely compared to hers at home. Yes, Catarina definitely needed a

family of her own, preferably one that included Jax. She and Jax needed each other. Marilyn smiled. Yep, she'd see to it that everything turned out just perfect.

There was a knock at the door and Marilyn answered it. Mark was there with a bouquet of white roses. "For me? You shouldn't have." She laughed.

He tweaked her nose. "I thought I'd give our girl flowers since she'll be leaving."

"She agreed, hardly any resistance at all. David's already called Jax and he'll be arriving Saturday." Marilyn rubbed her hands together briskly and grinned.

"Great! I don't think I'll show up this time. I rather doubt that Jax would be very happy to see me." He laughed. "You should have seen his face when Catarina introduced me to him. I thought he was going to deck me." He rubbed his chin. "Awfully glad he didn't."

"Well, he'll understand after this is all settled. I'm sure he'll be thankful you've been there for her this whole time. "Our flight is in the morning. Do you mind taking us to the airport?"

"Not at all." He looked at his watch. I have a dinner date this evening, do you think Catarina's presentable?"

"I'll go check."

"No need, here I am." She walked down the steps and up to Mark. "Thank you for all your support."

"I'll always be here you know."

"I know." She hugged him. "Are those for me?"

"Yes, since you're leaving me tomorrow, I thought I'd bring them."

"They're beautiful. Thank you."

"Well, I've got to be going. You listen to Marilyn and get some rest while you're gone. Use this as a vacation."

"I will. I'm actually looking forward to it. It's beautiful this time of year. Maybe I can talk David into taking me out on the ocean."

Marilyn laughed. "Don't give him any ideas unless you're up to it."

Catarina smiled. "Oh, I'm up to it and much more. Time to buck up and get on with my life." She hugged Mark once more. "Have fun tonight. I'll call you when I get back."

"You better if you know what's good for you." He turned to Marilyn. "Call me if you need anything and keep her out of trouble."

"I will and I'll try." Mark left and Marilyn put her arm around Catarina's shoulder. "You sure look better."

"I feel better, too." She walked into the living room and saw a package of photographs. She picked the package up and turned it over. "What are these?"

Marilyn tried to snatch them from her. "I didn't mean to leave them out. Mark saw the rolls of film and had them developed."

Catarina opened the first one and stopped, catching her breath. Jax' picture was on top. She smiled. "It's okay. I'm glad he did. I had the most fabulous time there with Jax. I never want to forget it."

Marilyn joined Catarina as she sat on the couch. "You want to talk about it?"

Catarina shook her head and swallowed the lump in her throat. She studied each picture and then handed them to Marilyn. "Look, Jax had a woman take this of us at the ruins. That was our first day out. I had so much fun and Jax was full of information. I told him he didn't know much, but he did."

Marilyn watched as Catarina's features enlivened with animation. Yes, she loved him all right. There was no hiding it. No matter what it took, she would see to it that they were back together again.

Chapter Fifteen

Catarina watched from the back seat as David drove her and Marilyn to their place. She could tell by the way their arms were placed, that they were holding hands. They were the perfect, happily married couple with two beautiful children.

She was so happy that Marilyn had found such a wonderful man to share her life and love. Would there ever be a man like that for her? She doubted it. The only man she wanted was Jax and even if he did love her, he would never forgive her for all her deception. She placed her hand over her now empty, hollow stomach. She wished things had turned out differently, but they hadn't. It was time she learned to accept it.

Catarina gazed out the window at the rolling hillside. The pine trees were taller than she'd ever seen them in East Texas. She loved to visit Marilyn's home. It was so peaceful. In the still of the night, you could actually hear the ocean waves lapping against the shoreline.

The city wharf loomed ahead, sun shining off the water onto the wooded decks. There were crowds of people lined along the street and Catarina strained to see what was happening. A small parade, complete with clowns marched along the decks. "What's going on?"

"The annual lobster parade. While Marilyn was gone, a boat brought in the largest lobster ever caught off our shore. It's in a tank at old man Gifford's place. Wait until Little Davie fills you both in on the story." David laughed. "He's found himself another hero."

"Great! Leave you alone for a week and I come back to our son worshipping a fisherman." Marilyn laughed.

Catarina listened to their happy banter and sighed. She wondered if they fully appreciated the love they shared. The downtown area quickly passed and they were soon heading up the mountain. Lighthouses littered the shores

and she could see the ocean lapping against the rocks. The turn for Lang Manor came into view and they pulled onto a rock drive. It circled through the trees and then opened onto a massive property. Red and pink sea roses lined the drive and as they closer, mums and roses could be seen sprinkled throughout the lawn. Little Davie was swatting at something in the large fishpond. When he saw his parents pulling up, he ran towards the car.

David pulled the car to a stop and he and Marilyn got out to greet their son. Marilyn reached him first. "Hello, baby. What have you been up to?"

"Mommy, I missed you!" Little Davie laughed as Marilyn kissed him on his nose.

Catarina watched the reunion quietly from a distance. In the past, she'd been right in the center of all the attention with Davie, but this time she stood focusing on little Davie and relating to his joy at being reunited with his mother. Catarina understood what it was like to miss someone so terribly that your every thought was centered on that individual.

David walked back to her side. "Why so quiet, Cat?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, no reason. Just thought I'd let you have some time with your family. Where's Mary?"

"Davie said she's taking her nap. Are you ready to go in?"

"Yes, I'd love to. Thank you for allowing me to visit this week."

"Don't be ridiculous. You didn't have much time here before your trip to London. We're glad to have you."

She followed him up the front steps and into the house. The scent of fresh flowers from a vase at a small table near the door greeted them as they entered. David dropped his keys on the table and started up the stairs. Catarina followed him to the same room she always stayed in while visiting. He placed her bags down inside the room and turned to her. "We're glad you're here, Cat."

"Thanks, I am too. I love the way the birds wake me in the morning. It's such a lovely way to start the day."

"You know, I think that was Marilyn's favorite thing about this room. When she came up here the first time working for Midwest Viking, this is the room she stayed in."

"I didn't know that." She looked at the big four-poster bed with its down mattress and raised her eyebrows.

David laughed. "I know what you're thinking." He shook his finger at her. "Our room is down the hall and always has been." He laughed as he walked away.

Catarina fell across the bed and sighed. The cool down comforter surrounded her body and she closed her eyes. She loved the feel of the bed and blankets; it was like floating on a cloud. It was the closest thing to heaven on earth.

Footsteps approached the room and she reluctantly opened her eyes. Marilyn was standing in the doorway. "Mind if I come in?"

"Of course not."

Marilyn walked in and lay on the bed next to her. "We need to make plans for this week. What would you like to do?"

Catarina laughed. "What is there to do? I thought that was the reason for moving out here, to get away from the hustle and bustle of big city life."

Marilyn joined in her laughter. "You're right, but we do have a few things. We could go on a picnic, tour the lighthouses or go fishing, and I don't mean bass fishing."

"I think I'll pass on the deep sea fishing, it's not my cup of tea. We could go on a picnic or a tour of the lighthouses. They're beautiful. Do people still live in them?"

"No. They're mainly for show now."

"Too, bad, they're amazing." Catarina was curious what one sold for. Not that she had the money for one, but was curious all the same. "Do you think if someone wanted too, they could make it habitable?"

"I'm sure they could, but it would be pricey."

"I bet you're right. It was only a thought." She rolled over on her stomach and propped her chin in her hands. "I love it here," she said, gazing out the window.

"Me, too, I can't imagine my life any other way." She looked at Catarina. "God has a plan for you, you know."

"I know, I just wish I knew what it was."

"Don't we all?" Marilyn laughed. "His could be right under your nose and you wouldn't even know it."

"Same goes for you, girl."

"Believe me, I've figured that one out on my own. Look at my life now. It's so different from three years ago." She shook her head. "David and I fought it all the way. Just goes to show, we can't change our destiny."

"Yeah well, I just wish I knew what mine was. I guess I'll have to be patient and wait and see." Catarina sat up. "I should unpack my things."

"Want some help?" Marilyn smiled asking.

"Nope, go and enjoy your family. I'll be down in a bit. Quit worrying about me. I'm okay, really." She shooed Marilyn out with a blouse she'd taken out of her suitcase. Marilyn left and Catarina put everything away in the dresser and closet. At least with all that finished, she didn't have to worry about wrinkled clothes. There would be no ironing on this getaway.

Shortly, she went downstairs. She saw Marilyn outside with Davie and Mary laughing and playing catch. Catarina could smell garlic coming from the kitchen and followed her nose. "Hello, Marie."

The tall stout housekeeper swung around and greeted Catarina with a broad smile. "Cat, my dear, it's so nice to have you back again." She gave Catarina a tight squeeze. "You could use a little meat on your bones. Leave it to Marie."

Catarina laughed. "No, I don't need any more meat on these bones. I've worked too hard to stay the size I am. My doctor says I'm perfectly fine." She grinned shaking away Marie's mischievous grin.

"Fine, don't listen to Marie, but mark my words, you're going to leave here next week with a little more weight."

"Great, just what I need. I think I'll go outside where it's safe." She ran out of the kitchen before Marie could stuff something in her mouth. Marilyn walked in holding Mary, with Davie clinging to her pants. "Looks like you have your hands full. Here, hand me Mary."

"You don't have to ask twice." She handed Mary to Catarina and turned to pick up her rambunctious son. "Come here, you stinker." She tickled him and Davie fell into a heap of giggles on the floor.

Catarina sat on the sofa and watched. They were sweet together. Marilyn loved her son to distraction and here sat her other bundle of joy, Mary. Ringlets circled her pink-cheeked cherubic face. Catarina leaned down and gave her a small kiss on the cheek. "You're beautiful, darling."

"Where's David, Marilyn? Did he leave?" Catarina asked.

Marilyn looked up. "Yes, someone called from the office. He'll be back in time for dinner."

"Marie threatened to put some meat on my bones before I return to Dallas. You're going to have to keep me away from that kitchen when those unbelievable scents come wafting in here."

"We'll restrain each other. Look at what three years has done to me. I weigh ten pounds more than I did when David and I first met." She looked down at herself. "I guess I don't look too bad. He still loves the way I look."

"I'm sure he does. You look beautiful. Marriage suits you both."

"Thank you." She stood and Davie ran from the room. "Looks like he smells Marie's cookies."

"Want to get a sandwich and take a swim? It's time to put Mary down for her nap."

"Sure. I'll go get ready while you put the baby down."

"Meet you outside," Marilyn said as she left the living room with Mary.

Catarina went upstairs and picked out a pink two-piece bathing suit. It wasn't too skimpy, more like a bikini bottom with an exercise bra. She slipped on a lace cover-up and took a towel from the private bath.

She followed the stone path that wound through the garden to the private pool out back. There was actually a mist covered two-inch sunbathing pool that drifted to a one-foot pool for the children and then increased to a ten-foot pool for the adults.

She removed her cover-up and placed her towel across one of the lawn chairs. It was hot, hotter than she'd expected it to be in Maine, close to ninety-five degrees. She pulled her hair up and clipped it on top of her head. The first thing she did was get in the sunbathing pool. A mister was suspended above, so she lay on her back and let the mist cover her hot skin. It was wonderful, soft and cool but not too wet.

Catarina heard Marilyn approaching. "That was quick. Mary must have been tired."

Marilyn laughed. "Lucky for me. I thought about this pool the whole time I was away. This is my time of relaxation." She removed her cover-up and jumped into the pool.

Marilyn had been on the swim team and had several trophies to show for it. Catarina waited for Marilyn to emerge from under the water and laughed. "Well, I'm glad I was all the way over here, or I would have been drenched. Don't you know how to dive?"

"If you think you're so hot, why don't you try it?"

Catarina turned her nose up in the air. "I don't want to look like I'm showing off. I'll wait a bit."

"Sure, I remember your swimming talents. You're lucky if you can stay a float."

"Some can swim and some can ski. I bet you can't ski the blacks."

"I'm not stupid enough to try it." Marilyn laughed. "I guess that makes us even. You ski the blacks and I'll stick to the greens."

"You dive and I'll stick to the kiddy pool."

"You've got a deal." Marilyn got out of the pool and joined Catarina in the sunbather. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess. It will take a while for me, but I'll be fine." They were quiet for a long while. "Marilyn, could you go on without David? I mean, if he hadn't come around and you two hadn't made up, would you have been okay?"

"Sure, but it would have been hard. I love him dearly, but I have to think of myself too. Besides, I did have a little one to think of. I was pregnant."

"I know." Catarina was quiet for a minute. "I'm not pregnant anymore, but I still wonder. Could I have made it without Jax?"

Marilyn turned to look at her friend. "Did you want to?"

Catarina looked steadily at her. "No. I didn't want to," she whispered. "I realize now how stupid I was being. I mean, Jax came down there for a reason and what did I do? I did everything possible to get rid of him. He'll never forgive me--and I don't blame him. He's a proud man."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. He may be proud but he's not stupid."

"Well, it's over now." She sighed. "I'll never go back to London. I don't think I could survive another heartache like that."

"I have a feeling Jax Blair isn't a man to be put off so easily. I don't think you've seen the last of him."

"Well, I hope I have. How could I ever tell him that I was pregnant and lost the baby? I just couldn't go through that."

"Honey, sometimes the hardest things in life are better faced than hidden. Give yourself time to heal, it will all work out."

Catarina couldn't reply. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the sounds of the birds chirping. Their songs brought healing and joy to her soul. Slowly she drifted asleep with the mist blowing against her skin and the breeze of the afternoon blowing the stray hairs around her neck like a lover's kiss.

"Catarina, Catarina wake up."

Catarina moved her head to the side and opened her eyes. She realized she had fallen asleep lying in the sun. "How long have we been asleep?"

"We've only been out here for an hour. I heard David's car so I'm going to let him know where we are. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Okay." Catarina stood and placed her sunglasses on the glass table next to her lawn chair. She walked to the edge of the pool and dove in, hardly making a splash. She smiled and thought, *I'm not so bad*. She swam the length of

the pool twice and then waded to the side. She let her head fall back and relaxed. The water felt cool against her heated skin, and she realized she was probably sunburned. She heard Marilyn returning and asked, "Marilyn, would you hand me my towel. There wasn't an answer and she opened her eyes. Catarina knew her eyes had to be playing tricks on her. She closed them and prayed fervently for God to take the image away. But, when she opened them again, he was still there. Jax, standing straight and tall, his deep brown eyes glaring at her. All she could do was mouth, "Jax."

He walked to her chair and picked up the towel, carrying it to the edge of the pool and holding it open for her. When she reached for it, he pulled it out of her grasp. "Hello, Catarina."

She cleared her voice and tried to speak. "Jax, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same, but knowing David I won't." He opened the towel for her again. "Are you coming out or not?"

Catarina tried to swallow around the knot that had formed in her throat. She wasn't sure if she should get out of the pool or just stay there. Her brain screamed for her to remain, but her heart told her otherwise. She knew she had to get out and fate said the music.

Catarina gripped the side of the pool and pulled herself up on the ledge. Jax stood above her watching, not offering help, and only holding the towel. She stood, water dripping from her body around her feet. She looked at the towel and knew Jax wasn't about to hand it to her. If she wanted it, she had to step into his arms. She looked into his eyes and walked straight into his arms before she had a chance to chicken out. His arms encircled her and Catarina melted against his strong chest.

Chapter Sixteen

Catarina's thoughts were a jumble of emotions as Jax held her in his arms. She felt as though she were in a dream--a dream from which she never wanted to awaken. She gazed up into his dark mesmerizing eyes. No, this was no dream. If it were a dream he would take her and kiss her, leaving no doubt as to how much he loved and missed her. Instead, he just glared at her.

His arms dropped away from her and she quickly grabbed for the towel. The cool breeze drifted around her and goose bumps rose on her legs and arms. Were they from the breeze or the intimidating look on Jax' face? She tried to calm her frantic heartbeat and stepped back. "Jax, why are you here?"

She watched as Jax walked to the opposite end of the pool, putting distance between them. He was angry, there was no doubt about it. She could see it in his eyes and the way his fists were clenched. "It looks like we're being played like a couple of puppets again," he said angrily.

Catarina backed into a chair and sat down. "I don't understand. What are you talking about, Marilyn and David?"

"Who else. David called and asked me to come out to the states. He said there was a problem at Midwest." His steps quickly ate up the distance between them, and in a moment he stood over her, glaring. "As soon as I arrived, he brought me here instead of the office. He asked me to get Marilyn for him from the pool. Instead, I find you."

The word *you* didn't have a pleasant ring to it and Catarina closed her eyes. God, she'd ruined everything with him. She swallowed hard and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"David's the one who should be sorry. I can't just jump on a plane and fly to the states on a whim." He turned around and walked back to the opposite side of the pool. "What are you doing here? Don't you have to work?"

Catarina started shaking. There was no way she could tell him about the accident and baby now. "I have another week of vacation I didn't know about," she lied. "So, I thought I'd spend some time with Marilyn."

His expression was a mask of suspicion. "You're saying you didn't know you had another week of vacation when you were taking a quick trip to London?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying."

He shook his head. "Whatever, it doesn't make any difference to me. Who am I to ask, anyway?" He turned and headed back to the house. "I'm going back in. It's getting late, you might want to go in and get ready for dinner."

He continued down the stone steps until he was out of sight. Catarina turned and faced the trees. What was she going to do? Her heart was pounding like a drum and she didn't think she had the strength to make it back to the house. She was a nervous wreck. Did Marilyn and David actually think they were helping her by calling Jax like this? She could still smell his cologne lingering in the air and feel his arms around her. She'd wanted to snuggle in his arms and forget everything, but knew that wasn't possible. Life would never be the same as it was a couple of months ago. It was over for her and Jax. She closed her eyes and the tears fell freely down her cheeks.

Jax stormed into the house and down the hallway to David's library. He pushed the door open and slammed it behind him. "What do you think you're doing, David?"

David looked up from his work as if there wasn't a problem in the world he couldn't solve. "See Cat?"

"You know I saw her and quit playing games with me!" His voice began to carry and he tried to modulate it. "I told you Cat and I were through. Why do you insist on throwing us together? Don't you realize you're only making things more difficult for both of us?"

David stood and walked around the desk. "Jax, we're like brothers and I don't like to see you this way."

"What way? There's nothing wrong with me!"

David raised one eyebrow. "Oh, and that's why you're yelling in my home with my wife and two children just outside the door."

Jax took a deep breath and sank into one of the chairs. He dropped his head into his hands and said, "David, can't you just let this go? You know what happened. She doesn't want me."

David rested his hand on Jax' shoulder. "Open your eyes, brother. That woman loves you. She just doesn't know how to tell you, that's all."

Jax looked up. "Are you sure? I don't want to go through the rejection again."

"Is your pride so important that you're willing to let Cat go, just so you don't get that heart of yours a little trampled?"

Jax knew where David was going. "No."

"Then do something about it. Go and tell her how you feel."

"I don't think I can." Jax stood and walked to the door. "I'm leaving. I'll find a hotel in town." He walked out of David's office and out the front door. Once outside, Jax closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Things would never be the same between them again.

Catarina sat at the dinner table. Davie was talking ninety to nothing, telling his mother the story of the Big Lobster. Marilyn looked absorbed in the story, but Catarina knew better. Marilyn was as nearly as upset as she was.

David cleared his throat. "Davie, do you think we could change the subject? Women aren't really interested in big catches."

Davie looked at his mother. "You don't want to see the lobster?"

She reached her hand across the table. "Of course I do sweetie, but I think Catarina would like to hear one of your stories instead. Like the one about the prince."

"Oh, okay." Davie turned an innocent little smile on Catarina.

Catarina returned Davie's smile and said, "I'd love to hear a story."

"All right." Davie gleefully proceeded to tell her a story about a gold fish that swam night and day in his pond, wishing for a princess to come along.

The story was similar to the princess and the frog and Catarina listened intently. It was so cute, hearing it from a three-year-old's perspective. Everyone laughed at his animated gestures and flapping arms. "That was wonderful, Davie. I bet you could be a writer if you tried." She gazed at Davie and found herself wondering how her own child might have looked at that age. Dark hair, brown eyes--just like his father.

She wondered if there was something she could have said or done to keep Jax from leaving. She should have told him how she really felt instead of being dishonest--again. Why did she have such a hard time being open with the man she loved? She didn't understand. Catarina set her fork down. "If you will excuse me, I think I'll go outside for a while." David and Marilyn looked at her and didn't voice an objection. She smiled at Davie and left the family alone.

She knew it would be cool outside, so she took one of Marilyn's sweaters from a hook by the door. The fresh breeze whipped her hair around and she pulled it under her collar. Catarina walked into the garden and followed the path around to the backyard. She sat at the bench in the gazebo, listening to the sounds of the ocean.

Memories of walking with Jax along the Thames River clouded her mind. The taste of their first kiss under the starlit sky and the feel of his hand on her back brought tears to her eyes. "What have I done?" She closed her eyes and smiled as she remembered them dancing in the crowded pub. Every woman in the room was attracted to Jax and certainly didn't try to hide it. Catarina stood. Why was she allowing this to happen? She didn't want to sit by while Jax found another woman to love. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that she and Jax were meant to be together. She paced the trail, thinking, trying to devise some kind of a plan. She didn't know how long she had before he returned to London, but one thing was for sure.

She had to do something. She wasn't about to just sit around and let the man of her dreams slip away. She returned to the house and found Marilyn in the living room reading. "Marilyn, I need your help."

Marilyn set her book aside and looked at Catarina. "I was wondering when you'd come to your senses."

"It takes me a while sometimes." Catarina smiled and sat next to Marilyn. "I've got to win Jax back. Do you think it's possible?"

"Nothing's impossible, honey, but are you sure that's what you really want? You'll have to tell him about everything, Cat."

Catarina looked away and whispered, "I know but I'm willing to do whatever it takes, Marilyn. I can't lose him."

Marilyn smiled. "I'm glad. Now let's see what we can do to get Jax back to his senses. David told me Jax left here quite angry. In fact, David suspects he may have gone a little too far this time."

Catarina's shoulders slumped. "Oh."

"Don't worry, everything will work out. We'll just have to be more careful this time."

Catarina sat quietly as Marilyn paced the room. She was tapping the side of her head thinking and Cat smiled watching her. She turned and smiled. Catarina waited for her bright idea. "Yes?"

"This is Wednesday, right?"

"Yes."

"I think I'm going to plan a dinner party Friday and Jax wouldn't dare not show up."

"Oh, I think you may be wrong. Jax does exactly as he pleases, and I guarantee he doesn't want to be in the same house as me."

"That's where you're wrong. Oh, he acts like he doesn't want anything to do with you, but David told me he's torn up over this. I'm sure Jax will show up." She smiled.

Jax walked through security, took the elevator to the third floor and proceeded straight to David's office. He didn't so much as glance at Cindy, the receptionist as he walked into David's office and shut the door behind him. "What in the hell are you two up to now?"

David didn't seem a bit surprised to see him. "Are you referring to the dinner party?"

"You know I am. I thought I made it clear that I wanted you and Marilyn to stay out of this, David."

David scratched his chin. "One day, when you have a wife, you'll understand." He grinned. "Actually, Marilyn usually throws a dinner party every other month or so. You just happened to be in town during this one, that's all. So, don't take it as some sort of cockeyed attempt to throw you and Cat together again. You made it perfectly clear, you don't give a shit about her."

Jax clenched his hands into fists and fought the urge to knock David back into his chair. "I never said I didn't care."

"Oh but you did, brother, when you left and never returned. Cat's not stupid. She knows it's over. And she's not one to beg."

"Like I did, flying to Dallas."

David held up a finger. "Wait a minute. You said when you went to Dallas you told her you wanted to see her again. You never told her you loved her, or even cared about her, did you? No, you acted like a medieval knight about to drag his lady off by her hair. There was no wooing or seduction, only demands."

"I never demanded a damn thing of her. She's the one who told me it was over and that she had another man in her life."

David returned to his desk and sat down. "Now, *that* I never understood. How could you have fallen for garbage she threw at you? She was a bloody virgin, Jax. If she'd been in a relationship, don't you think she would have slept with *him*, not you?"

"That's what I thought at first--until he showed up." Jax fell into the chair opposite David's desk.

"You mean a guy about your height, shoulder length brown hair, and bulging muscles?"

"You know this guy and didn't tell me?" Jax looked as if he were about to explode.

"Is his name Mark?"

Jax stood. "Yes, his name was Mark. How long have they been seeing each other?"

"Never. He's one of Cat and Marilyn's childhood friends. He's been out here several times. They're like brother and sisters. Apparently Cat managed to rope Mark into that little charade and he played along. He must have thought he was protecting her until he found out what was really going on."

Jax shook his head and tried to grip what David was telling him. "He was just a friend. Why would Cat do something like that?"

"You are so stupid sometimes, Jax. She's an innocent. Think about it. She didn't know what to think when you showed up. She was sure you couldn't care about a girl like her so she was trying to protect herself." Jax sat stunned. He could trust David and knew he was telling him the truth." He didn't know what to do. Should he take another chance and talk with her? Could he trust her? He shook his head. "I don't know, David." He stood. "I'll think about it. Tell Marilyn, I'll try to come." He turned and walked out of the office.

Marilyn reclined on the bed next to David. "Tell me the rest. Do you think he'll show?"

David brushed her hair from her face. He loved her smile and excitement. "I don't know. Jax is pretty angry. He said he might show up but didn't know for sure."

The smile fell from her face. "Oh David, he has to come. Catarina will be so disappointed if he doesn't. She really loves him."

"I know and he loves her, too, but it takes more than love for a relationship to work. You of all people should know that, sweetheart."

Marilyn kissed his lips. "Yes, I know. She's my best friend and I can't stand to see her hurting. At least, now she has something to fight for. She's hoping there's a chance he'll forgive her."

"There's always a chance. I just want you to understand that I can't get in this any further. I have to stand with Jax and his decision."

"Even if it's the wrong one?"

He tapped her nose. "Yes, sweetheart, even if it's the wrong one. You'd do the same for Cat. She's like a sister to you and nothing would ever make you stop loving her. The same goes for me and Jax."

She put her arms around his neck. "That's another reason why I love you so much. You're honest and devoted. I can always depend on you."

"Yes, you can always depend on me." He kissed her lips and then smiled. "And I'll always love you." He kissed her again. "In two day's time we won't have to wonder about Jax and Cat anymore. Just keep your fingers crossed."

Chapter Seventeen

The formal dining room was set for sixteen. Catarina walked around the table making sure everything was in place. Marilyn had done a fabulous job. She'd decided to serve lobster for their main course, and then afterwards they would all retire to the garden for dancing.

Cat looked at her hands. They were shaking slightly and she rubbed them against her long black formal dress, trying to wipe away the sheen. She'd been more nervous today than she'd ever been. This was the night. She would know by the end if she and Jax had a future or if it was over. She prayed it was just a beginning.

She glanced in the mirror on the wall. Her hair was pulled on top of her head and small tendrils fell loosely around her face. She wore a pair of emerald and diamond earrings and a small emerald ring her mother had given to her before she died. She ran her fingertip across the ring. The small marquise cut emeralds and baguette diamonds seemed to shine more so tonight than before. Maybe it was a sign that her mother was looking down on her now, giving her the courage she needed.

The doorbell rang and she held her breath. The first guest had arrived and she was terrified to see who it was. Marilyn said she was going to invite several people from the office and friends of theirs from town. She heard Marie greeting the guests and was relieved when she heard the voices of Lauren and Daryl from David's office.

She smiled, took a deep breath and then entered the hallway to greet them. "Lauren, Daryl, it's wonderful to see you again."

Lauren turned around. "Catarina, David told me you were in town again. How are you doing?"

"Oh wonderful, I'm leaving in a few days, so Marilyn thought she'd have a small dinner party."

"Right, like anything Marilyn plans is small. How many are invited?"

"Sixteen." She laughed and Lauren joined her. "Daryl, I see you and Lauren came together."

Daryl smiled and pulled Lauren close. "Yes, it took some coaxing, but I finally got this woman to go out with me. I don't think she's too disgusted by it."

Catarina laughed. "No woman would be. You're a fine catch."

Daryl smiled and looked at Lauren. "Tell Lauren that."

Lauren smiled at him, and Catarina wanted to run and hide. She'd shared those same looks with Jax just a few months ago. She prayed she would again soon. "Well, would you two like a drink? Marilyn and David should be down any minute." She heard the doorbell again and let Marie answer it. Catarina quickly left the foyer and walked into the living room. Marilyn soon joined them in the living room. "Lauren I'm so glad you could come." She gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Daryl, it took you long enough." She laughed at the look on his face. "I was wondering when you'd finally ask Lauren out."

Daryl choked on his drink. "I forget you women have everything all planned out. Are you ever disappointed?"

Marilyn looked at Cat. "Very seldom." She smiled encouragingly at Cat.

Cat swallowed and another couple joined them. She busied herself helping Marilyn with the guests. Every time she heard the doorbell, she jumped. She looked up at the clock and frowned. It was half past seven and he should have been there by now. Maybe he wasn't coming after all.

Cat looked at Marilyn and saw she was in conversation with David. They looked at her and gave her a small smile. They were obviously thinking the same thing. Jax should have already showed. He wasn't coming. He really didn't care anymore after all. She turned away from them and looked out the window at the garden. It was better she learned now and not later. The doorbell rang again and she held her breath. *Please let it be Jax.*

A woman walked in. She was beautiful, tall and slender. Her hair was pulled back in a chignon. Pearls were

draped at her neck and she looked very classy. A man walked in behind her and Catarina blanched. *Jax!* He took the wrap from the woman's shoulders and guided her into the living room. Their eyes met and his were as empty as the black sky.

Catarina swallowed hard and held back her urge to cry. How could he? He wasn't stupid, he knew she was going to be here. Couldn't he have waited until she was gone before flaunting another woman? Cat turned and walked to the other side of the room. She wasn't prepared to speak with him--or the woman. She watched David approach them and speak to Jax. He then leaned over and kissed the woman on the cheek.

Marilyn approached her. "Cat."

Catarina stood straight. "Don't say a word. I can't deal with it now. We'll talk later."

Marilyn placed her hand on Catarina's arm. "It's not what it looks like. Grace is an old friend."

Catarina watched the way Jax placed his hand on the woman's back. The same way he'd done to hers. No, it wasn't the touch of an old friend--they must be lovers. "I'm fine."

"Cat..." Marilyn was interrupted when Jax approached them.

"Good evening, Marilyn." He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips, depositing a light kiss.

Marilyn pulled her hand from his grasp. "Jax, how are you?"

"Fine." He turned to Catarina. "Catarina, you're still here?"

Catarina swallowed. "You knew I'd still be here."

"Did I?" He looked towards Grace.

Catarina laughed. "It didn't take you long did it? I should have known you were only a player." She turned and left Jax and Marilyn standing alone.

Marilyn's eyes frosted. "Jax, you are a jerk."

He bowed. "So I've been told. I told you and David to drop this. There is nothing between us."

"You're right. There isn't now." She turned to walk away but stopped. "You know what Jax? I feel sorry for you."

That girl loves you more than her own life and here you are throwing it in her face." She shook her head and left him alone.

Catarina let David escort her into the dining room and seat her on his left as Marilyn sat to his right. Other guests lined the table, with Jax and Grace sitting on the far side out of Catarina's direct line of vision. At least she wouldn't have to watch Grace and him touching. The meal seemed to drag on forever. Catarina answered questions as they were addressed to her, otherwise she was silent. The other couples seemed to enjoy themselves and the food was exquisite. Marie was a fine cook. When the meal was over, David and Marilyn led everyone out to the garden for dancing.

Catarina joined them only out of courtesy. She planned to escape as soon as possible. As she waited for the first dance to begin, she took a glass of champagne from a table. The bubbles tickled her nose and she swallowed, wishing she had a glass of vodka instead. She placed the glass back on the table and turned to see Daryl heading her way.

"Catarina, would you dance with me. Lauren is talking with Karen and they're going to be a bit." He laughed.

Catarina didn't want to be rude so she followed him to the dance floor where several couples were already dancing. She could see Jax and Grace dancing together. She turned her face away and closed her eyes.

"Something wrong, Cat?" Daryl asked.

"No, I'm just a bit tired."

"There seems to be some sort of tension between you and Jax Blair. Something going on with you two?"

Catarina smiled. "There was once, but not any more."

Daryl chuckled. "Right." He turned her in a circle. "If there's nothing going on, then why does it look like Jax is about to pounce on us?"

Catarina stiffened. "You must be mistaken."

Daryl shook his head. "No and he's about to make his kill. He's headed our way."

Daryl took a step back. "Jax, how are you this evening?" He extended his hand and Jax took it.

"Fine, thank you. Do you mind if I cut in?" Jax was looking at Catarina and didn't wait for Daryl's answer.

He took her hand and pulled her into his arms. The music was slow, and Catarina couldn't help but melt into his body. She tried her best to keep the tears at bay. Still, they gathered on the edges, waiting to fall. Neither spoke, only their bodies communicated.

Catarina closed her eyes, printing everything to memory. If she couldn't have Jax, then at least she'd have this memory to take with her back to Dallas. Jax pulled her body closer, placing his hands on her back. The warmth of his palm sent tingles down her spine. His cheek grazed hers and in a moment his lips brushed against hers, and then he stopped abruptly and pulled back. Catarina held tight to his arms afraid her legs would collapse beneath her. Jax was holding her so gently, as if he cherished her. His warm hand cupping her back made her shiver. When she felt his lips pulling away from her own, she leaned in closer to him. Suddenly, they stopped dancing and Jax grabbed her close, kissing her more intensely than he ever had. She couldn't breathe, didn't want to. Catarina was afraid if she breathed or moved it would all come to an end.

She heard a voice behind her and stiffened. *No, please.* Jax straightened and lifted his head from hers. He was looking into her eyes and she was silently begging him to not leave.

"Jax, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to leave." Grace looked from one to the other.

Catarina wanted to kill her. How could she do this? Surely Jax would tell her to find another way home, but instead he turned and took Grace by the arm walking away. Catarina couldn't move. She stood watching as Jax turned his back on her and walked away with another woman. She thought her heart would break in two.

Catarina didn't say a word. She turned and walked up the stairway to her room without excusing herself from Marilyn or their guests. It was time to go to bed and tomorrow she would return to Dallas, to the life she never should have left.

Jax escorted Grace out the front door. "I'm sorry Grace, but if you don't mind I'll have the driver take you home."

Grace looked up and smiled. "She's beautiful."

"Yes, she is." Jax couldn't say anything else. He knew now that he couldn't go on without Catarina in his life. His heart belonged to her. Grace touched his cheek. "Good luck, I think she's pretty mad right now. You'd better go to her, although I don't know if she'll want to speak with you."

"She'll have to. I'm not leaving here until she does."

"Good." Grace turned and approached the car. The driver opened her door and she waived at Jax as she got in. Jax waited until the car pulled away then turned and entered the house again. David was standing in the foyer waiting for him. "Tell me what to do, David."

"Tell her you love her."

"Do you think she'll listen to me?"

"She's in the buttercup room. Go."

Jax didn't waste any time. At the bottom of the stairs he closed his eyes for a moment and prayed that God would give him the right words to speak. He knew this was his last chance. Jax walked up the stairs and stopped outside the buttercup room. He turned the doorknob and entered. Cat lay on the bed with her face turned away. He could see that she had a Kleenex in her hand, blotting her eyes. She sniffed and Jax sat down on the bed next to her. "Cat?"

She jerked around and bolted upright. "Jax, you shouldn't be in here."

"I know but we need to talk." He watched as she tried to compose herself. His heart broke at the sadness hiding behind her eyes. He loved her desperately. "Cat, I'm sorry about everything."

She turned her face from his as tears streamed down her cheeks. "You have no reason to apologize. It was childish of me to run away the way I did. I tried to rationalize it, but there's just no logical explanation. I ... I was just so afraid ..."

Jax scooted against the headboard and pulled her to his chest. He held her close as she cried, not quite sure what to say. He knew one thing. He never wanted to let her out of his arms again, and if he had anything to say about it, he wouldn't. Jax rocked her until her sniffles subsided. "Can we start over?"

Catarina closed her eyes. "Jax, we can't."

Jax stiffened and tried to control the anger that started to rise inside. He twisted her body until she faced him. "What do you mean? Why?" He demanded.

"Jax, there's something you don't know."

"Don't give me that again, Catarina. I know who Mark is and I know you're just good friends. Now tell me the truth!" He couldn't believe it when more tears started pouring down her face. How could a woman cry this much?

"Jax, I was pregnant." She fell against his chest.

Jax sat stunned. Pregnant? Was pregnant? God, no! Not an abortion. Afraid to ask, Jax sat patiently waiting for her to tell him the truth.

Her breathing calmed and she slowly unfolded the entire story, crying quietly all the while. Jax placed his palm across her stomach and a tear fell from his eye. "I'm sorry, Cat. I'm so sorry." He scooted down the bed and pulled her close to his chest. He covered her with his body, letting her absorb his warmth and strength. "It will be okay, sweetheart. I promise."

She finally calmed and a short while later drifted off to sleep. Jax lay listening to her even breathing. He loved her so much his heart ached. He was determined to show her how much he loved her--every day, for the rest of their lives. He pulled the blanket up over them both and closed his eyes joining her in her dreams.

Catarina woke and could feel a heavy hand draped at her side. She tried to remember what happened, and then suddenly the conversation with Jax flashed before her. Was it true? Was Jax there beside her? The room was dark and she wondered what time it was. She twisted and looked at the clock on the bedside table. Eleven. She'd been asleep for two hours.

She remembered telling Jax everything. The only thing she'd held back was how much she loved him. She had to tell him, she couldn't hold it back any longer. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and she looked at his eyes. He wasn't asleep; he'd been watching her. "Hi."

He ran his fingers through her hair and framed her face. "Hi."

He kissed her, gently at first, and then with increasing pressure. She opened to him and lost herself in his touch. She'd dreamed of his smell, touch, and taste so long that it was almost as if she was still dreaming. She sighed. "This isn't a dream, is it, Jax?"

"No, sweetheart" Jax whispered. He pulled her closer to him. "I love you, Cat. I love you so much."

She closed her eyes and smiled. He loved her. Jax loved her! "Oh Jax, can you ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, darling. The only thing that's important is that I love you and I never want to lose you again."

"Oh, Jax, I love you so much. I never thought I'd hear those words from your lips."

"Well, you'd better get used to it, because I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to convince you."

"Good." She smiled as he kissed her again, teasing her under her ear. "Jax, about the baby."

He put a finger over her lips. "Shhh, there will be more babies. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when it happened."

"That's all right. I know you would have been if you'd known."

"Well, we have a new life ahead of us, don't we? Do you think you can pull yourself away from the states to move to London and be my wife?"

Wife. Jax wife. Catarina felt as if she were about to explode from happiness. "Well, let me see." She laughed when Jax tickled her. "I guess I can suffer marriage to you in that beautiful country of yours."

"Good, because I'm never letting you out of my sight again, Cat." He kissed her and looked deep in her eyes. "I love you so much."

Catarina thought she'd melt under his loving gaze. She snuggled closer to her future husband and felt the tension and stress of the last few weeks dissolve. She thought of Marilyn and David and the incredible love they shared, and she smiled. Now, at long last, she had her own knight in shining armor, and they, too, would live happily ever after.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kimberly Roberts lives in Grand Prairie, Texas between Fort Worth and Dallas. She's been an avid reader of many genres, especially romance, since she was young. Her favorite authors were Jane Austen and Janette Oke. Kimberly enjoys writing romance, young adult, and inspirational books. *A Chance Worth Taking* is her second published book and she's thrilled to have it published in the ebook Industry through DiskUs Publishing.

A Chance Worth Taking is the riveting sequel to her first book, *Everlasting*, published by DiskUs Publishing. However, the manner in which the book is written would never lead new readers to suspect that it's a sequel. If you love *A Chance Worth Taking*, order *Everlasting* through DiskUs or Barnes and Noble. It's the story of David and Marilyn and their trials in overcoming a life-changing experience, ultimately finding eternal love.

Kimberly reviews books for several authors and publishing companies. "It keeps me on top of the publishing industry and I see what the publishing houses are looking for." Marilyn Nesbitt of DiskUs was the first to ask Kim for a review and it started growing from there. Recently interviewed by Peter Gumble of "The Wall Street Journal", Peter wrote, "Kim is a revolutionary arbiter." <http://kimqaona.com>

Foremost in her life are Kimberly's husband of twelve years, Richard, and her two children, Richie and Kristen.

Richard has been a wonderful supporter of Kim's work. When she needs time to write, he gladly spends time with the children and allows Kim whatever time is needed. Her children think it's "Cool!" that she's published.

Kimberly would love to hear from her readers.

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