



**Karen Wiesner**

Forever Man  
*by Karen Wiesner*

## **Hard Shell Word Factory**

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## Chapter 1

*SINCE WHEN* do you take advice from that pompous windbag Tad Whittinberg? Savannah O'Brien chided herself, glancing to the left and right after turning the corner.

She'd never had a car before six months ago, so when Tad asked her how "Corvette life" was treating her, she admitted it had a few clunks—literally. Tad recommended a garage on the Upper West Side. Instead of asking the name of it, she'd asked for directions.

*And now you're lost*, she concluded. Amazing to have lived in New York City all her life yet she had no clue where this place was. The truth was, about all she'd seen lately were her apartment in Greenwich Village and her law firm in Midtown, Fifth Avenue. She couldn't remember the last time she went out with anyone, let alone friends. When her mind drifted to the novel little restaurant in SoHo she and old friends used to frequent, she shook the thought off before it could become an actual memory.

Savannah had no idea what to expect of this garage, precisely because of who the recommendation had come from. Tad's mind attached importance to everything he said and did. Any grease-monkey shop became the white palace emporium if Tad Whittinberg deigned to frequent it.

Shaking her head in disgust, Savannah sat back against the stiff leather seat. Then she saw it. A sign so familiar, *dèjà vu* reached out and grabbed her right by the heart.

Before she could give it a second thought, she yanked the steering wheel hard in that direction. Until she heard the screech of tires and at least a dozen blaring horns, her instincts ran on one-cylinder focus.

With her cheeks flushed hotly, she parked in front of the white painted, brick building, then glanced over her shoulder in chagrin at the near accident she'd caused. A few drivers gave her final, sharp rebukes with their horns.

A man in dark blue coveralls rushed out of the garage, clearly wondering if an accident had happened right outside. The man wasn't *the* man—the one she'd almost killed herself, and maybe a couple other motorists, only a moment ago; the one whose logo topped the building looming in front of her. A brightly painted fox with its bushy tail curved around its feet and a sly grin looked down from the sign. She knew that fox. Brett Foxx. He'd had the same logo on the back of his leather jacket with the word FOXX in studs beneath last she'd seen him. Back when he'd been a highwayman in Savannah O'Brien's heart.

Could it really be him? Had he really settled down enough to own a business? It had to be. His name was on the sign: Foxx Body Shop.

Had Tad known Brett owned the garage he recommended?

"Hey, lady, you okay?" The barrel-bodied mechanic leaned down to glance in at her from the passenger window. The patch on his uniform read "Mikey."

*Other than being a little blindsided by the past?* Savannah laughed to herself. "I'm fine. Who owns this garage?"

"That'd be Brett Foxx, ma'am."

Savannah's heart-rate went into triple cadence at the confirmation. Her mouth dry, she asked, "Is he here?"

The towheaded mechanic grinned at her. "You know anything about Brett Foxx, ma'am, you know he's where he likes it best—under a wicked honey who takes dangerous curves."

For a stunned second, Savannah just stared. But how could she be jealous? In all the time she'd known Brett, he'd had a steady girlfriend, someone she'd genuinely liked. Savannah had never had a shot anyway—and part of her hadn't really wanted one. Infatuation was better than true love. And fantasy was better than reality.

"Sounds like the Brett I knew." She smiled and got out of her car. "I need my car looked at..."

"Well, come on in. If you're a friend, he'll wanna do ya personally."

Savannah felt a rush of heat flood her face at the image the mere suggestion created, but the mechanic already strode toward the door he'd emerged from.

*Now's the time to be cool and calm*, she lectured herself, resisting the urge to fan her hot face as she followed Mikey inside.

The aroma of warm oil, gasoline and antifreeze hit her sharply, surprising her when she realized she kind of liked the scent.

"Yo, Brett! Got one for ya!" her escort shouted.

Savannah expected Brett to come out of an office somewhere with a "honey" following shortly after. Instead she heard the scrape of steel on concrete as a creeper rolled out

from under a bright red Testarossa Spider, a car that by all appearances could definitely be called "a wicked honey who took dangerous curves."

Savannah's first instinct was to laugh because of what she'd assumed, but the way Brett looked at her stalled her completely.

In slow motion, his gaze traveled from her feet to her head. She was a hundred percent certain he'd missed nothing. Not the barely-there scuff on her right pump, not the faded scar just below her left kneecap, not the purple lace intentionally peeking out beneath her tailored suit, and certainly not the goofy, near-tears, *God-how-long-has-it-been?* smile she couldn't control.

"Savvy O'Brien," he said under his breath.

"Thought I'd finally lost that nickname." She said it with tears in her throat. He surely knew she accepted his personal nickname for her, since they'd spent so much time together in the past ... and he'd said it so often during that time. He couldn't know that she liked it, not so much because of the embedded compliment, but because she loved the way he said it, in that deep, bedroom voice of his. He said it like he enjoyed wrapping his tongue and lips around her name. He said it like she was special to him.

He sat up on the creeper, a slow grin lifting the corner of his mouth. "Guess you never know what fate's got in store."

"Guess not."

While he stood, she couldn't decide whether to step back or step closer. Something about this man had always intimidated ... and attracted her.

Despite the fact that, when she wore heels, he was a half inch shorter than she, his sheer presence made him appear to tower over her. She stood her ground.

Wiping his hands on a rag, he moved in on her in that unleashed, animal stride that set her heart racing once again.

"Baby, did you look this good last time I saw you or is the lighting in here playing tricks on my eyes?"

She could barely breathe. The warm scent of the garage filled her lungs; this beyond-sexy man did the rest to render her dizzy and incoherent inside her own head.

Had *he* looked this good the last time she'd seen him? Everything about him was familiar and yet she might have been struck by lightning, based on her reaction to him now. He *hadn't* changed. He was still Brett Foxx, lean, mean, untamed and personifying reckless sex in a mere glance.

"Light must be playing tricks on my eyes, too," she murmured.

Someone dropped something nearby, an echoing clang of metal on the cement floor that jolted Savannah out of her reverie. She wasn't here to renew an old friendship, even if Brett wanted the same.

"My car—"

He cut her off with another lopsided grin. "Was that you out there?"

"*That*"—the accident she'd almost caused out front. She flushed as if he'd seen it and knew why it happened.

"Some old boy must've caught sight of those mile-long legs."

He glanced down for an instant, giving every indication he meant *her* legs. Then he started out of the garage, to her car, presumably.

He'd always been a flirt. Not necessarily in terms of oozing charm, but in honesty. Brett Foxx never had any trouble saying what was on his mind. Even those impulsive thoughts most people chased out of their own heads before they could reach verbalization, he said out loud. No regrets.

Savannah followed him outside and found him eyeballing her Corvette.

"Since when did you get a car, Savvy? Weren't you the one who said New York City needed cars like dogs need fleas?"

She smiled at the fact that he'd remembered. "When you're all over town during the day, it becomes necessary." *And when the only feeling you get below the waist is from a car, you compromise*, she added to herself.

"She's a honey," he said, speaking real low. "What's wrong with her? She can't be more than six months old and she's already giving you problems?"

He could have been describing a child ... or a lover. She'd never understood men's attachment to cars.

She'd bought the Corvette from a professional basketball player who'd decided the car was too low-slung for him, class or no class. Every time he hit a pothole, he risked creating a sun roof in it, the hard way.

"It ... *she* clunks."

"Front or back?"



He glanced at her, and she raised a shoulder in uncertainty. "I'm afraid cars are your area of expertise. It clunks underneath. That's as specific as I can get."

As if the heat was getting to him, he shucked off his coverall so the top part hung down his back. Beneath, he wore a wide arm-hole tank that followed every muscular ripple of his torso. Savannah had a difficult time concentrating on anything he said when he squatted at the rear-end of her car.

She'd seen men twice his size, but she'd never seen anyone who could match the power emanating from Brett. If he picked up her car and looked under it right now, she wouldn't be surprised. He seemed that powerful.

*Imagine being in the arms of a man that powerful.* She bit gently on the corner of her lip at the thought.

"How much time you got?"

He stood, moving toward her, forcing her to abandon an oldie-but-a-goodie fantasy.

"Oh. Ah, I don't know. How long do you think it'll take?"

Something about his expression left her feeling exposed. He couldn't know what she'd been thinking ... but he could have noticed the lapse in her attention.

"Fifteen, twenty minutes, if even. Muffler's still good. Just needs to be re-attached."

Savannah nodded sheepishly. "I can wait."

When she held out the keys, she wanted to tell him to take his time. As much time as he possibly could.

\* \* \* \*

SHE WAS a honey, all right.

Brett had to acknowledge he'd been down for a long time, but he wasn't dead. He'd have to be dead not to react to Savannah O'Brien. Sophistication, sensuality, smarts—she had it all. But he was going to let her walk out of his life because he'd made a vow—no more first moves. Women were a hell of a lot easier to handle when *they* made all the rules.

"Well, that didn't take long," Savvy said, once the car was back out of the garage, clunk-free. He caught the note of disappointment in her voice.

*She's outta your class, man, and you know it. One glance know it.*

Take away the five hundred dollar suit, the upswept, cinnamon colored hair, the diamond studs sparkling in her ears and on her wrist—the lady was down-to-earth real, with a wild streak a mile wide. As warm and friendly as Savvy was, he'd seen how she kept men at a distance. And he didn't need his heart broken beyond repair more than once this lifetime.

Brett stepped closer to her, just to see the flash of anticipation claim her whiskey colored eyes.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

Brett wouldn't accept money from her and was sure she knew him well enough to know that. "I charge by the hour, not the minute."

Unable to help himself, he drew a strand of the silky hair framing her face through his fingers. He wanted to ask her how she was doing, what she was doing, who she did it with.

Instead, he chucked her under the chin and said, "Careful with those legs in the future, Savvy. Or you're gonna send

some poor guy to the emergency room claiming it was worth the injury."

Before he turned and walked away, he saw her grin and figured, since it had to end, it was a good place to end it.

"Who was that?" Mikey asked him.

"Used to be my lawyer."

Mikey nodded, still looking after Savvy though she'd gone. "She's class. Think maybe she can make you revoke your vow to stay away from women?"

Brett wasn't looking to break his vow, but he couldn't see how Savvy fit into his multi-leveled promise to himself not to use sex anymore to fill the emptiness or loneliness he felt a lot of the time. Savvy'd been his lawyer. Still ... "She's gone—"

The words barely emerged from his mouth before he heard her voice again and turned toward the door.

"Since you won't let me pay for the work you did, how about having dinner with me tonight?"

They met each other halfway across the garage. "You can bring Rori or—"

"What time should *I* be there?"

She gave him a little, almost shy smile. "Seven o'clock? I haven't moved, if you still remember my address."

They'd had a lot of good times together in the past, with his friends—Doobs, Darlene, Rox, Diane, Mikey and Jace. His friends had become her friends. Her friends, her boyfriend, had never become his friend. But he and Savvy had never been completely alone together in the past.

Brett guessed he could sit through a meal alone with her. He might be tempted to have her for dessert, but he figured wanting was a stretch from taking. Rori taught him all about caution when she walked out on him.

"I remember it."

"Great."

Behind her huge smile of pleasure, he saw something that gave *him* pleasure. She was nervous. In all the years he'd known her, they'd never had the opportunity to explore the thread of tension between them. He'd blamed that tension on her. Men made her nervous somehow, yet she still liked to play with them.

Was she attracted to him? Or was it just her streak of wildness looking for another playmate? He wouldn't be that playmate. For the first time in his life, he'd rather have friendship than mind-blowing sex. Friendship rarely ended with a heart-breaking sendoff.

"So I'll see you at seven."

He nodded, then thought as she walked away *What is it about her? No other woman except Rori made me think it could get heavy and I could be letting myself in for a world of hurt.*

She'd been here for twenty minutes and he'd flipped out six ways to Sunday. Shaking his head, he turned away. Mikey chuckled. Brett ignored him.

## Chapter 2

SAVANNAH burst out laughing in sheer relief once she got into her car. God, she'd never been more nervous in her life going in there. She couldn't imagine Brett saying no to her, she realized now that she'd started breathing normally again. He was a ready-at-a-moment's-notice, damn-plans kind of person. That was part of his appeal, especially for someone with her penchant for organization.

Her mind whirled with plans and contradictions of fear and excitement. She drove back to the law firm she'd become a partner in over five years ago. The firm specialized in entertainment law.

Brett had been a part of that entertainment industry—the music industry—years ago as a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. He seemed to have found his niche in the real world finally with the garage. His business was thriving as far as she could tell from her handful of minutes there. And she wanted to know everything—about his new life, his new career ... if Rori Mason remained the life and death of him.

After crowding into the elevator with a dozen other people, she rode it to the thirty-fourth floor, then walked straight to the lounge for coffee.

Tad was in the spacious, fully stocked room with David Kane and Phillip Callahan. She murmured a greeting, hoping to be able to scoot out quickly, but Tad forced her to remain after she poured her coffee.

"Get that Corvette of yours fixed?" he asked in his booming voice. No such thing as a private conversation with him.

She nodded.

"You went to the garage I recommended?"

*Here we go*, Savannah thought, stirring a dollop of cream and a packet of sugar into her coffee. "Yes. Thanks for the referral."

His chest all but swelled to Popeye proportions. "Didn't I tell you? Tad Whittinberg'll never steer ya wrong."

Instead of voicing an ungrateful reply like "You're a genius—now shut up", she gave him a satisfied smile and went to get the carton of yogurt she'd brought for lunch.

Phillip got up to join her at the counter. "I could have looked at your car if you'd asked me, Savannah."

His tone lie halfway between wounded pride and possessive anger. Her own anger flared at his sudden, obvious jealousy. They'd gone their separate ways six years ago, after being together for three long, frustrating years. She didn't know why she'd continued it for so long. Or why he had, for that matter. They'd had very little in common from the start. What they had never approached love.

"It was no big deal. The muffler just came loose. It was fixed in a couple minutes."

"Wasn't Brett Foxx a client of yours?" Tad stepped near her on the other side of the counter, all but blocking her escape.

As if she didn't know, Tad continued: "He owns that garage I sent you over to."

Against her own will, Savannah glanced at Phillip. His face had gone a dull red and she could see the jealousy in his hazel eyes. Embarrassment forced her to look away quickly. She couldn't fathom the meaning of her own instinctive thought *How did he know how I felt about Brett?*

"He was a client," she managed tightly. "He and his friends."

Tad nodded.

"I remember 'em. Never forget that sweet thing Roni Mason."

"*Rori*," Savannah corrected, then blushed again because it was now obvious she remembered everything about Brett Foxx in detail.

"You've got grease on your face," Phillip said in a low voice that did everything short of imply she also had greasy fingerprints on her upper thighs.

Her hand moved to the exact place on her cheek Brett's hand caressed earlier. She didn't dare look at Phillip.

He pivoted away from her to retrieve his soda can. For the first time in a long time, she had a flashback of him always getting a can of soda and gulping the sugary "gut-rot" (as she called it) after they made love like two animals shot full of hormones. That memory coincided with what *she* did after. Wallowed in her own disappointment and embarrassment.

Never before had she let herself believe she'd used Phillip all those years. Used him because she couldn't bear to be alone when....

*When what?* When Brett had a girlfriend he'd be with forever? Had it really been like that? Would she want to analyze it if she suspected it had?

Savannah cringed at her own thoughts. Murmuring "Excuse me, gentlemen", she left the lounge with her coffee and yogurt.

Her assistant appeared to look everywhere but at the smudge of grease on her face as he gave her messages, highlighting the urgent ones. Then she closed herself into the comfort of her office.

She settled into her chair, pushing aside her lunch and the messages. In her purse compact, she discovered the telltale-as-a-scarlet-A smudge on her cheek. A smile gave way to her berating conscience. There was no connection between Phillip and Brett! No connection between when she broke up with Phillip and when Brett severed their business relationship with nothing more than a message to the firm's switchboard operator.

Anyway, she didn't need to re-hash the past. She didn't need to know what she'd felt then or why she'd reacted the way she had. Brett was an old friend. Anything that happened past this point was different. Somehow she'd make sure of that because, like it or not, tonight was already far too important to her.

\* \* \* \*

COME SEVEN o'clock, Brett had already been parked in front of Savvy's apartment for twenty minutes and sat on the hood of his car, patiently checking out her neighborhood.



He knew she wouldn't be home any earlier than seven. She was a from-the-cradle workaholic. Not much ran a second to her career.

But the lady knew how to have a good time, he had to concede. He remembered the times they stayed up all night at her apartment or some obscure restaurant talking, laughing, just basically being crazy. They'd been with Rori, sometimes his other friends and her boyfriends. Ol' Phil usually had cut out early if he showed at all. Even when he had come, he'd never fit in.

Brett couldn't say he'd been too friendly either. Despite Savvy and Phil's shared profession and their mutual dedication to it, he'd never seen two more ill-suited people. Rori used to get on him about his treatment of Peewee Phil, Phil the Snore, Phil the Fogey. But Savvy had been happiest, less inhibited, the nights the human dud stayed home to pine by the phone.

Was Ol' Phil still living in her apartment and sharing her bed? Brett doubted it, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Maybe the guy was out of town and she wanted to do some entertaining.

Once the thought crossed his mind, he regretted it. Wild streak taken into consideration, Savvy O'Brien was a classy dame. Nothing about her could be considered trashy.

*Who spent the day carbo-loading like she invited you to sample her body instead of dinner and some verbal catch-up?*

Sliding off the hood of his souped up Camaro, Brett let his boots touch the pavement. She lived in a nice neighborhood. Clean streets, flowers all around, old ladies giving him the evil

eye because of his leather jacket, his car and/or his appearance.

Even at what he considered an older-and-wiser forty-six years old, people still took him for a hoodlum. He had the long hair, the clothes, the bad boy looks for it. That didn't begin to cover his record or his past sins. He wondered what people would think of a golden girl like Savvy with a guy like him.

Then he heard the click of heels coming toward him. He turned to watch her approach.

Oh hell, sitting here for twenty minutes did nothing to prepare him for her teeth-grinding impact on him.

"You're early," she said with just a touch of breathlessness.

"You're walking. Where's the car?"

"In my thirty-year leased spot in the parking garage a block over."

Brett shook his head teasingly, whistling through his teeth. "That's quite a commitment for somebody who never wanted to get her own car."

She glanced past him. "You still have yours."

"Only lady who's ever been true to me," he said, running his hand over the brilliantly polished hood. He glanced at Savvy. "Pretty pathetic."

She didn't return his smile, as if she read some deeper hurt behind his words. Things were getting too serious.

From the passenger's seat of his car, he retrieved a long-stemmed, white rose.

Might as well have been a fifty pound diamond for the surprised glow that lit her face. "Corny, but every time I see a white rose I think of you, Savvy."

Instead of smelling the flower the way most people would, she brushed it gently over her mouth, closing her eyes for an instant as if the gesture filled her with pleasure.

"How often do you see white roses?" she asked.

He couldn't tell if the little quirk in her tone meant amusement or fishing for a compliment.

He leaned closer. "Not nearly enough, baby, not nearly enough."

Watching him, she drew the blossom over her full lips again. "Thank you. It's beautiful."

Yeah, she was. Tall, elegant and one-of-a-kind.

"Well, let's go in."

He took her briefcase and the large, brown paper bag from her, then followed her up the stone steps.

"SoHo."

She looked back at him and the bag he held as she entered the elevator. "It's been a long time. Seemed appropriate."

They'd hung around that little restaurant in SoHo a lot, way back when. The food, the conversation, the company—they all combined to the point where Brett wasn't sure if his fond memories were of one or the combination.

They rode the elevator to the top floor, which she shared with only one other tenant.

Brett still remembered the first time he'd come to Savvy's apartment with his friends. The place was like a palace.

Marble floors, high ceilings, open spaces and first-class furnishings. Somehow it remained warm and cozy. Especially the living room, with the stone fireplace. At night, with a fire blazing away, the walls seemed alive with sensuous shadows.

Drunk as he'd been most of the time, he'd had quite a few fantasies here. Hell, he must've been a pervert because those fantasies usually came when her uptight boyfriend decided to join them. Brett wasn't even sure why he'd thought so much about taking Savvy six ways to Sunday in front of Ol' Phil.

*Torture him cuz you were jealous?* The dead-ringer thought came out of nowhere.

"So, where's Senator Phil?" He remembered many a conversation listening to the human yawn talk about his political aspirations.

He set her things on the marble bar enclosing part of her kitchen, watching her expression carefully shutter.

"We broke up six years ago. You didn't like him much, did you?"

Brett lifted an eyebrow. "He didn't fit ya, if that's what you mean."

Her gaze moved over his face as if she wanted to ask him what he meant. But she shrugged. "We didn't fit. And he's still a lawyer. Guess the politics were all talk."

So she saw Ol' Phil everyday. Brett found himself wondering things he had no right to wonder.

"Let me change my clothes, and then we can eat before this gets cold. Make yourself comfortable."

Savvy lived in a palace with all the conveniences, but she'd never been formal. They'd never used her dining room table

or chairs or any of the gold-edged plates gleaming behind glass cabinets. Her living room was the usual picnic spot.

The first time they'd been here, Rori had asked if they should be parked on a carpet so plush and fancy, even walking on it should be a crime. Savvy had shrugged it off with some 'stain-resistant' and 'intended for frequent use' excuses. That was also the first time Brett realized Savannah O'Brien wasn't some china doll through-and-through, despite her appearance. She hadn't stopped intriguing him since.

She came back out dressed in comfortable, homemade jean shorts, loose enough that a man could just slide his hand inside, right down the curve of her hip. Her top was short-sleeve, knitted and she'd left the last two buttons open. Not too many women could make the outfit sophisticated instead of sexy. She did both with ease.

"Do you want some beer or wine?"

He watched her bare legs against the black and white kitchen tile as she went to the refrigerator.

*Legs all the way up to her eyeballs. Damn.*

She wasn't what he'd always told himself was his type—a woman with long, loose blond hair, 38 plus-24-34. He was rapidly developing a preference for cinnamon colored hair worn up, small, firm breasts and narrow hips. He liked pretty much everything he saw on Savvy.

"Brett?"

His jaw clenched so tight, his teeth hurt. He hadn't ached for a woman in a long time. For sex, sure, nothing personal. Prolonged (even self-imposed) celibacy for a man who'd spent

a lifetime indulging on a whim was hell. He ached for this woman personally, for far more than just sex.

"I quit," he said under his breath.

"Alcohol?"

Even if he'd had the energy to care at the moment, he couldn't fault her shock. Before he'd realized it was a big part of his anger, he could drink five times what the average drunk could and remain standing. He'd never been choosy either—beer, wine, any of the hard shit.

"I quit one day and never looked back. Too easy to get in trouble under the influence."

"Oh." She seemed both confused and surprised. "Do you mind if I—?"

"It won't change *my* mind if *you* do."

She brought a bottle of that expensive white wine she liked so much and a bottle of water over to the bar. When she lifted the water for his approval, he nodded.

"So that's why you haven't needed my services." She smiled tightly, getting a wine glass.

"That, and I was dirt broke. Couldn't afford my next meal let alone keeping my overworked lawyer on a retainer."

His career—if the dabbling he'd done in the arts for most of his life could be described so importantly—had never given him much to live on. For six months out of any given year, he and his friends lived like kings. The next six were hand-to-mouth, everybody doing what they could to get by.

Together he and Savvy carried their carpet picnic into the living room. He shed his leather jacket on the sofa while she unpacked the carry-out meal.

"So where does the garage come in?" she asked, handing him a set of chopsticks.

"I bought that a long time ago. I knew someday I'd crash, and then I'd need something stable."

"Well, it seems to work for you."

He laughed slightly. "Wish I'd done it years ago. It's better to always have money in your pocket, even if it's not a fortune, than to have a fortune for a day and broke for a month. Tell that to a road warrior though."

She lifted a pea pod to her mouth, but didn't bite into it until after she said, "Is that road warrior retired or just on extended vacation?"

Backing up slightly to lean against the sofa, he shook his head. "I still got the Harley if I ever wanna fly again."

"After all the accidents you had on that thing, I'm surprised it's still in one piece." A dark note crept into her voice and a shadow crossed her face. She looked away to uncork the wine.

"You'd be surprised how driving without the influence of a couple bottles of Jack Daniels improves the whole experience."

She shook her head disapprovingly, and all he saw was Rori. Rori had hated his motorcycle. Old anger rose in him, remembering her irrational attitude.

"So why'd you stay with Phil, the human dud, as long as you did?" he asked, realizing *he* was being irrational out of an assumption Savvy disapproved of him the way Rori had ninety-nine percent of the time.

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For a minute, Savvy looked at him in utter shock. He'd never seen her sputter and she didn't now, but she came close. He knew she saw a distinction in his question. He hadn't asked why she broke up with Phil; he already knew why. He wanted to know why she didn't realize old Phil was the original scarecrow of stuffed shirts when she was with him and that she was too much woman for him.

She suddenly shot to her feet. "Well, why isn't Rori here? Why did you break up with her?"

Rather than wait for the answer, she stalked out of the room.



### **Chapter 3**

BY THE time Savannah reached the kitchen, she could breathe enough to ease the tension in her chest.

She'd been a basket case since she'd seen Brett's name on his garage this afternoon. She wanted him to make some vital connection between them like never before. She wanted him to kiss her, hold her, do things with her she'd only fantasized about far too many times to be healthy. She wanted him to tell her about all the good things in his life so she could share in them. She wanted him to tell her about the pain, too, so she could heal it.

For a long time, she clutched the edge of the cold, marble countertop as if it could draw all the insanity out of her.

Why was there no in between with this man? Why couldn't she just enjoy a light friendship with him instead of going ballistic at the thought of him still with Rori? At his strange questions about Phillip? What even motivated him to ask?

When she'd told Phillip it was over, she managed to convince herself the reasons lie somewhere in his political obsessions and his assumption she fit into them. How could she live with herself if she realized she'd never loved him and never had any intention of loving him? The last thing she wanted was to be like her father.

Straightening, she told herself she had to go back into that living room and pretend nothing had happened.

She saw the white rose lying on the counter. Romantic gestures had always made her uncomfortable. This one made

her emotional. More than once Rori had said Brett didn't have a romantic bone in his body—no complaint; simple fact. Any way Savannah looked at this gesture, it was romantic.

She turned on the tap, cut the stem beneath the water, then put the rose in a bud vase.

Brett sat with his knees raised on the floor when she returned to the living room. He seemed two stealthy moves away from getting up to come after her or from leaving.

"I forgot to put this in water," she said casually, setting the vase on an end table. She turned on the stereo to ease the tension.

Once she returned to the floor with him, they both resumed eating.

"So what else have you been up to besides the garage?" It seemed like a safe subject, if he allowed it to be.

He shook his head, the wariness in his eyes fading. "Not a hell of a lot. Laying low."

"So have I."

Inclining his head toward the built-in entertainment center on the opposite side of the room, he commented, "You got quite a collection of movies there."

The movie she'd watched last night stuck half out of the VCR. She'd fallen asleep in front of the TV again. Around 2:30 a.m. she stumbled to bed, cursing her own abhorrence of having a television in the bedroom.

"That pretty much sums up most of my nights," she confessed. She supposed she should be embarrassed. If she admitted it to any of her co-workers, to *anyone* there, she

would be humiliated. Not so with Brett, especially when he said, "It's a hell of a life, ain't it?"

"You too?" She couldn't help smiling at him. "What did you watch last night?"

"Some sci-fi with a skinny chick. Totally unrealistic. Why do they think aliens gotta be more evolved than we are? If they were evolved, they'd do something with those big old heads. Grow some hair, Zotar, then we'll talk about who's got more intelligence."

Savannah, who was in the middle of swallowing a sip of wine, burst out laughing and choking.

Grinning, Brett patted her on the back until she was okay. She dabbed her mouth with a napkin.

"You want to talk about unrealistic? The one I watched last night ... When does this ever happen? Man and woman, making animalistic love, bra gets tossed over the lamp shade, pantyhose hanging from the chandelier, stiletto heel in the aquarium. Come on! Who would throw a shoe? Even in the heat of passion?"

Shaking her head, she picked up a carton of food and stabbed her chopsticks inside.

"I'd throw a shoe."

When she glanced up, his expression became some twilight zone between amusement and seriousness.

"You'd throw a shoe?"

He leaned forward and momentarily cradled and stroked a hand around her bare foot. Her toes curled, her arch arched, her breath got caught in her throat.

"Yeah, baby, I would definitely throw a shoe."

Forever Man  
by Karen Wiesner

She'd wanted this man for longer than she cared to admit to herself. But did she have the courage to stop wondering what it'd be like to be with him, just once?

Looking at him with a fire burning low inside her, she saw her last chance. She might never see him again.

After a few more drinks, she'd make a move. Definitely. Hopefully he'd take it from there.

\* \* \* \*

SHE WAS drunk. Or as close as a woman like Savvy got. She laughed, talked, and he thought, *The old Foxx would have this lady flat on her back by now, riding like a champion stallion.*

He remembered now how touchy-feely she got when she had a little alcohol in her. How her eyes sparkled in the firelight. How tempting her mouth looked every time she lowered her wine glass and the wetness gleamed on her lips.

Aiming the stereo remote, she changed the CD, then stretched out on the carpet on her side. They'd lit the fire in the fireplace grate. He'd always thought it was crazy to turn the air conditioner up just to use the fireplace, but tonight ... She was too damn beautiful in the amber light for him to give it a second thought. Her skin glowed satin, her hair—still up in that sophisticated little twist he loved—shone all its unique colors of red and blond and brown.

"She walked out."

He found himself saying it before he realized he planned to tell her.

"What?" She eased up to her elbow. "Rori?"

He nodded, twisting the cap on the empty water bottle. "I didn't break up with her. Anybody who knows me knows no way I'd let go of something that belongs to me." He grinned slightly, but Savvy wasn't amused. She didn't say a word, but he could see she listened hard enough to border on desperation.

"I think she's married now. I don't know."

"You loved her."

He bit down on the inside of his cheek for a second, nodding. "I loved her about as much as I hated her. And I never let her forget it either."

For all of two seconds, he wondered why he was telling her. He hadn't told anyone else more than "I cut her loose", like he'd had any choice at all in the matter.

"You live like that—love and hate, no in-between—you do a lotta stupid stuff cuz you think you deserve to. You earned the right to make things fair any way you can." He laughed without humor.

"Why?" Savvy asked, visibly swallowing hard after the word.

"She never loved me. There was this guy, the guy she's with now, she always loved. Nothing I did could make her forget him. I spent a lotta time punishing her for that, but all I really did was punish myself cuz I couldn't be who she wanted, no matter how hard I tried."

Savvy sat up, scooting a little closer to him. Her intense gaze never left his face. "I think she's crazy for letting you go."

Hell, she didn't know. She didn't know the half of his dirty deeds if she could say that and mean it. "No way. She was right. I was the meanest mother alive when I was with her."

The look that crossed Savvy's face surprised him. Defensive, offended. For him. "Why do you say that?"

"Cuz it's true. Cuz I was crazy with her. Do you know what it's like to feel like that ... alone? To want somebody so damn bad you bleed every time they get a shadow across their face, when you see the one you can't be in their eyes?" He exhaled through clenched teeth. "I don't ever wanna love somebody like that again."

He'd been staring across the room, watching the red and green LED lights on her stereo rise and fall with the music. When he glanced at her in the aftermath of his words, his throat aching with the memories, he saw tears streaming down her cheeks. They glittered in the fire bright as diamonds.

His entire world zapped back from the past. Reaching out, he touched her cheek. She turned toward his hand, to hide or to heal. "Why are you crying, Savvy?" he asked in shock.

She closed her eyes, wrapping both of her hands around his and holding him against her wet cheek. "I've never loved anybody like that. It shouldn't be the way you said. So insane. Then again, maybe it *should*."

He'd handled female tears with all the finesse of a raging bull when booze was as natural as breathing for him. Since quitting, he didn't have to deal with female tears. He didn't have a clue how to, either. "Don't cry," he said awkwardly.

"Why not?" She opened her eyes, slowly facing him again.

Hell, she looked so soft and vulnerable and sleepy. He was all thumbs in this situation. "Cuz I'll either have to do something or I'll have to leave. I don't know how to handle this. I shouldn't have told you anything." He'd never expected this reaction from her. He didn't know what he'd expected. One minute he'd gone ten rounds with his libido, the next he'd spilled his guts.

He pushed himself to his feet, but she wouldn't let go of his hand.

"Don't. Don't go. Please," she begged.

Their eyes met, and he couldn't move, to stay or leave. What was he supposed to do with a woman who cried for him, who believed in him when he knew damn well he wasn't worthy of such a noble gesture? Not where Rori Mason was concerned.

Savvy tugged on his arm, urging him to stay. He did because he couldn't leave at this minute. Even as her reaction shamed him into believing he should have shut the hell up, she intrigued him again. Besides, maybe she needed him.

When he sat again, she looked at him as if gauging whether or not he'd remain with her. Then she leaped on him like a cougar on prey.

Her mouth covered his, soft, wet and sweet with wine. If he reached, if she came—he didn't know it. They came together, lips opening, devouring, hands clutching, claiming, forever or a single heartbeat before he broke away.

"What are you doing, baby?"

His voice sounded like an extension of their heat. Her face ... Man, he'd never seen a woman so consumed with need, so

damn gorgeous he had a hell of a time not grabbing her again.

"I thought I was kissing you," she said breathlessly, looking from his eyes to his mouth, a blatant request for more.

He must have kissed her hard. Already her bottom lip swelled. Brett ran his thumb over it while holding the inside of his index finger against her chin. "Yeah. You were. And you were doing a hell of a job, too. Why me?"

She caught her tongue between her front teeth. How could a woman jump him one minute and then get all shy the next? A flare of color rose against her taut cheeks.

"Haven't I been obvious?"

Brett's tension eased slightly. "Actually, you have." She'd touched him every chance she got, however platonically each touch could qualify. "But I don't know what you want and I don't think you know either. And that's where it gets dangerous."

She looked away now, unable to claim lust for embarrassment. "You don't want me."

Not much competed with that in terms of ridiculous, but he could see she believed it based on how he'd stopped her and what he'd said.

He eased her back on his legs, took her hand and curved it around the bulge between his legs.

Color flared so hot and fast in her cheeks, he was afraid she'd lose it completely. Instead, she closed her hand a little tighter around him and rubbed.



Closing his eyes, he swore harshly under his breath, convinced nothing could ever feel better than this, with her.

She leaned close to his ear and whispered "Let's" as if his curse had been a request.

He saw it, too. Saw himself yanking off her shorts, opening his fly and driving himself home sweet home.

But he also saw them both spent and wondering what the hell to do next.

"Too much and too damn little," he said between his teeth, easing her hand off the trigger. "We don't know each other, baby. Believe it or not, that means something to me in your case."

"We've known each other for eleven years!"

He was mad, and he wasn't sure why. "You knew me when I was a law-breakin', trouble-makin', fucked up SOB. Now, I haven't broken any laws or had any trouble in awhile, but I'm no good for a woman like you, Savvy, not unless it's all or nothing."

He pulled himself up to the couch, thinking it'd help get him under control if she wasn't so close. Instead he wanted her more, seeing her on her knees in front of him, long strands of her hair loose and wild around her flushed face.

"I'm not asking for Mr. Perfect." Her tone matched his for conviction. "I'm not even looking for a forever man."

"Then what are you looking for?"

He wanted to hear the words because he suspected Savvy wouldn't get that far. If she did, then he was in for trouble.

She shoved her hair back behind her ears, looking away for an instant. Out of nowhere, she met his gaze again,

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swallowing hard before saying, "You. I'm looking for you to make love to me. Tonight ... if you want me, too."

His body screamed *Take it, you stupid bastard! You're never gonna get a better offer.*

But some part of him held out for that prize anyway. "And then what?" he demanded, this time a hundred percent sure she wouldn't answer. He knew Savvy was a woman who did everything with a plan, even her dirty deeds. She wouldn't admit her plan amounted to sex—one night, weeks, months or even years, and then she'd drop off the face of his planet like she did every guy she got involved with.

Making love to her would be beyond incredible. Most men would sell their souls for such an offer. What she didn't seem to realize was Brett *was* a forever man. When he loved, he loved all the way, to the point of no return. He didn't know how else to do it.

She swallowed hard again under his gaze, but didn't back down. She also didn't answer, as predicted.

Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her again, deep as he dared. "When you figure out what you want, Savvy, you know where I am."

## Chapter 4

LESS THAN a minute after Brett walked out, Savannah saw his jacket, left behind, on her couch. She could have run after him or gone to the window to return it to him. There was time. She just couldn't get herself to do it.

Despite the wine she'd consumed, she'd never set out to seduce a man before. Brett did everything short of encourage her, only to reject her when it came down to the wire. Her humiliation burned fierce as a dozen bee stings. It warred in her conscience with a less defined emotion that bordered on grief.

Stumbling to her feet, she gathered the remains of their dinner.

Why did she keep making these ridiculous connections today? Why would Brett's rejection of a no-strings-attached night together remind her of her mother's funeral almost a year ago? And why would thinking of her mother's death bring back the pain of her father abandoning them thirty-one years ago?

Life wasn't as simple as a connect-the-dots. If it was, she could explain to herself why her first serious relationship had ended with him leaving her for another woman, why she'd gotten involved with Phillip to begin with, why all the other relationships had been so abrupt ... and why she couldn't seem to forget one man. *The* one man who apparently didn't want her half as much as she wanted him. She couldn't seem to get Brett Foxx out of her head or her system.

After she snuffed the fire, she started out of the living room. As if it'd called to her, she turned back for Brett's leather jacket. She'd just put it in her bedroom so she wouldn't forget to have it returned to him tomorrow.

Turning off the lights as she went, she held his jacket against her on her way to her bedroom.

She could smell him on the old, worn leather. Smell his cologne, the garage and smoke, and a million memories the thing must have soaked up. She traced the metal studs that spelled out his name, touched the grinning fox logo above it. She remembered Rori holding onto Brett from the back, her cheek pressed against his back and the memory twisted inside her with jealous rage.

The relationship between Brett and Rori had been completely insane, even to an outsider. Brett had been cruel to Rori, but he'd also been kind. No in-between. Rori had seemed desperate to break away from it, yet lacked the confidence to stand on her own.

Apparently she'd found it. Savannah couldn't help the wicked joy that filled her at the knowledge.

Savannah had liked Rori; she'd more than liked Brett. She'd even liked them together, as much as she'd secretly hoped they'd break up.

None of her relationships even bordered on a fierceness like they'd had. No fierce love, no fierce hate, no fierce passion, and certainly no fierce grieving once it ended.

*What a sad life I've lived*, Savannah thought as she scrubbed her face and brushed her teeth. She'd had two

episodes shatter her in her lifetime. When her father walked out on her and her mother, and her mother's death.

*Three, she added to herself. Brett shattered you. He shattered you every time he kissed Rori, every time he grinned at you, looked at you. When he severed the business relationship and consequently severed any other relationship too. And tonight ... tonight he shattered you with passion and rejection.*

*Had he rejected her? she wondered. He'd left as if what happened next fell in her hands. He'd left as if she'd rejected him simply because she'd only asked for one night instead of forever.*

*She didn't want forever. God, she couldn't take hearing a man tell her he loved her, hearing his promises and then having him disappear forever.*

*Tears ran down her face as she brushed her hair out in front of the bathroom mirror.*

*"I'll be back at 12:30, sweetie." Her daddy tried to dislodge her tightly clenched fingers from his pant leg.*

*She looked up at him, hugging his leg harder. "When the big hand's on the six and the little on the twelve?"*

*"That's right." He kneeled by her, chucking her under the chin with a gentle fist. "I promise."*

*Savannah threw her arms around him, holding to his promise just as fiercely. Being with all these strangers still scared her.*

*Her daddy gave her a final squeeze before pulling away.*

*"I love you, Daddy."*

*"I love you too, sweetheart."*

Savannah slammed her brush down, calling herself every kind of pathetic fool. She hadn't been that shy, clinging little girl for a long time.

She went back out to her bedroom, shedding her clothes angrily. All her life, she'd refused to allow her anger to touch her mother, but now she let the memories wash over her. Every time Savannah asked her mother why "daddy isn't coming home" or why any man was worth getting involved with, her mother would quietly and desperately defend her husband with "Your father was a good man. He loved you. Please don't let yourself believe he didn't."

She'd seemed genuinely distressed about Savannah's pain and anger, as if it was misplaced. For most of her life, Savannah chalked it up to her mother's personality. Shy, submissive, maniacally private, quiet and over-ridden with the fear of hurting anyone. She'd obsessed over the slightest thought of hurting someone. And she'd loved her vagabond husband until the day she died, without revealing why she persevered in that.

"He wasn't worth it," Savannah said out loud, even angrier that the kindness and love always in her father's eyes came back to her. That trusting little girl who believed her daddy would come for her still lived somewhere deep inside her. She needed to make sure she stayed locked away.

Despite her many faults, Savannah loved her mother, too, and continued to live her life in a state of shock over her death.

She reached for her nightshirt from the end of the bed, a slash of red satin only inches from Brett's jacket.

He was no good for her. He could break her heart if she let him. But, oh, what it'd be like to be with him just once! Or twice. She couldn't imagine being satisfied with a dozen times, but she'd make once last a lifetime.

Lifting his jacket, she felt a sudden, violent release from the mess of emotions collecting in her heart this day.

*You're a fool*, she reminded herself as she slipped into the jacket. The feel of the warm leather against her bare skin calmed her more. The jacket enveloped her like a cocoon, allowing her to sleep as close as possible to in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

*A MAN AS stupid as you should be forced to walk the plank*, Brett told his reflection in his matchbox sized bathroom above the garage. *Hell, you are the plank*.

He glanced down at a certain part of himself, a part that'd been doing all the thinking since he left Savvy's. Then he tossed away the towel he'd used to dry his face.

He was sick of standing here looking at his own reflection, asking himself the same damn questions he'd been asking himself for so long it wasn't funny: *Am I any different than my old man? Am I any better?* Even now, he couldn't answer. He didn't like it either.

He went back out to his room, not knowing what to do with himself. Watching TV hadn't helped, reading magazines didn't help, lifting weights certainly hadn't done anything to get the image of Savvy out of his mind.

He threw himself back in his full-size bed and flipped on the TV to the cartoon channel.

He had a great excuse if he wanted to show up at her door. His jacket. This time of night, she'd question his need for it, but once they were horizontal she'd forget his excuse as fast as he would.

Instead of getting dressed and giving his principals the old heave-ho, he picked up the phone and called his sister.

Darlene answered with a mumbled "Uh-huh?"

"You awake, babe?"

As if his sister could see through the phone wires, he draped a sheet over Savvy's handiwork.

"Sure. Aren't most people awake at ... 3:23 a.m.?"

"How tired are you?"

She had every reason to be exhausted with a rambunctious fourteen-month-old and a husband absolutely crazy about his two "little ladies."

"Depends. Are you depressed or just can't sleep?"

Despite the gravelly tone of her voice, she seemed to be waking up.

"How 'bout a little of both?"

"Depressed enough to...?"

To start drinking again, she meant. "Not that depressed. I wouldn't even call this depressed. Just ... different."

*Different.* Not exactly the truth. He'd felt this before, the second he laid eyes on Rori Mason. He'd been consumed with the life-or-death need to have her. Back then, he'd never thought in terms of forever or exclusive. He'd been thinking all or nothing, instead of just once, tonight, with Savvy.

"What's different?" Darlene asked.



Even if he'd never say it out loud in so many words, he thought, *What would I do without you, Darlene? You're the only person in the world who'd ever sit up at 3:23 in the morning and listen to my problems.*

Then he wondered if Savvy would do that, too. Back when he broke laws like they were optional, she'd talk to him any time he called, even when he called her at home, after hours. She'd bailed him out more than once with no more complaint than "Call me sooner ... *as soon as you need me.*"

"You remember Savannah O'Brien?" he asked his sister.

"Your lawyer? Sure. Whatever happened to her?"

"Nothing. She's still here, doin' what she does."

"You saw her," Darlene guessed. "And not because you need a lawyer."

"What do you think of her?" He glanced under the sheet to see he'd gone from a code red alert to all systems normal.

"I liked her. She's not what you'd expect. First time I saw her, I thought ... Well, I thought she'd be a bitch. But she's smart and funny and actually pretty cool."

This was the second stamp of approval he'd gotten from his sister, the only person's opinion he cared about. She'd liked Rori, too. Everybody liked Rori.

Everybody liked Savvy.

"So what happened?"

*"We broke up six years ago. You didn't like him much, did you?"*

*"Well, why did you break up with Rori?"*

*"I don't ever wanna love somebody like that again."*

*Those diamond-like tears ... for him. "I've never loved anybody like that..."*

*Her mouth, soft and wet and sweet. Her hand where he was hard and hot and horny for her. Oh fuck....*

*"Let's..."*

The sheet rose like a tent with his own torturous memories. Reminding himself she wasn't looking for a forever man, just a lover who'd go away, didn't soothe him much either.

"Nothing," he summed up what'd happened with Savvy a little too briefly and with too heavy a sigh to be convincing.

"You came, saw, but didn't conquer? Is that why you're calling me?" Darlene teased.

"She offered," He snorted. "I got all noble."

"What? Are you...?"

His sister's tone couldn't have been more shocked if he claimed Savvy had his secret baby while visiting Mars. "Don't take this personally, Big Brother, but you've never been a saint when it comes to women. Why her? She's better than most of the women you share five quality minutes with."

Noble or not, he would have had Savvy a lot longer than five minutes. He might've even stuck around for scrambled eggs. But he didn't have an answer for his sudden chivalry, none he'd admit to Darlene anyway.

"Oh, I get it."

"You do not." He said it like she got stuck on square one and missed all the clues to reality. On the screen across the room, Bugs Bunny ran from a ten foot, red hair ball. Darlene's silent smugness unnerved him.

"What do you know?" he finally demanded.

"Obviously she's the one."

She said "the one" in the same revering tone she'd use approaching deity.

"Rori was the one," he insisted.

"I know you always thought that, Brett, but she was just an obsession," Darlene said softly, knowing anything concerning Rori was volatile ground for him. "You were insane with her. I didn't know who you were around her. You need a woman you can be proud to be yourself around. Maybe Savannah is that woman if she brings out the knight in you."

He was about to point out he'd hardly been a knight with Savvy, but then it didn't seem to matter. "Even if she's the one for me, doesn't mean I'm the one for her."

"Why not you? You're a great guy. You're as settled as you're ever going to get, you stopped drinking, you're fun and—"

"Okay, okay. But I've got a heartbreak habit I can't kick. I cross the line, she bails, and I might-as-well end it all. I can't take it again."

He'd gotten too serious. Even Bugs saying in that nasally, beauty-parlor voice "If a monster can't have an *in-te-resting* hairdo, I don't know what the world's coming to" failed to amuse him.

"What makes you think she'd bail?"

Darlene had met Savvy a half dozen times. At least four of that six, Savvy'd been with a different guy. Hadn't his sister noticed? "She's not into the long road. 'Second a guy gets close, she runs for cover."

"What do you mean? She was with that political stud for a long time. Didn't she live with him?"

He understood his sister's taste for wild men. She'd found Ol' Phil dull as dishwater, too.

"It wasn't serious." His gut instinct told him that.

"Brett, single women date a lot of men in their lifetime. It doesn't mean they're not willing to get serious with any one guy. We play the field, too, before we settle down."

She'd as good as called him a sexist, and he couldn't come up with concrete evidence against Savvy. He just knew, he *sensed* she avoided commitments.

Insane as he'd been a decade ago, he'd noticed a lot where Savvy was concerned. She always had a guy along when they got together. Some of them stayed around for a second get-together, but usually they were history after the first. When Brett heard Phil the Dust Bunny had moved into her apartment, he'd been knocked flat. Whatever her reasons, none of them included love or commitment.

"Go for it, Brett," Darlene encouraged. "Anything worth having is worth fighting for ... even if you have to fight *her*."

Brett snorted again in derision. What was he supposed to do? Lurk on her doorstep? Go crashing into her office on a white steed?

Nah. He'd wait it out. He'd wait *her* out. She'd come if for no other reason than to return his jacket.

"What was that?" He heard something in the background on Darlene's end. "Stevie-Jade awake?"

"No. Jace. You know what they say about rousing a grizzly bear."

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Yeah, he woke up mad ... or hungry.

Brett grinned. 'Least somebody was getting more than heartburn.

After he hung up, the loneliness came on without mercy.

## Chapter 5

DANIEL STUCK his head into her office. "I'm going to go if you don't need me to do anything more."

Savannah glanced up from her law books. "No. Go ahead. Have a good night."

Her assistant started to retreat then ducked back in again. "Would you like me to order dinner for you before I leave?"

They'd worked together a long time, over ten years. Even though he always left for the day first, he seemed to know without asking whenever she planned to work late.

Savannah shook her head. "I'll grab something later. And I've always got my stash." She patted the drawer of snacks that kept her going many a night. After suffering from low blood sugar all her life, she'd learned to have something on hand at all times.

A quietness settled over the suite after Daniel left. She'd been completely alone here many times before. She usually turned on the radio to drown out the silence. Tonight every song reminded her of Brett.

The light of day had done nothing to relieve her embarrassment. Or her desire for him. More than anything, she wanted to toss her fears, her pride, and just go to him. Whatever happened, happened. But the past was too imbedded in her.

"Might have known it was you," a voice said behind her as she got herself coffee from the lounge.

She jumped like a cartoon cat. Phillip murmured an unapologetic apology for startling her.

"I thought I was alone here," she said, wiping up the spilled coffee quickly, hoping to escape him. "I'll turn the music down."

If she'd known she wasn't alone, she wouldn't have turned the radio up so loud. She didn't need to ask to be certain everyone who worked here wasn't the fan of heavy metal music she was. Phillip in particular hated it and many a time accused her of having some missing gene for her preference. She'd never explain to him how the sound of the untamed, the uninhibited, the primal wail of the guitar and the raw cry of the vocals matched her own heart. She certainly didn't expect Phillip—what had Brett called him? *the human yawn*—to understand that.

"So, are you seeing him?"

Savannah clenched her teeth when she glanced back to find Phillip following her into her office. Did he actually have the nerve to ask her something so personal?

"Excuse me?" she said pointedly, trying to remind him with her tone and shuttered expression that he had no rights to her whatsoever period.

God, she hated that smug expression of his. He'd had it after sex—every time.

He folded his arms over his chest, leaning back against a bookshelf as if he planned to become a permanent fixture. "I always knew you had a thing for him." He shook his head, his clean-shaven face tight with disgust. "You're pathetic, Savannah. The guy is a bum. He's worthless. Where do you

think he'll be a year from now?" He snorted. "A month, even?"

He'd gone too far and not for the first time. "Maybe he'll be in my bed," she said, her smug tone matching that expression of his. She wanted to goad him as much as he goaded her.

The dull red coursing through Phillip's face gave her pure, visceral satisfaction for all of a minute. Then she felt sick with fury.

"He can't give you what you want, not like I could," he claimed confidently.

Savannah felt dizzy as she tried to focus on him. "You never knew what I wanted, so don't start thinking you do now."

The words felt barely there, whispered, and then she realized what was happening. She needed to eat something fast.

When Phillip's arm came around her waist, she tried to push him away but her blood sugar decline left her too weak. He helped her over to her desk, then yanked open her snack drawer.

"You little fool. Do you think he's worth this?"

Wanting to turn and hit him, at least to defend herself adequately, she could barely get out the words: "He has nothing to do with this. God, leave me alone. I don't need any more of your lectures. I had my fill years ago." She felt humiliated, and he always knew how to make it worse.

She sat heavily in her chair, then grabbed the pack of cheese and crackers out of his hand. "Get out. Please. I don't need you to take care of me."



"You made a big mistake, Savannah," he said as he straightened and moved away. "Someday you're going to realize that and want me back."

She didn't need to say the words; he knew she didn't believe that. Whatever her reasons for getting and staying involved with him, she wasn't the only one with ulterior motives. He'd wanted a wife who would fit in with the political set. He'd never loved her. He'd rarely even liked her.

After hearing about Brett's heated, no-middle-ground relationship with Rori last night, Savannah knew all of her relationships had been cold. Maybe she'd engineered them that way.

Alone in her office, she forced herself to eat until she felt well enough to stand. She didn't want to be here. Getting any work done would be impossible anyway. She couldn't concentrate. She'd go home, make herself dinner and fall asleep watching a movie. But no porn tonight. She couldn't take that.

Hell of a life, all right.

\* \* \* \*

"WHAT ARE we doing, Brett? We were just supposed to take this baby around the block. Now we're stuck in Midtown traffic."

Brett glanced over at his co-worker and friend, Mikey Lund, and couldn't help chuckling. The guy looked extremely uncomfortable, like Brett purposely drove them into a war zone.

Subconsciously at least, Brett hadn't intended to come down here. Not until he was a block from Savvy's law firm did he acknowledge a destination. He wanted to see her, even if his sight amounted to the building she worked in.

He glanced up at the forty story, "glass" building, zeroing in on Savvy's office after a few seconds. The entire right side of her office was a window, but her desk wasn't lined up with it out of necessity. Not like his cramped office back at the garage, where that was necessary. Her office was bigger than his entire apartment over the garage.

He'd been up there a handful of times. The times before he realized he liked her a lot better away from there. There she was all-business, cool, and she actually fit in with all the other starched shirts. He supposed she had to be that way around them. She couldn't smile uninhibitedly, kick off her shoes or say something unbearably dirty and sexy like she had last night in front of the firelight.

"Hey Brett, this guy's gonna come to the garage to pick up his car at three. And where we gonna be? Cruisin' around in it like we own it."

Brett shrugged and said without any concentration on the subject, "Sometimes the clunks don't start 'til you drive it a couple miles. I wanted to make sure it was fixed."

Mikey nodded, unconvinced. "What are we really doing out here?"

Brett let the car inch forward with the flow of traffic, then inclined his head toward the building he'd come to see. "She works there."

Leaning toward him, Mikey craned out the driver's side window. "Your lady lawyer?"

*His lady.* In his dreams. "Yeah."

Mikey whistled through his teeth. A long, impressed whistle.

Brett gripped the steering wheel, grinding his teeth a little. "What do you think, Mikey? Think a guy like me can make it with a classy lady?"

The answer came from his long-time friend immediately. "You may not be classy, Brett, but you *da man*. You da king. Da stud. Da heartbreaker. Love taker..."

For a second, Brett stared at Mikey as he boogied in the seat, bottom lip in teeth. Then he grinned, shaking his head. "You gonna be okay?" Nobody'd ever sung his praises quite this way before, if at all.

"Never seen a babe who could resist ya." Mikey had turned away from him, his words ending on a low note.

Brett laughed to himself. *Except the ones I want indefinitely. Those are the ones who resist.*

He saw movement in one of Savvy's office windows. Had he believed for an instant she wouldn't go to work after last night? If she was half as dedicated to the men in her life as she was to her work ... He whistled through his teeth, but truly believed what he'd told his sister. Savvy was definitely love shy.

*Who kicked you around, baby? Who made you feel like you gotta stand tough against giving yourself away?*

He'd had hard lessons kicked into him too, ones that made him wary, made him hold back, made him want to kick back

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against them until he uncovered every little secret that kept Savvy from him.

## Chapter 6

SAVANNAH had been meaning to have Brett's jacket returned to him all week. But every time she went to get it before she headed to work, she remembered sleeping in it the night before, safe in a soft, warm and primal-scented embrace. Why Brett hadn't come to retrieve it from her was a mystery. Hot or cold weather, Brett wore his jacket like most people wore underwear.

She'd told herself 'If he wants it, he'll come get it.' She'd also told herself 'If he wants *me*, he'll come get *me*.'

The fact that he hadn't should have damaged her pride beyond recovery, yet—come Thursday morning—she found herself turning the corner onto the street Foxx Body Shop was on.

What was it about this man? Six years ago, he'd left a message with a switchboard operator at the firm, telling her their association had come to an end. Their friendship was implied in the severing since he'd never contacted her again. Maybe he'd never considered her a friend in all that time. She'd told herself Brett was a man who never looked back and never had any regrets. It was part of what she love ... liked about him.

Oh God, she couldn't do this! She couldn't see him without throwing herself at him like some wanton, desperate fool.

She'd go on past, go back to her office and have Daniel return the jacket for her.

But her foolish heart overruled her judgment. Seconds before she would have passed the shop, she jerked the wheel to the left. A blare of horns erupted all around her as she guiltily crossed the street to park on the garage approach. Without heeding the rebuke behind her or her own misgivings, she grabbed Brett's jacket and jumped out of her car.

He'd apparently been on his way out, maybe to see what the ruckus was on the street, because they nearly collided just inside the door.

For an eternal minute, they stared at each other. Savannah's instincts warred.

*Grab him!*

*Get out now!*

His gaze held hers steadily, alive with the barely leashed power of a predator.

"Put anybody in the hospital this time, Savvy?" he asked quietly, breaking the spell.

Savannah shoved his jacket at him, muttering, "You forgot this at my apartment" before turning on her heel to escape. She didn't get far.

"You wore it."

Her mind buzzed with a jumble of emotions, yet she heard his words. They entered her with all the heat of a poker in the fire. Unable to help herself, she turned back, knowing ... knowing exactly what she'd see.

Brett held the jacket to his nose, the lining facing him. "I can smell you on it," he said with his teeth clenched around the words.

Breath caught in her throat, Savannah tried unsuccessfully to control her reaction. Her entire body fired with longings. Longings so deep and familiar and so tender, one touch of his hand could turn her to ashes.

And then she saw his eyes. He was in the same place, fighting the same desire, but without his armor this time.

She nodded. "Every night. All night. Without my clothes." Her lips trembled with the soft words, but she didn't care who looked or listened. She had to. God, she *had* to tell him.

What she'd expected him to do with the information, she didn't know. But the words barely left her mouth before he grabbed her arm and hustled her across the garage. They took the steps to the upper floor of the garage as if skipping across clouds, trying to escape the dark one at their heels.

Brett yanked her in through a door, closed it, then pushed her roughly back against it. His actions excited her so much, she felt the coil of climax tightening at the very heart of her femininity.

Savvy barely heard his jacket hit the floor over her own wild heartbeat. His mouth descended. She *wanted*—that was all. Wanted that heat and that pressure and that taste and, *God!*, that man.

An inch from Eden, he stopped and stared down at her. "You come here for this, Savvy?" he asked, low and soft.

Her body melted under his tone like hot caramel. "I came for you." No matter how hard she fought it, in the end that summed up her goal.

His mouth came down on hers. She couldn't have been more satisfied, despite her hunger for him. Nothing could

have been more perfect. He kissed like an animal starved, like a song raw with power and pain. She kept up because she couldn't lose, not now that she'd waited so long for him.

His hands skimmed her breasts through her blazer, through the layer of sheer lace beneath, and continued down her sides, her hips, pulling up on her skirt to ease under. With his fingers curled around her bottom, he lifted her until he could bury his face against her breasts.

"You took too damn long, Savvy," he said through clenched teeth.

Her nipples rose, beneath the frothy lace, against his teeth, and she gripped his head, afraid she couldn't hold herself together much longer. He had to feel how wet she was. His fingers were so close...

When she glanced down at him, she saw his eyes close tightly. Without opening them, he inched up and kissed her again as if he knew his way around her by heart. This kiss moved slower, deeper, and Savannah lost herself in it. She stopped thinking about her impending orgasm, how good it would feel to have him buried so deep inside her she couldn't breathe or hide.

*It's you, she thought, blocking the sting of tears. It's always been you, and I'm scared to death of what we're doing and what will happen to me if I let it. And what will happen if I don't.*

She realized in startling clarity that Rori Mason had been a safety net for her, just as Phillip had. Wanting someone you couldn't have was safe. But what about wanting someone you *could* have? Who would protect her?



"Let's go."

He opened his eyes, ended the kiss and spoke all in one moment that startled her out of her grip of terror. "Go?"

"You and me. Let's hit the road and let it take us wherever it leads."

She stared at him, shocked. "You mean ... You don't mean *indefinitely*?"

"You think it'll take that long to figure this thing out?"

He grinned, sort of. She couldn't even manage that much. She knew what he was proposing. He wanted to let whatever happened, happen. No more safety nets—what she'd thought before getting here. Even if a broken heart was the result, she wanted the same.

"No promises, no plans ... no regrets," he said huskily.

It sounded wild. And it sounded like a good, absolutely certain way to get her heart broken to bits.

"I have some vacation time coming to me," she heard herself murmur regardless.

*Some.* She hadn't taken a vacation in years. Tad had been hounding her about it.

"So let's do it."

His gaze held hers too intently to allow her a breezy attitude. He knew her too well. She planned all the big things in her life. She had to. Spontaneity could get a person hurt.

He leaned close to her face, his fingers suddenly beneath her satin panties and stroking the nub of flesh in a way that made her gasp and then hold her breath. "You think you can do it, Savvy? Can you tell yourself there are no boundaries? Can you let whatever happens happen?"

The waves of pleasure tugging hard at her almost had her eyes rolling back in her head. Instead of giving in, she issued the challenge right back at him with all the defensiveness of wounded pride. "Can *you*?"

Brett looked away for a second, his stroke stalled, his jaw working back and forth. His eyes were intense when he turned back. "It's either that or you walk out of here for good and I regret something for the first time in my life."

He was saying he'd let her go, he wouldn't finish this ... this *need* if she didn't agree to the road warrior terms.

No matter what misgivings and downright fears she had, she knew for a fact she couldn't turn back now. She didn't want to live the rest of her life regretting that she wanted something, this man, more than anything else, yet refused the opportunity to be with him when it came with too many strings attached.

"Let's do it," she said softly, surprised by the bravery in her tone. "But I have to call my office. And I have to change my clothes."

His fingers again moved through her wetness, this time to slide inside her. Her orgasm slammed through her and kept rolling, excruciatingly exquisite, as he bit her nipple through the lace top. Savannah didn't bother trying to hold back her half-screams. It felt too damn good. It felt even better when he swore, so dirty and sexy, and whispered something that prolonged the wave she rode. Then he kissed her hard and let her go. "You call your office, we go to your place and you change. But after that *no plans*."

Tension, a cross between excitement and dread, settled into Savannah's middle. Obviously they wouldn't be finishing what they started here, not right away.

Afraid to touch herself or move, she glanced down and saw his jacket. She remembered sleeping in it, a primal embrace. Tonight could be the real thing.

Everything inside her concluded it'd be worth it

\* \* \* \*

IN THE TIME it took Savvy to call her office and shuffle her caseload, Brett showered—cold water, gave Mikey the lowdown and the captain's hat, and got the road warrior's machine out of storage. His Harley Davidson chopper was in peak condition. Since he took it out every month or so to polish it up and take it for a spin, it was ready to go at a moment's notice.

He was packing the saddlebags when Savvy came out of his apartment and down the steps.

"I just realized you quit smoking," she said, and Brett knew she needed to put some distance between them after giving her word to let it all come down however it came down.

Instead of playing her game, he shook his head. "I still like a smoke occasionally." He glanced up at her. "Like after really good sex."

He already knew sex with Savvy was going to be knock-down, drag-out, blow-every-gasket good. One very detailed kiss with her, and he'd been ready to go to his death for her. What more could a man ask for in life?

*How 'bout the whole shebang? Sex. Love. And everything that comes along with 'em.*

The real clincher was he wouldn't back down and accept just part of the package. Brett had figured out long ago whoever said it was better to love and lose than never to love at all had no balls. He'd never be that stupid or that desperate again. Not even for a woman like Savvy.

He had some time to make her see the light and he'd do his damndest to convince her he was worth it.

Savvy met his eyes, letting him see the hot fire in hers, then said, "Next stop, my apartment." She rolled up her stretchy black skirt, giving him a view of her long, silky legs—clear up to a peek of wet black satin—before straddling his bike.

His insides clenched like a fist ready to fly. True, he hadn't had *any* woman in longer than he could remember, but he couldn't imagine wanting a woman as bad as he wanted this one right now. He could still smell her, and his mouth watered at the idea of tasting her. He could have had her too, six different ways to Sunday, against that door. Could have eased his pain inside her hot, dripping, sweet little body...

When he put on his jacket after his shower, he got hard again just smelling her on the lining. She'd worn his jacket against her bare skin ... without that sophisticated outfit, without the satin firmly clinging to a part of her he wanted to acquaint himself with more than he wanted his next breath. Maybe tonight he'd let her wear his jacket again, only this time he'd join her in it....

*No plans, he reminded himself. Stop thinking about the future and concentrate on now. Now's all that matters.*

"New rules," he muttered, handing her one of his helmets. He'd never worn one when he drank and he'd paid for his recklessness more than once. Thank God, Rori had never been with him all those times, since she hadn't worn a helmet either.

Savvy took it without a word, but he saw a ghost of something, something painful, in her eyes. Was she remembering all the times he'd called her from a hospital to ask her to tell Rori he'd been in another accident?

After Brett tucked her purse into the saddlebags, then locked her car up inside the garage next to his Camaro, they drove to her apartment.

He was so hard by the time she stood, tugging her skirt into place, on the sidewalk at her apartment building that he couldn't stop grinding his teeth. The lady wasn't shy about holding onto him. Savvy had plastered herself to his back during the ride, rubbing her hard little nipples against him, locking her hands inches above his straining fly. Wind velocity could only explain so much.

"You might as well come up. You can watch the bike from the window if you're worried."

He followed only because his brain didn't work half as well as certain other body parts. He probably would have followed her to his grave if she commanded it.

While they took the elevator in silence, he wondered how much he could stand if they didn't get physical soon. Having

her body near his, her hands on him so close yet not close enough would have him on his knees pretty soon.

"I'll only be a couple minutes," she said just inside her apartment.

Brett knew for a fact her bedroom door would be open during those couple minutes. He watched her walk ahead of him and down the hallway leading to her bedroom. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in a wild cascade when she released the clip that held it back.

Taking off after her like a horny stallion was his first instinct. His second was to follow his gut. The faster his moves, the faster she'd run once the sweat dried.

Brett went the other direction and looked down at his bike from the window. He couldn't stop grinding his teeth.

The doorbell rang barely a minute later. The peal was followed by banging and a loud male voice shouting "Savannah! I know you're in there!"

The Politician-Wanna-Be. Brett grinned nastily as he went back to the door.

When Brett opened the door, Phil, the stuffed shirt, stood there. His face was red, his clothes and hair askew.

"Hey, Phil. Long time no see."

The violent surge of anger flooding Savvy's ex's face made Brett's grin even slyer. He liked nothing better than being the bad boy to a jealous boyfriend.

Phil shoved past him without a word and stalked inside, heading straight for Savvy's bedroom.

For one wicked moment, Brett wished he'd gone with his first instinct and followed Savvy into her bedroom. Seeing the

Human Snore blow a gasket would be worth a lot. *Let me show ya how it's done, peewee.*

But he forced himself to go back to the window and content himself with snatches of the tumult erupting on the other end of the apartment.

Savvy was obviously furious with her old cream puff and his jealousy. Brett thought of intervening until he heard Phil say "He's the reason you broke up with me, isn't he?"

If Savvy answered, Brett didn't hear it despite the fact that he was all ears now.

"You're pathetic, Savannah. Did you think I never noticed how you threw yourself at him every chance you got? He had a girlfriend, for God's sake! And now this! Have you no shame?"

"Get out! I don't know what makes you think you have any say in my life, but I want you out of here. You don't know anything about me. And you don't know anything about him. You never did."

"So now you're just going to take off with him? As if you have no commitments or responsibilities ... or *sense*—He's a bum, Savannah. He's using you. Whatever his reasons, you can bet he's using you."

Savvy murmured something too soft for Brett to hear, so he moved slowly into the hall.

"Go. Get him out of your system. Maybe it'll do you some good. Maybe you'll come to your senses and realize what I realize. *We* were meant to be together, Savannah. But I'll let you go long enough to sow the last of your wild oats."

Brett had heard enough of the swelled-baboon-chest talk and chuckled out loud when Savvy said, "I've got a lot of those where he's concerned—you're right about that. But I don't need your permission, and you don't need to disillusion yourself anymore. It was over six years ago. Now get out."

Phil glanced toward Brett long enough to give him one last you're-beneath-me-bum glare. "I give it one week. I'll be waiting for your phone call, Savannah."

"Or we could just send you the taped version," Brett offered cheerfully. "Otherwise you'll miss a lotta good stuff in the translation."

Brett cleared the doorway to let him pass, but Phil managed to give him a shove anyway. His ears turned red as he retreated from Brett's laughter.

"I can't believe that jerk!" Savvy hissed from the other room.

Sliding back into the doorway of her bedroom, Brett watched her pull a short, sophisticated leather jacket over a pair of jeans and a form-fitting top that revealed no tell-tale lines. One good slip-slide, and he could have those firm little beauties in his hands.

"What can't you believe, baby? That he's jealous? Or that he doesn't know you checked out with him?"

In mid-motion of pulling her loose hair from the back of her jacket, she stopped. "What does that mean?"

Brett swaggered into the room with his hands in his pockets. "Means you tossed him out on his ear six years ago, but you didn't leave the courtesy Dear John."

"Are you implying I didn't tell him it was over?"



Her eyes threw sparks of fire out, partly leftover from her confrontation with her ex, no doubt.

"Nope. I'm implying you never told him why." He ran his fingers over the collar of her jacket, down around the scoop neck of her top.

Sucking her breath in uncontrollably, she nevertheless shook her head. "That's ridiculous. Of course I told him why. We just didn't *work* together."

Brett laughed shortly, watching sparks turn to flames when he eased a finger into her top. She gazed down at his handiwork, then swallowed hard.

"You tell a man something like that, all he hears is 'Work harder and maybe I'll take you back.'"

Her breasts fit into his palms like destiny's design. As if she couldn't hold herself up, she grabbed for him, missed, then snagged his jacket and dragged herself closer to him.

"We could leave later," she said softly, completely without fight now.

She closed her eyes, raising her face to his. He was so near the fire, one kiss might leave him in ashes.

Leaning closer, he touched his forehead to hers. "We better leave now, baby, or we're gonna burn down your apartment."

She shrugged. Her hands fastened around his biceps. "It'd be worth it."

When he looked at her, the soft expression in her eyes put a thought in his head: *Sometimes I could believe you love me, Savvy*. Because he'd seen that look in her eyes before, when he was with Rori. Damn, he wanted to hold on to her

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like she was the wind and capturing her for even a second was a miracle he'd been granted.

"Come on," he muttered harshly, grabbing the roll of clothes from her bed. "Something's out there, baby. Let's find it."

## Chapter 7

"YOU HAVE a tent in here," Savannah said in shock. She'd opened the saddlebags to get her comb. The nylon bag the tent was enclosed in was hardly bigger than a notebook. Brett had managed to fit everything absolutely essential on his bike—they both had a change of clothes, combs, toothbrushes and paste as well as sleeping bags attached to the backbar. And now a tent.

"It only holds one. Two if you're gonna make the beast with two backs."

His tone should have been suggestive. Instead, it was matter-of-fact.

"You wanna use it?" he asked.

Savannah shook her head, murmuring, "No", then turned away from where he assembled a campfire.

The drive to somewhere in Pennsylvania (Brett clearly knew where he was; she didn't have a clue) had put her in a relaxed, melancholy mood that she'd been dismayed to realize Brett didn't share. When they'd stopped for dinner a few hours ago, they'd barely spoken two words to each other over the meal. He didn't seem angry so much as simply withdrawn. She'd replayed in her mind the exit from his garage until they'd left her apartment, but couldn't imagine what she'd said or done wrong. Had he wanted to finish their lovemaking and she hadn't tried hard enough? Was he upset about the things Phillip said? He had to know her "ex" was an idiot.

Maybe she was pathetic, as Phillip was so fond of calling her, but she still wanted Brett as much as she had up in his apartment and in her bedroom. Without the experience of a normal romantic relationship under her belt, she wasn't sure how to restore the intimacy.

After combing the tangles out of her hair, she tried to remove the sleeping bags from the backbar but couldn't figure out the knots. By then she'd realized taking them off could be likened to getting hotel rooms, one or two? She knew she couldn't live it down if she assumed they'd share one sleeping bag and he rejected her. Better to let him make the choice in this case.

She instead went to gather up twigs for the fire. Her reason for vetoing the tent was the same as her reason for vetoing a hotel when Brett suggested it at dinner. She'd never slept out under the stars before. Roughing it actually sounded good to her. She could live without a hair dryer, a soft mattress, protective walls—at least for a little while. And tonight was a beautiful night. The sky was clear, the stars gave off plenty of light. The air felt as warm as it would in hotel room.

"Have you been out here before?" she asked. She'd been to a few other states, but she'd never traveled much. Especially not in a sightseeing way.

"Yeah."

An unnatural surge of jealousy all but knocked her flat. He'd been out here with Rori—and they'd surely never had to use two sleeping bags.

As foolish as her jealousy over his past relationship with Rori Mason was, especially considering she'd genuinely liked Rori, Savannah couldn't control it. She looked at him now, squatting on the ground before the firewood he'd just lit, and she wanted to belong to him. The long drive, molded to his hard, warm back made her needy and possessive. Angry at all the years she'd spent coveting him from afar. Silly, stupid, pathetic, desperate—yes, all of those things. But *free*. Finally she was free to become a part of him, even though only temporarily. Would *he* stand in the way of it happening?

With the campfire lit, he stood, shedding his jacket on the way to the bike. Savannah watched him effortlessly loosen the top sleeping bag. Once it came free, he tossed it to her. For a minute, holding the fleece roll in her arms, she wanted to cry. *Good thing you left it up to him*, she thought, biting down on her pride as he unfastened the second roll.

She forced herself to take the bag to the circle around the fire and unroll it.

Had she come here with a plan? Had she planned the second the bike stopped, Brett would be on her like a bird on prey?

God yes, she'd planned that. She wanted him bad enough to beg. Planning that had made her completely relaxed during the drive. She'd believed Brett would make a move on her because he was a man and she was a willing woman; there'd be no complications. She didn't know whether to be fascinated or annoyed that Brett was a lot more complicated than any other man she'd ever known.

She sat down cross-legged on the soft blue fabric, then shrugged out of her jacket.

The silence that followed Brett stretching out on top of his bag with his jacket balled up under his head was nowhere near comfortable for Savannah. He seemed perfectly content with the natural audio of firewood popping and crickets chirping.

For a few minutes, she actually wondered if he'd gone to sleep. Her anger at him leading her out here, letting her assume he was interested in having her too, made her speak despite believing he slept. "It was unintentional."

He turned his head, in no great rush, and asked casually "What was?"

"If I left Phillip thinking I wanted him to work harder, it was unintentional. I assumed he realized it wasn't working just like I did."

"Sometimes only words'll do."

She shrugged. "I guess I'll have to set him straight when we get back."

Brett snorted a soft laugh. "You think that's gonna work now?"

Something about his tone implied she was naive, implied the length of time she'd let it go had created a monster unwilling to give up in Phillip.

"He's not that tenacious. I'm actually surprised at the few steps he's taken lately. He has aspirations, just no ambition beyond what he's already got. I knew he'd never become a senator. I don't know why he set it up like his life-long goal. I

guess I just don't understand men. They say one thing and do another. Or do one thing and say another."

Brett had turned on his side and propped his elbow up to listen to her. The position made her hot all over again.

His interest in the conversation no longer seemed casual, especially when he said, "What other man's said one thing to you and done another?"

Could she tell him? She'd never told anyone else. She'd never revealed herself to a man before. A part of her was afraid to, but with Brett her courage didn't seem to need an outlet. It simply emerged.

"My father walked out when I was five. He dropped me off at this play group kind of thing and I never saw him again. He promised he'd be back in an hour and a half. I watched the clock like a hawk ... I didn't feel comfortable there to begin with." She pulled her boots off, keeping her eyes down. "Three hours later, my mother finally showed up. I'd never seen her so upset. She just kept saying *"He's gone. He's gone."* She never talked about it more than that—other than to defend him."

She snorted, not caring how unladylike the sound was. Still without looking up, she removed her socks and continued talking. "I met Stephen right after I passed the bar and joined the firm. We eventually moved in together ... I was working day and night so I could become a partner. A woman has to fight to get ahead, even where I work."

Somehow the defense sounded exactly that—defensive. She didn't stop to analyze it closely. "So one day, one *night* I got home from work and he was sitting there in the foyer with

all his things packed. He was practically crying. He said he met someone else."

She could still see his face clearly in her mind. As clear as the night before he walked out, when he told her he loved her. She hadn't been able to hold his gaze or even remain in the same room.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I didn't think how illogical it was for him to say "I love you, goodbye" until later. I just thought 'Okay. That's okay. Thank God.'"

She tried to laugh, but it stuck in her throat, dry as dust. She didn't want to analyze that too closely either, and never had.

Inhaling deeply, she stuffed her socks into her boots, then lay down on her bag without risking a glance at Brett.

Her emotions jumbled together. Relief, guilt, fear. She found herself blinding back tears. She'd revealed too much. She just wasn't sure to *who*.

"Now I get it."

His voice carried over to her, soft as a feather on the breeze.

"Get what?"

For a long minute, he said nothing, forcing her to look at him. He lay back again, this time without his shirt, his hands behind his head. "You."

Immediately, she became offended and defensive. "Explain that."

He shrugged. *Shrugged!* She glared back at him. If she'd had a pillow, she would have thrown it. Her boots might have more impact....



"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she demanded, her hand seconds from closing around her boot.

"No big deal. You get kicked around, so you kick back, and you bleed for it. It's the law of nature."

No big deal? He did everything short of say there was something wrong with her. That she'd spent her life "kicking back" to protect herself and ended up only hurting herself in the process.

He sounded like her mother, who always said she shouldn't let the past influence her so much. Savannah insisted she didn't know what she meant each time, too.

Somehow saying to Brett "You don't know anything about it" sounded just as hollow and false.

\* \* \* \*

SHE LOOKED like a little girl sleeping. Soft, precious and completely vulnerable.

Brett reached over and brushed his index finger over her cheek. Instead of waking, she snuggled closer to his jacket. She slept so restlessly, he'd brought it to her last night thinking she was cold despite the warm, fleece bags. As soon as he draped it over her, she'd calmed down.

When he woke a few hours ago, he found his jacket inside her sleeping bag, wrapped in her arms snug as a beloved teddy bear. At that point, knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, he'd moved his bag next to hers so he could watch her sleep.

This was why he'd come on this insane journey. To see the real Savvy O'Brien. To see her completely open, no agenda,

no inhibitions, no fears. He'd forgotten his reason yesterday while they drove without a map. Instead, he'd remembered old Phil saying, "Go. Get him out of your system", and it made him wonder if that was Savvy's reason for coming. Did she want to get him out of her system?

*Even if you're it, you know she's not looking for Mr. Right.*

A bird flew overhead, out to find an early worm. Brett lay back, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Yeah, stupid as it was in the light of day, a part of him hoped he could be the man to change Savvy's no-commitments record. But she'd laid it all out for him last night. She was just like Rori. Hung up on her daddy's mistakes and fighting so damn blindly she couldn't see she made the same ones.

Not that he could claim to be completely untouched by his old man's mistakes himself. He hadn't seen the bastard in twenty-two years and planned to keep it that way for the rest of his life. He'd seen his mother a couple years back, when she had a stroke and was in the hospital. She hadn't woke up during the short time he'd talked to her and held her hand.

Yesterday he'd hovered halfway between furious and defeated, thinking if he gave Savvy what she wanted, she'd give him a firm kiss-off once it was over. So he didn't give her what she, what *they* both, wanted. Better to hold back or walk away than to fall in love and lose your heart.

Each time he looked at Savvy yesterday, he remembered Rori running out on him whenever he turned around, until she finally bailed for good. And every time he remembered it, he thought *No way. No damn way I'm gonna put myself through*

*hell like that again. So don't start. Don't start anything she won't let you finish.*

Propping on his elbow again, he looked down at Savvy.

*Maybe she's the one*, Darlene had said. Maybe....

Before he could talk himself out of it, he leaned down and kissed her. Soft, at first.

*Maybe it was hell with Rori because she was just an obsession.*

"Brett."

Savvy's eyes remained closed, she might still be asleep, but he'd heard his name sure as the sun would rise soon.

He pressed his mouth to hers again, only to feel a mutual pressure. The battle scars ran on both sides because his reaction was violent. When he kissed Rori awake, he'd known every single damn time he wasn't the man she gave herself to in her dreams. But Savvy said his name, and he suddenly didn't care about anything else. Whatever happened, it'd be worth it to have something real one time, just once.

He yanked on the zipper separating them, then lifted Savvy out and over him. No doubt about it; she was awake and wild. It didn't seem to matter any more to her than it did to him that another camper might stumble over them.

Savvy wore only her shirt and a pair of slippery red satin panties. The lady fit very nicely in his hands.

"Good morning," she rumbled, a chuckle and a moan rolled all into one.

"Yeah. It is," he agreed with a satisfied grin.

She proceeded to kiss him, this time using her whole body to make sure they were both one hundred percent awake.

Damn, it'd be so easy. A few moves, and he could be inside her, filling her like the sun pushing back the darkness. Mhm, so damn easy....

He rolled her on her back. "You planning to get me outta your system, Savvy? Is that what your plan is?"

He asked because he couldn't *not* ask, not when he wanted her this bad.

For a long minute, she stared up at him silently, a little confused. "If I have a plan, it's to get you *into* my system." Her voice came out rough yet soft.

"And then?"

"Whatever happens, happens. That's what we decided, right?"

Not only had he agreed with that, he'd made the rules. Now he had to live with the consequences.

She swallowed with difficulty. "So?"

*So why don't we make love?* That was what she asked. He could see it, naked and a little hesitant, in her eyes. Definitely he could feel it in the not-so-subtle way she lifted her hips, notching his erection in the cradle between her thighs.

"Can't think of anything I want more at this minute. But I don't have anything with me."

The flash of disappointment crossing her face told him she didn't have birth control with her either.

"But we could..." And she proceeded to whisper some alternatives that almost set him off like a bull in heat at the mere mention. Hell, the lady had a dirty mind and the words to prove it. And he could get addicted to both.

"Baby, I've never been a prude, but the next camper's close enough we could charge a fee for something that 'entertaining.'"

He pushed himself back and to his feet. She lay there, hair wild around her, legs open. They stared at each other for a long moment, at what they'd done to each other and couldn't finish, before he helped her up.

They got dressed, got the bike re-packed and went for breakfast. Despite a little sexual frustration, they were both in a good mood again. They could talk and laugh together, and share a few hot kisses along the way.

Brett realized in the fledgling companionship that years ago he would've called Savvy his lawyer no matter who he talked to. His lawyer, never his friend. He'd never been friends with a woman before, other than his sister. But Savvy had been a friend, regardless of what he called her. How many lawyers would take "house calls" from clients at any time of day or night? How many lawyers would be the first to the hospital when something happened to a mere client? He'd talked to Savvy all night sometimes, while either Rori or Phil checked out physically or mentally.

He liked talking to Savvy. He liked being with her. Watching her and having her wrapped around him. The only thing he didn't like was wondering how close he could get without having her flee.

They stopped early that evening, at a campground just outside Chicago, and decided to cook out instead of going to another restaurant.

"Did you get marshmallows?" she asked as they loaded the chopper.

"Didn't know they were required."

"Of course." She smiled tightly. "I'll go back and get some."

He watched her walk back inside the convenience mart. Savvy wore jeans and a top like other women wore lingerie. *And I gotta get me some of that.*

Which meant being a little more prepared than he'd been this morning. But was buying condoms "planning"?

Yeah, he decided, but this was one thing he wasn't willing to go into impulsively.

"Forgot something else," he said, going in just as she came out with a blue plastic bag heralding the name of the convenience mart on it.

The look she gave him asked what, but she didn't voice it. He found the section where condoms should have been, but they were sold out.

Swearing under his breath, Brett went into the rest room and the machine there had one lone star left in it. "Better make it a good one," he said under his breath, kissed and pocketed it.

A year ago, he wouldn't have been caught dead without a string of condoms in his wallet. Now he had to content himself with one when he could easily imagine a dozen might not be enough tonight.

He made sure their campsite was the loneliest on the grounds. No friendly neighbors and hopefully no chance anyone would venture back on a leisurely stroll.

"Sure you don't wanna go to a hotel tonight?" he asked after they ate. It was what a woman like Savvy deserved. A fancy hotel with all the perks. The finest. She was used to the finest too.

*"He's a bum, Savannah ... Go. Get him out of your system."*

She tucked the matches into a saddlebag, then moved over to him on the picnic table.

Like he did, she straddled the bench between her thighs, sliding as close to him as she could. "I like the stars. Do you know I've never been camping before in my life? I've never showered at a truck stop or cooked a hot dog on an open fire. I don't think I've even eaten chips out of a bag before."

Brett couldn't help grinning. "And this is exciting for you?"

"I wouldn't like to do it all the time, but, yes, I'm definitely enjoying myself."

On a deep inhale, she put her hand on his thigh, drawing her nails along the seam of his jeans. "Did Rori like doing stuff like this?" she asked innocently. A little too innocently.

He wasn't thinking about Rori, yet couldn't help considering, at her prompting, if Savvy could actually be jealous of that dead relationship.

"She never complained unless we stayed in one place too long."

Savvy nodded expressionlessly, but her cheekbones conclave as she glanced down.

"You and Phil ever do anything exciting?"

She shrugged as if she didn't want to talk about it. "We went to Washington D.C. once. Stayed at the Jefferson Hotel and ate at *Le Lion D'Or*. I was bored to death."

Brett laughed slightly. "Never would've figured you for cold, hard ground and hot dogs, Savvy."

Her smile rose, soft and seductive. Scooting just a hair closer, she put her arms around his shoulders. "I don't plan to be cold. And I don't plan to be on the ground tonight. But I do plan to be on something hard."

God, this woman kept him on his toes. Grinning, he watched her. He liked a woman who talked dirty, especially when she blushed immediately after, yet didn't avert her eyes.

When she kissed him, as he knew she would, she let it build. He let her lead.

Never before had he been seduced by a woman. With every woman he'd had, the act was purely take from both sides. Giving was almost accidental. Even with Rori, it'd never been mutual. It'd never been love and need tangled up until they were one emotion, one fierce action.

He didn't know what to do with Savvy, and he found himself almost scared to find out. What if she turned away after, like Rori always did? What if she *walked* away? She'd take everything, and, dammit, he wouldn't let another woman rip his heart out because she hadn't come to grips with her past. Almost like a ghost re-visited, he could hear Rori's soft sobs and then the click of her high-heeled boots walking away from him.



Without pushing her away, he got up. He just got up and walked toward the fire feeling like he battled enough demons to drive him insane.

"Why do you—? You keep walking away from me! Why don't you want me?" Savvy's voice behind him hinged somewhere between a scream and a sob.

Brett couldn't look at her. He wanted a drink. He wanted to feel the wind roaring past his heart 'til he thought he'd go deaf from it. He wanted to slam his fist into something and hear the crunch of his own bones and the smell of blood. "I want you. Too damn bad for my own good," he said violently.

"Then let's do it. You're the one who insisted we let happen what will, but you won't. Are you still in love with Rori? Is that it?"

He could feel her behind him and lost his mind a little more because of it.

Rori. Hell yeah, he wasn't over all that. Being anywhere near Savvy brought it all back. And he didn't want Rori back. He didn't want her goddamn pain, his pain. The anger and the anguish of seeing the truth stare him in the face every fucking way he turned.

So, it *was* about love. Yeah, it was about love. But not with Rori.

"Forget Rori," he muttered.

"Then what is it?"

He kicked at the fire with his boot. The tension in his body was at point break.

"I'm not your daddy. And I'm not like the other guys you pushed overboard. I'm not gonna take whatever I can get from you, no matter how bad I want it."

Savvy could have responded to a lot of what he said. He didn't expect "I pushed overboard? The guys *I* pushed overboard? It wasn't all my fault, you know. It takes two."

She was offended, but he didn't give a shit. He turned to her, didn't dare touch her, but he told her exactly what he'd thought when she laid the blueprint of her sorry relationships out for him last night: "You engineered the breakup with that first sorry sap. You were afraid he'd get too close, so you did everything you could to make him bail. And to make sure you wouldn't have to take the blame for it, since you were workin' on your career. All very noble. Every guy who ever told you he kinda liked you, you sent down the pike. Ol' Phil never had a chance either, even after three years—is that how long it was? But then he probably never got close. You engineered that one, too. Opposites like you two never make it, which was exactly the way you wanted it, sweetheart. Doesn't feel good to know you're quite the mastermind, does it?"

She stood, fire hot enough to singe the hair off his face in her eyes. "You don't know me well enough to make assumptions ... *accusations* like that!"

He'd withstood fires a lot hotter than this. He didn't even flinch. "You sure about that?" he asked calmly, not surprised when she turned tail and walked off into the night. "I call 'em like I see 'em. If I'm wrong, shrug it off," he shouted to her back.

A few minutes later, in the cold silence, her retreating footsteps haunted him as he acknowledged his cruelty. He'd put her under the microscope because he'd been under it himself. He'd been afraid he wasn't man enough to get Savvy to take a chance. Afraid he wasn't any different from his own SOB father.

"I'm sorry," he said immediately, surprised when she came back in sight over an hour later. "You wanna go home?"

She shook her head without hesitation, but didn't give him a clue what she felt inside. "Do you?"

"Not a chance." His tone was light, but he wanted to kiss her. She wouldn't let him, he knew, but he wanted to make her feel better. Wanted to get back in her good graces the pathetic way he always had when Rori came back to him.

Later, in separate sleeping bags across the fire from each other, he decided they needed to go through some hell apart before they took any big steps together. If they did it the other way, there'd be too much to lose. The fact that neither of them wanted to bail out of this trip said a lot. The advantages still outweighed the risks.

The lone star would just have to wait for another day.

## Chapter 8

NEITHER of them felt like riding all day the next day. Early in the afternoon, when Brett saw the sign for the Mall of America, they followed it on the premise of getting some fresh clothes.

The truth was, they needed a break from each other. They agreed to meet at Snoopy's dog dish in two hour's time, then went their separate ways.

Wanting her own space should have had everything to do with being furious with Brett. Phillip had spent three years nagging her about one thing or another he wanted her to change. That had been annoying. Brett's vicious attack had been more than merely annoying. He'd hurt her the way Phillip never could.

After fighting a no-win battle with herself last night, she'd finally admitted *the truth* hurt. Facing the truth about herself, facing that Brett knew her better than she knew herself, was agony.

In big ways and in small ways, she'd done just what Brett said. When someone got too close, she "checked out." In fact, she did everything she could beforehand to make sure they didn't get too close.

With Stephen, she'd done it slowly, working day and night until they'd spent next to no time together. As Brett said, all very noble as she excelled in her chosen profession. That way she wouldn't have to acknowledge her part of the blame when

Stephen left her for another woman. Whether it could have turned into love, she couldn't say. She hadn't wanted love.

Phillip had never claimed he loved her. That might have been part of the allure of staying with him for so long.

After a sleepless night last night, she'd pieced together the sequence: Phillip had asked her to marry him. That alone had sent her into a tailspin after three years of a selfish relationship they both took from but rarely gave. She would have broken it off with Phillip sooner or later after his proposal if Brett hadn't left that message, ending their business relationship. That had given her the killer incentive.

Now she knew the only reason she'd been with Phillip was because she couldn't stand to be alone when Brett had Rori. She'd used Phillip to shield herself from her feelings for Brett and her jealousy of Rori.

Her only hope was, though Brett realized she hadn't loved Phillip, that he'd never find out the reason why not. Bad enough that Phillip had seen the thing she'd had for Brett all those years. No matter what happened, she couldn't let Brett get too close.

Ironical as it was, she'd become exactly like her father. She couldn't make a lifetime commitment to anyone because she couldn't get over how he'd walked out. It made her sick to accept that truth. She was still a scared, lost little girl, especially in light of the magnitude of emotions Brett Foxx brought out in her. No matter what fell in her path, nothing seemed to deter her for long when it came to wanting him.

She didn't go far at the mall. Up a couple flights of stairs, and past Legoland. When she found herself back pedaling to a

lingerie shop, she remembered her optimistic purchase yesterday. She'd cleaned that convenience mart out of condoms. If luck was on her side, Brett wouldn't find the stash in his saddlebags unless they were both ready.

*If we're ever both ready again*, she told herself sharply, fingering a lacy teddy inside the shop. What would Brett think of it? What would Brett think of *her* in it? Maybe he'd stop thinking. Maybe they both needed to do that.

She picked out her size, then went back to try it on. The vixen red color picked up on the highlights in her hair, not that he'd probably notice. Hopefully he'd be too busy picking out what it did for her body.

She bought it without another thought, put it back on and tossed the underwear she'd been wearing in the nearest trash can.

Having the peekaboo teddy beneath her clothes made her feel just a little bit naughty. She'd done everything short of beg him on her hands and knees for the past couple days. Was she up to another seduction that might end in her embarrassment?

Finding him where they'd agreed to meet, finding him there well over an hour early, put a lump of emotion in her throat. The mall was huge enough that finding a restroom would be at least a twenty minute round trip. He couldn't have gone far, if he'd gone at all.

What affected her so much was that yesterday, for a few precious hours, they'd been ... lovers. They'd laughed and talked and kissed as if they'd shared the intimacies before. She wanted that again. She wanted to become his lover,

someone he could be completely at ease with, doing or saying anything.

He saw her from two hundred feet away as if he'd been looking for her. His hands were as empty as hers.

He straightened from the towering column he leaned against. "You didn't get a change of clothes," he noted, implying it meant something important. As if she couldn't stand to be away from him a full two hours.

"Neither did you."

He took a deep breath, looking around him. The din from the amusement park nearby rose. Brett nodded. "We can go to a laundromat instead."

Savannah suddenly realized he looked jumpy, like he had a hard time keeping his hands still. Even his jaw looked tense with agitation.

They stood in a crowded mall, but she didn't care. She wanted to soothe whatever demon howled beneath his skin.

Gliding into his arms, she said, "Okay."

The force of his hold astonished and pleased her, especially when he whispered, so hoarsely, "Savannah." He'd never before called her by her full name. "Savvy" always, and in that wrap-your-tongue-around-it-and-savor-it tone.

She pulled back just enough to see him, and he kissed her, his eyes closed tightly. But he knew the way. Just exactly the way.

"Honeymoon," Savannah heard someone say. An older lady, sitting on a bench shaped like a dog bone, smiled sweetly at them when they reluctantly turned toward her and claimed, "I can always tell."

Savannah was about to deny it, but Brett shocked her by nodding. "We need to be alone."

"Yes," the woman agreed as if she was an accomplice to their rendezvous.

"You told her we were married," Savannah scolded when Brett led her through a complicated maze of shops and restaurants, out to the parking ramp. Despite his initial claim that he hadn't been there in years and a lot had changed, he didn't get lost once.

"Why not? Made her happy."

The emotion in her chest expanded further, until she could barely keep herself from grabbing hold of him and never letting go.

Savannah didn't get a chance to ask where they were going before they climbed back on the motorcycle again. Her legs ached.

She was disappointed to see a laundromat when they parked. Apparently he'd been serious about washing their clothes. They went inside to find it empty of other patrons.

"What are you doing?" she asked, watching him lock the front door and turn the sign to Closed.

"You got any clean clothes with you?" he asked, shedding his jacket.

"Well, no. But—"

Watching him pull off his shirt, she realized this situation wasn't new to him. He'd done this before, probably with Rori and/or his friends. She'd never seen anyone more comfortable undressing in a public place.



He shoved some quarters in a washer, bought a box of soap from a vending machine, then proceeded to put his clothes in the washer ... one item at a time.

Savannah stopped breathing, her mouth went completely dry as he revealed his body to her without an ounce of embarrassment. And, *God*, he didn't need to be embarrassed. About anything. Long, lean, muscular. Man, man and more man. She could have collapsed on the floor, she was so hot and weak.

"You gonna throw your clothes in here or stand there staring all day? I figure we've got an hour before somebody starts banging on that door."

She could hear her own heartbeat, louder than the churning machine. Every bit of confidence she'd had in the mall fled her. It wasn't easy, being caught between inhibition and desire the likes of which she'd never felt before in her life. If Brett touched her, she felt sure she'd implode like a black hole.

"I'd turn my back, but I'm not gonna sit here staring at a wall for forty minutes. And I'm not much of a gentleman. Never claimed to be."

Stark naked, no apologies, he strode over to her. "Or maybe you just need a little help."

"I'm..." She swallowed hard enough for him to hear. "We're in a laundromat. Those front windows are all glass. What if someone sees me?"

"They won't," he said simply.

A part of her was afraid to ask. "Why won't they?" Sure, they were in the back part of the building, as far as they could be from those windows, but—

He reached for the hem of her top. "Cuz I'm gonna be covering you."

Desire immobilized her. For one second, she truly believed a person could faint from sexual overload. She stopped caring about discretion. Where, when, how. When all was said and done, she just wanted him any way she could get him.

Her shirt came off and went sailing right into the machine. She could tell he missed nothing as he undressed her, but he didn't say anything until he got down to lace.

"Being the James Bond fan that I am, I gotta say, Savvy—that's a nice little nothing you're almost wearing."

Savannah choked out a startled laugh, but he slammed shut the lid of the machine, then lifted her on top of it.

"I bought it for you," she just barely whispered. She couldn't do anything except comply to whatever he wanted at this moment. Because that was all she wanted.

"Back there?" At the mall, he implied.

She nodded, watching him trace the flower-petals-opening pattern of lace with a finger.

"I don't like being away from you for long," he said under his breath. "I don't like hurting you. I don't wanna *be* hurt either. But I want you too damn bad to care what happens anymore, baby. I'll deal with it, heaven or hell. Later."

Her first instinct ran to assuring him she had no intention of ever hurting him. She caught herself before she could make something resembling a commitment. Right now, the

last thing they needed were lies or promises. She couldn't say for sure they weren't one and the same.

Instead of speaking, she opened her thighs and scooted closer until she could surround him with all her limbs. She closed her eyes to his battleground expression.

The first kiss took her straight out of the physical world around them. All that mattered was Brett loving her like only he could.

He said her name again, in that hoarsely reverent tone, as his fingers trailed over the front of the teddy. Her nipples rose eagerly to meet him.

For a moment, she wondered if he could find her at all sexy after Rori Mason. Rori was the quintessential blond bombshell—long legs, tiny waist, completely stacked, and drop-dead gorgeous. While Savannah acknowledged she was attractive by most standards, she also knew a man's initial thought upon meeting her wasn't that of sex. For the first time in her life, she wanted to be everything a man, only this man, could ever want or need or fantasize.

"Damn, wish we had more time," Brett muttered.

"What? ... Why?"

His hands glided over her body slowly, in awe. "Cuz I wanna get to know every gorgeous inch of you, six different ways to Sunday."

That phrase and variations on it ... vintage Brett Foxx. She smiled. "This won't be the first and last time, you know."

"It will be until we find a store that hasn't been hit by the Condom Hoarder." He took a gold foil packet from his leather jacket. "This is all I've got."

He hadn't come prepared. He hadn't broken the rule of "No plans." At least he hadn't succeeded if he'd tried.

Savannah pursed her lips, meek but definitely not feeling any guilt. "I cleaned out that convenience mart in Antioch yesterday. We're stocked for a couple days."

Brett stared at her in utter disbelief. "*You're* the Condom Hoarder?"

She couldn't help it. His expression ... as if he'd never considered she might be the one ... cracked her up. She giggled wildly.

"And you bought this..." He fingered a spaghetti strap, hooked it, then eased it down the slope of her shoulder.

Savannah didn't feel like laughing anymore, not with his caress so close to sensitive, aching flesh.

"Sounds like somebody had a plan," he accused, his voice so low and sexy, she gulped back a moan.

"Do you mind so much? Did I break any cardinal rules?"

He grinned. "Nope. Only flaw I see in this plan is those condoms are out there and we're in here. But that's okay. We can get a lotta use out of this lone star."

The washing machine clunked into the rinse cycle, and they vibrated against each other. They smiled, then he drew her chin forward again to kiss her. His tongue swept over her bottom lip before pulling it gently between his teeth. When he let it go, he said in a soft, rough voice "Remember when we used to sit up talking all night? Ol' Phil'd be bored to tears—"

And Rori would be asleep on the couch. She remembered the music, the firelight, the conversation and feeling so much

for Brett she was never sure how she'd been able to keep it from him.

Savannah nodded, a little alarmed by the tears stinging her eyes.

"I wanted to take you then," Brett said. "I used to think about it a lot. God, you naked from head to toe in that firelight. I wanted to put the fire inside you."

She caught her lip between her teeth, unwilling to let him know she'd been waiting and wishing he would. Brett took her hand now, placing it firmly against his erection.

Swallowing hard, she murmured under the pressure of his hand still covering hers. "You did?"

He let go of his hand and let *her* go. His eyes closed, his teeth clenched as she touched the silky smooth heat. He'd wanted her back then, she marveled. He wanted her. No doubt about it. Not when he was this hard and her hand was coated thoroughly with his desire.

"Oh, yeah."

With his hands beneath her bottom, he eased her forward, closer than before, preventing her from continuing her caress. His kiss was reckless. *Like this*, he seemed to be saying. *I would've taken you like this*. She would have responded with the same fire.

He dragged the teddy down over the gentle swell of her breasts and moved in fast. Seeing his tongue lap against her nipples alternately made her body arch and run like an active volcano. He curled both hands around her, so the red peaks stood at attention for him.

The hum in her lower belly kick-started into high gear. She rubbed herself against his hard stomach. When even that wasn't enough to satisfy her, she leaned back on her hands trying to get closer to him.

She wasn't sure who the moan came from at his touch to the core of her. He flicked at the snaps that kept her from him as if they were made of mere air.

His fingers glided over her, inside her, manipulating her climax so easily she let out a strangled cry at the force of her own response. Everything melted away against his voice, muttering emotions she felt too, against her mouth. Words that drove her past reason. She wanted him just as much, just as down and dirty, just as soul-deep, and she told him in every way she could because she couldn't stop the hunger for him.

Then he lifted her. She felt something solid against her back and opened her eyes. He'd left her. Through blurry eyes, she saw him throwing their clean, wet clothes into a dryer and starting it up. He was gone only a minute and still aroused when he climbed over her on the folding table. "You ready, baby?" he asked, rolling on the condom with one hand.

Savannah curled her hand around him to finish the task. "Yes. God, yes. Now, Brett."

Instead of watching their bodies join, he stared into her eyes. She'd never seen a man more aroused in her life, yet there was something unbelievably tender about his gaze. He cradled his hands around her head after looping his arms under hers. "Definitely worth the wait," he said with a lopsided grin.

Tears filled her eyes and her throat. When he rocked and then rolled against her deeply, she sucked in her breath in a gasping scream, losing any thought of battling back her emotions. She cried hard, she came like an erupting volcano, and Brett met every one of her fiery needs. He reassured her with his touches, his whispers. He drew her thighs up so she was completely open to him and drove himself inside her over and over until she didn't know anything except him and that her mind was gone. Goodbye. *Saluto*. Who cared? Mhm.

And he told her he loved her too, just before he let out an anguished groan and the heat between them exploded in life and death violence. He kissed her hard enough to bruise, exactly what she needed to block out the comfortless extremes of pleasure and pain.

"Hold on to me," he ground out, and she was one with the feeling of coming apart completely, the fear of being unable to hold together.

She wept his name like a grieving widow in his arms. She had something to grieve too: The complete loss of her heart. What would he do with it?

Her greatest fear wasn't that he'd break her heart, but that he wouldn't let it go after this was all over.

\* \* \* \*

SHE WAS gonna be an addiction. An obsession until the day he died, devil be damned. Savvy O'Brien had given him something no other woman had ever given him. Love. Love with a capital L. Even knowing she hadn't intended to give it to him couldn't save him.

They left the laundromat as empty as they'd found it, dressed in clothes only slightly less warm and damp than they were. They ate lunch in a booth at a fast food restaurant, both sitting on the same side so they'd be touching at all times.

Rain hit them just minutes after they got a camp site at Shakopee Valley RV Park and set up the tent. She didn't seem to mind the lack of space or the sound of rain hitting the lightweight but sturdy tent. That didn't surprise him. The only thing that jolted him was how easily she gave in to everything. They weren't just giving each other a couple incredible memories and she knew it near as he did.

Even though he'd never had *any* woman tell him she loved him, the way Savvy said it ... Hell, she'd cried it over and over that first time like she couldn't *not* say it. He could accept the words might be just heat of the moment stuff if not for the way she touched him, looked at him, cried his name, responded to everything he did and said.

They stripped down in the cramped confines of the tent, but her mouth was on his before they'd toweled off.

"Aah, Savvy," he muttered, feeling his chest tighten until he wanted to scream. This wasn't the same as when he had Rori in his arms, she was gone and he wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled, until his head exploded. Until she came back from wherever the hell she went to escape him and meet with a ghost. He wanted Savvy to look at him, look him straight in the eyes and mean everything she said and did.

As if reading his mind, she lifted her head to look down at him. She smiled slightly. "I don't think I'll ever be able to



sleep again. I don't think I'll ever be satisfied. What have you done to me, Brett Foxx?"

Entirely too serious and he knew it, he shook his head. "I don't know."

"Well I do. We'll have to come up with some new fantasies."

When he swallowed hard at her shadowed admission that he'd made her fantasies come true, she kissed him again. Instead of lingering, she moved down his chin, tasting, biting and stroking his skin with her mouth and her hands every inch of the way.

Brett groaned and bucked his hips as she licked his nipples. Hearing her groan, too, made him a lot crazy. She wasn't finished though. The touch of her wet mouth on his stomach muscles forced a guttural cry out of him. He felt violent, but no way could he stop her from what he knew she had planned.

Savvy's mouth closed over his erection without the slightest hesitation and she actually looked up to meet his eyes, obviously wanting to watch him react.

Helplessly, he closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, tore his hands through his hair, then looked at her again—just as helplessly, as her mouth worked him over, her hands cradled the tight sac and her fingers held him in place for her sweet torture.

The tent bucked with their movements, but he didn't care if the damn thing collapsed on them. He couldn't get enough of the surge of power flowing between them, her soft lips and tongue traveling each sensitive inch of him, the passion

making her eyes almost sleepy as she neared climax with him.

Ah hell, he thought about it. He thought about letting go. Wondered briefly if she'd take him all the way, if she'd turn away or finish it with a smile on her face ... But he knew the answer and that was enough. This time he wanted her with him all the way, not just reacting to his pleasure.

"C'mere, baby. God, c'mere."

Her face flushed in the half-light coming in the roof covering, she administered one last, moist kiss to the tip of his manhood, then came to him. As soon as he had her in his arms, he turned them until she was under him.

Spreading her legs as far as they could go in the tent, he touched her. Hell, she was as close as he was.

"Brett..." she cried, covering his stroking hand with her own and letting out another keening shriek at the added pressure. "Come inside me. I could die..."

Fumbling with birth control was torture. He was so damn close....

Driving into her ruthlessly brought co-mingled screams and then co-mingled heaven. She cried his name again in a way that made him crazy enough to feel his eyes stinging. He could feel her tears on his neck, just like he used to feel Rori's. But this was different. That didn't matter at all. This mattered. Nothing else mattered.

He turned them again, glad as hell that the tent wouldn't allow her to move an inch away from him. Rubbing her back, he tried to get his breath again.

"We could've gone to a hotel."

"What's a couple bruises?" she murmured, lifting her head long enough to kiss him. He could taste himself on her lips.

Her light tone defied how contentedly she stretched and sprawled on top of him. Somehow knowing she would have stayed this way even if they had room to move sent a surge of satisfaction through him.

The tent was too cramped for him to check her over carefully. "Are you serious?" He'd worried about her comfort in the laundromat, wishing he'd had enough forethought to bring in a sleeping bag. But then he'd stopped thinking about anything except taking her from one end of heaven to the other.

"It's no big deal." She raised her head to smile at him. "Believe me, it was worth it. You put every other man in the world to shame. Have you won any awards for this?"

Brett couldn't help laughing. At the moment, he was so sore all he could win was the Academy Award for Limp & Lifeless. "Not in the last year or so."

Her expression turned serious. "Why not in the last year or so? Don't tell me you've haven't *mhmhed* since Rori?"

"Oh yeah. I've *mhmhed* plenty since Rori. I had a couple girls a day for awhile there. Anything to prove to myself she was the one sufferin' the biggest loss."

"Did you? Did you prove that to yourself?" Savvy asked quietly, her eyes bright.

Brett shook his head. "'Bout all I proved was sex for the sake of sex is like finding a black hole. You're pretty much dead; what's the point?"

Instead of turning away, she pulled herself closer. "I think she lost the most," she murmured with full conviction. She kissed him gently.

He couldn't say. If he was still hung up on Rori, he would've let Savvy pass him by again when she showed up at the garage about a week ago.

"What about you? Have you *mhmhed* since Ol' Stud Phil?"

She laughed bitterly. "No. But it has nothing to do with him why I didn't. I guess I figured out early I didn't want sex for the sake of sex either."

And here she was—practically admitting what they had broke all the boundaries. He had the feeling if he tried to get her to admit it, she'd back out in a hurry. Same went if he admitted this was a hell of a lot more for him too. He wasn't ready to let her go. Now, or—new addiction aside—probably ever.

## Chapter 9

"I DON'T think this is such a good idea," Brett muttered before they reached the front entrance of a motorcycle bar called Hog Haven.

There wasn't a single car in the parking lot. When Savannah saw all the motorcycles, she'd asked Brett if he'd ever been there. The way he said "Yeah" told her he'd been there a lot.

"Oh. I forgot. You stopped drinking. Is that why you don't want to go in?" She put a hand on his arm to tell him they could turn back if that was his reason.

"I can handle that. This is a rough place, baby. They knew you were a lawyer, we wouldn't leave in one piece."

She laughed because he seemed to think a place like this was above the law.

Silly, completely juvenile, but she'd always wanted to go with Brett to a place where the other patrons would take one look at them and know they were together. Know *she* was this road warrior's woman.

God, she'd envied Rori that. Rori could touch Brett whenever, wherever she pleased. She could put her arms around him and press herself to his back as if they were the only two pieces of a puzzle.

"Look, you're a classy lady, Savvy. No matter how you're dress at the moment—" He indicated her worn jeans, scoop necked T-shirt and short leather jacket. "—everybody's gonna take one look at you and know you're class. The kind of crowd

at this dive comes looking for trouble, and if one head isn't busted sometime during the night, they feel like they didn't try hard enough. So stay close to me and don't look at anybody. If there's trouble, we're not gonna be rescued by the cops. The owner's got too many shady deals on the side to risk calling 'em for a couple busted tables and broken windows."

He was serious. Savannah's legal mind rebelled against it. "Did Rori get a list of rules every time she came in here with you?" she snapped, unable to hide her jealousy.

His face moved close enough that she could see the deep blue rim of color around his pupils. "No, dammit. Rori had street smarts. She could take care of herself in a place like this. You're not street smart, baby."

Savannah took offense to being told she couldn't handle herself around thugs, yet Rori could. As a lawyer, she'd seen her share of troublemakers. She didn't need protection and rules. But she'd stick close to Brett because she wanted to.

Acid metal music pounded out the door, doing everything short of flinging them back, as they entered. Brett not only put his arm around her, he put a possessive hand inside her jacket, over her breast. It was blatant "Mine, don't even try" demarcation, but Savannah didn't mind in the least. She knew he did it, not too much because he was possessive, but so no other man would take an interest in her and start trouble. Her nipples rose, and, sore as she was, her core responded eagerly to Brett's nearness.

She didn't believe anyone would bother them. Still, she didn't stare at anyone. She simply glanced around long

enough to note that this was definitely a tough crowd. Muscles, tattoos, leather and lots of hair.

Yup, she could definitely see Brett and Rori fitting in nicely here. Why shouldn't she belong though? She wasn't dressed any differently. She wasn't the soft, ultra-feminine type. Why would Brett say she could never fit in, in a place like this?

They made it through the crowd without invading anyone else's space, then Brett greeted the bartender as if he'd been here only a week ago. Savannah could have sworn the bartender actually recognized him and became a little afraid. Brett ordered a couple beers as well as some food, then indicated a booth before leading her that way.

"You've been all over the place, haven't you?" she said, looking at him while sliding into one side of the booth. He surprised her by sitting next to her, heartbeat close.

"Pretty much."

He kissed her, easing both hands beneath her jacket. Her nipples were already so hard, his fingers on them made her utterly crazy. The fact that they were in public only excited her more. Memories of the laundromat, the tent, made her almost wish they'd gone straight to a hotel. Room service and a big soft bed while they waited. Maybe Brett would let her finish this time. She could almost taste him again and feel him filling her mouth like she'd only dreamed ... God, she was obsessed.

"You don't have to keep showing everyone we're together," she said softly, when he broke the kiss and she was so close to climax, she had to concentrate hard to keep it from embarrassing her.

He picked up one of the bottles of beer a waitress had delivered. He handed it to her. "I know I don't. If I had to, I'd invent *any* reason. Do I have to invent reasons?"

Moistening her lips with her tongue, she shook her head. Her face felt so hot, she was surprised she didn't go up in flames. "No." She was his for the duration of this trip. How would it ever be enough? One shot of his potent poison and she was a slave to it.

She took a drink of the beer, nearly choking when she saw the heat in his eyes as he watched her drink. The bottle reminded him, too, of what she'd done to him in the tiny tent.

Oh God, oh God, she could not seem to get enough of this man. She was about to ask him, for his ears only, if he'd ever made love in a bar. But then she knew his answer would be yes. She didn't want to think of him with another woman, *Rori*, ever again.

When he pulled her toward him, to whisper in her ear, she got tears in her eyes at the desire and fear of wanting him to belong to her exclusively. "'Soon as we're outta here, I'm taking you to the best hotel in Minneapolis. One with a fireplace. I wanna make you mine again, baby. Make you happy."

Savannah closed her eyes, turning her face to him as tears stung behind her eyelids. No other man had ever made her feel sexy and tender at the same time. At the same time she wanted to fulfill every sexual fantasy he'd ever had, she wanted to heal him and make him completely forget about Rori Mason. She wanted to make him happy.



Their food arrived and they ate it as if they sat alone in the bar. They didn't talk. Didn't need to.

When they got up and Brett threw down some money, Savannah assumed they'd leave. Instead, they joined the other couples on the floor. The Scorpions song blasting really wasn't a dance number, but no one danced anyway. The men and women held each other, swaying slightly. Most of them made out like they were at an unchaperoned prom.

Brett didn't kiss her, didn't touch her in a way that would be inappropriate in any other public bar. He just held her close, with his mouth against her ear, and they moved together in slow rhythm.

*I'm in trouble, Savannah thought. You think you can go eleven years wanting this guy and then—once you've finally got him where you want him—walk away when you realize you're drowning? No way, baby. You're lost, six different ways to Sunday.*

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said abruptly, pulling out of his embrace and walking away blindly. She heard the panic in her own voice, or simply felt it, but figured over the extreme volume of noise in the bar Brett wouldn't noticed.

Someone grabbed her arm, and her panic took a new turn until she felt Brett press himself to her back. "We go together, dammit! I asked you not to leave my side. Did you forget?"

"But you can't—" She glanced back at him.

"Like hell I can't."

He steered her toward a hallway with three doors, an exit in the far back and separate restrooms for “Dudes” and “Babes.”

“You're actually going to come in with me?”

“Now you're gettin' it, babe,” he said without smiling.

Savannah turned to him fully at the “Babes” door. “Brett, I may not be Annie Oakley, but I can certainly manage to go to the bathroom without a bodyguard.”

He shook his head. “Look, Savvy, you've got three options: You hold off 'til we get to a hotel, you go out in the bushes—but I wouldn't recommend it, or you go in there with me right behind you. Now what do you wanna do? And decide quick cuz I got a bad feeling. I wanna get outta here.”

He wouldn't back down, and she couldn't hold off. She went in. He followed.

At least he didn't join her in the stall, she conceded with a blush, though she could use protection—against germs. The stall was beyond disgusting. She'd insisted on going; now she had to do it.

After laying a dozen long strips of toilet paper over the seat, (Brett waiting for her prodded her into hurrying) she found herself embarrassed about “performing” with him so close. She'd done far more intimate things with him, yet this seemed unbearably private.

She could see him through the gaps separating the stall door from the walls. The epitome of patience, he leaned against a sink with his arms crossed over his chest.

The whole concept of urinals testified to the fact that men could go anywhere, at any time. She couldn't. Telling him she couldn't even tinkle with anybody nearby would humiliate her.

He shifted, clearly wondering what the holdup was, when the bathroom door burst open. Savannah literally jumped off the toilet and zipped up.

"Wrong can," a very tough, very bored female voice said.

Maybe she could go, Savannah thought, now that someone else had provided a distraction. She eased her zipper down again.

"Brett Foxx?!?" that same tough voice exclaimed, turning more excited than bored. "Where have you been, baby? You dropped off the face of the planet ... and we were just gettin' cozy."

Savannah leaned close to the gap in the door, shocked and furious when she saw a brunette with her octopus arms around Brett, her body plastered against his. From her angle, she couldn't tell if Brett held her or held her *off*.

"Where's your boyfriend, Dawn?" Brett asked his too cozy friend.

"Out there. Maybe you better get outta here. Cuz Constrictor's still got a price on your head for last time. Somebody out there's bound to tell him you're here."

*Dawn? Constrictor?* Why did those names sound so familiar?

Almost before she posed the question to herself, Savannah remembered Rori saying them. Brett had called Savannah from a Minnesota hospital and asked her to find Rori. Once she'd done that, she and Rori paced the hallway there,

waiting for a doctor to give them a report on Brett's condition. Rori had cried and said over and over "*I shouldn't've told Constrictor he slept with Dawn. It's all my fault. And now he could die.*"

Without bothering to re-zip her jeans, Savannah flew out of the stall. "Let's go! Let's go now!"

Her attention landed fully on Brett in her desperate need to get him to hurry.

He took her arm wordlessly, leaving Dawn without a "See you." As she fumbled with her zipper with one hand, Savannah's relief didn't get a chance to surface.

They stepped out to the hall, so close to the exit, and then Brett swore under his breath. A mountain had stepped out of the men's bathroom, right in front of the exit door.

"Brett Foxx," the mountain roared. "I finally get to kick your sorry ass. I been waitin' a damn long time for this day."

Never in her life had Savannah seen a man this big. Brett's enemy was at least 6'5, 350 pounds, complete with a scowl that would send a grizzly bear running in the other direction. This man had sent Brett to the hospital once, nearly killing him.

Surely someone would call the police, despite Brett's claim otherwise. When she looked around hoping to see a sympathetic face, all she witnessed were excited bystanders, clearly relishing the idea of seeing some blood.

"Brett, let's just go. No one will stop us if we go out the way we came," she whispered.

He didn't pay any more attention to her than the rest of the crowd did.

"You banged my babe, Foxx. Now I'm gonna string you up by the balls."

With a roar, Constrictor started forward and Savannah felt a scream rising in her throat. She grabbed for Brett's arm, anything to keep him at her side and hopefully out of danger.

Her movement caught Constrictor's attention. The way he looked her over reminded her that her jeans' snap remained open.

"Or maybe I can take out the damage you caused me with *your* babe. She's a little top light, but I like fiery redheads."

Constrictor's arm shot out like a snake striking, grabbed her wrist and yanked her against him.

Fear was Savannah's first impulse; anger followed on its heels. "I wouldn't let you touch me if you were the last man on earth," she spit, nowhere near his face. She wasn't that brave.

Black eyes glared down at her from impossibly small sockets. "I ain't *askin'*, bitch. I'm takin'."

Oh God. There were no options here. None good anyway. Either she got hurt or Brett got hurt. She didn't like the prospect of either.

"Let her go," Brett said somewhere behind her. His tone was low and deadly. "This is between you and me, you bastard. You let her go now and maybe I'll leave you with a couple teeth."

What was he doing? Based on size alone, no contest. Brett was strong, but this guy had to be three times bigger than him.

She remembered Rori telling her when Brett got mad he had the strength of ten men. Even if Rori hadn't been exaggerating, Constrictor was a monster. And he'd put Brett in the hospital once before.

"You wanna piece of this?" Constrictor moved Savannah out of his path only long enough to thump his chest at Brett.

"If that's what it takes."

What surprised her most was how confident Brett sounded. Did he believe he could win? Or was he trying to create a window of opportunity for them to escape?

Constrictor hauled her up against him and kissed her hard enough to break teeth. "You and me. Later," he muttered as if she wanted anything more from that kiss than to puke.

He threw her back to Brett like she was a Frisbee. Brett caught her, but nothing could reduce the jarring collision.

When she looked up at him, she saw fury unlike anything she'd ever seen before. His eyes had become red hot coals. She experienced a moment of exhilarant fear, this time for the mountain.

"Outside, Foxx. Now. You're not gettin' away from me this time."

Brett looked down at her. "Stay where I can see you." He ran his thumb against the corner of her mouth, and she saw blood on his fingertip from Constrictor's smashing kiss.

"Let's run," she whispered desperately. "We can."

He shook his head. "No way."

She wasn't sure if he meant he wanted to fight or there was no escape.

Either way, it was too late. The crowd behind them already pushed them forward, out the exit door.

\* \* \* \*

SHE HAD TO be in a middle of a nightmare. None of this was civilized.

Constrictor made a show of removing his jacket and flexing his mountainous biceps while the crowd steered her and Brett out to the parking lot.

Brett did nothing to prepare. He looked at her once, repeated that she stay where he could see her, then he threw himself like a cannonball at Constrictor's back.

No one had the chance to warn Constrictor and the element of surprise worked. The human mountain lost his balance, but caught himself only seconds before he would have hit the pavement with his face. Then he sprang up and turned to Brett. "You wanna play dirty? Well, come on."

Mid-sentence, Brett flew at him again, catching him at another disadvantage.

Savannah actually took a deep breath and let it out. Brett was smaller than the mountain, but his reflexes were lightning quick and his punches seemed to be propelled by a rocket launcher. Maybe....

But Constrictor learned to expect the unexpected from his opponent too soon. He landed a punch in Brett's middle that sent him flying backward. Savannah instinctively rushed forward to go to him, but someone grabbed her and yanked her back. "Believe me, girl, this is one fight you don't wanna

throw yourself in the middle of. Con doesn't care if you're a woman. You get in the way, you go down."

Savannah supposed she should have been grateful for Dawn's assistance, especially when fists flew, blood gushed and there was no clear winner for endless minutes.

"Can't you do something?" she whispered, feeling her heart contract violently every time Brett took a punch.

Dawn stared at her like she was insane. "Like what? I'd have to be nuts to get involved."

"Can't you talk to Constrictor?" Savannah realized only subconsciously she was crying, crying the way Rori had in the hospital waiting room. "Tell him you were to blame, too."

Dawn laughed. "Brett can take the beating a lot better than I can."

She admitted her boyfriend hit her? "Why do you stay with him then?" Without waiting for the answer, Savannah focused on Brett again and cringed.

"We can't all be lucky enough to land us a Foxx, now can we, Miss Lily White?" Dawn muttered.

Constrictor apparently seemed to think he was winning because he started speaking to Savannah, saying the most gutterish things, so she'd be ready for him "soon as I finish up here." As if she looked forward to it. As if she looked forward to anything except getting out of here with Brett still standing.

The lascivious things Constrictor chattered on about were meant to goad and wear Brett down. They did just the opposite. Savannah had never seen anyone move so fast in her life. Constrictor never had a chance against light-speed



punches and lethal kicks. Brett resembled some kind of unprogrammable warrior. Fearless, focused, and, God, so sexy Savannah couldn't believe her body's response to watching him. Violence of any kind was deplorable. Every value she held dear rebelled against fighting like this.

The hum of arousal growing in her wouldn't be controlled by logic. She wanted to tend his wounds and then love him until any ache that consumed him became pleasure.

"Damn, something about a man usin' his muscle that gets me off every time," Dawn muttered in a half-there voice.

Savannah's jealousy flared. Obviously Dawn wasn't talking about Constrictor who was barely able to keep himself upright.

She turned to the petite brunette. "He's mine. Or do you want a piece of this?" She held up a fist.

Dawn shrank back in surprise more than fear.

"And don't call me 'Lily White.'"

The other woman muttered an apology just before Constrictor landed in a heap at Brett's feet. Savannah was so relieved, she almost laughed.

Brett leaned down and said something to the fallen mountain too quiet for the rumbling, mumbling crowd to hear. Then he glanced back to see Savannah exactly where he left her.

He wasn't bleeding at all. She'd seen blood everywhere, yet he wasn't bleeding. Even after the punches he'd taken, he didn't look as though he'd suffered any damage.

Forever Man  
*by Karen Wiesner*

He held out a hand, and she went to him quickly and powerlessly. She belonged to him. At the moment, she couldn't do anything to fight it.

"What did you say to him?" she asked, putting on her helmet and getting on the motorcycle.

"I told him I was sorry I slept with his babe."

There was more to it than that. Savannah could feel it, but she wanted to get out of there before the mountain rose up again looking for revenge for his wounded ego.

## Chapter 10

"I DON'T get it," Savvy said as soon as the bellhop left their hotel room well-tipped even without the tour. They'd just wanted him gone. "How did this guy put you in a hospital last time when you completely flattened him this time—and came out without a scratch, I might add."

Brett knew she wouldn't let it go. Seldom did a man's past haunt him in flesh and blood the way his had this night. The chance of him running into an enemy always loomed, but one that wanted to see him go down without mercy? He'd expected trouble, only not like this. Not where Savvy could come to harm.

"You're not hurt, are you?" he asked, nudging her chin up so he could look at the damage to her lip. The blood was gone and it didn't look serious enough to give her more than a twinge for a day or so.

"I'm fine. Answer me," she demanded.

Brett moved away, down into the dark, sunken living room. "He didn't."

"He didn't what?" Her voice was gentle yet impatient.

"He didn't put me in the hospital."

"But—"

Glancing back as he rounded one of the sofas, he saw utter confusion on her face. What did she know anyway? She seemed to know something.

"But Rori said she told Constrictor you slept with Dawn and ... I assumed he beat you up and that's why you were in the hospital that time."

The fact that she remembered specific details about one of his many visits to the emergency room was enough to throw him for a loop. That the whole conversation bothered her so much she *had* to have all the answers just made it worse. He wanted to drop it. History was history, and he didn't want to remember the kind of man he used to be with Rori.

He wanted Savvy; wanted it to be different this time, but the anger he'd felt out there ... That was familiar. Familiar like those years with Rori.

After flipping on the lights he didn't want, Savvy moved over to him and put a hand on his arm.

The gesture annoyed him. "You want all the dirt on how I punished her? Cuz it ain't pretty, baby."

She withdrew in slight confusion, crossing her arms protectively in front of her, but he could see she wanted to know everything. She looked exactly like she had every time she came to the hospital after he'd been in some kind of accident or fight. Like she didn't want to be there. Like he'd inconvenienced her. But she'd demand he call earlier each time. Call her and not worry where she was or what she did. She never made any sense during those times. Or he'd been too drugged to see clearly.

"I didn't cheat on her cuz I couldn't commit to one woman," he muttered, yanking off his jacket, then tossing it and himself in a chair. Savvy moved to face him straight on.

"I did it cuz..." He shook his head in self-disgust. "I was a bastard and I wanted to hurt her as bad as I hurt. She cheated on me every damn time we made love. It was always *him* she wanted to be with. Never me. So I got back at her."

"By sleeping with Dawn?" Savvy asked quietly.

He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the glass tabletop in front of him.

"It was part of it. I never fought Constrictor before. I landed in the hospital because Rori left me when she found out I fucked Dawn. I knew I had to do something drastic to get her to change her mind. I drank myself blind and, like a jackass, I got on the Harley plannin' to get her back. And it worked."

Savvy sat on the glass-top coffee table in front of him. Her expression mirrored the horror in her voice. "You *crashed* on purpose? You were that desperate?"

"The accident that put me in the hospital was real." That accident had been the closest he ever got to dying.

He rubbed a hand over his face. "But I knew what I was doing when I drank three bottles of Jack Daniels in the space of an hour and a half. I was gonna punish her and get her back all in one blow. Or die trying."

For a long, echoing moment, Savvy stared at him with a hand against her throat, her face whiter than a sheet. Then she got up and went into the bathroom.

Brett swore under his breath. What the hell was he gonna do with this woman? She believed he'd loved Rori so much he'd never get over it. But he'd hated Rori, too. That conflict turned him into a psycho like his old man. He'd glimpsed that

psycho again when Constrictor grabbed Savvy. But he'd stopped. The old Brett wouldn't have stopped until Constrictor and the pavement became one. Maybe he wasn't like his old man after all. Maybe.

He didn't want to feel what he had when he was with Rori. He didn't want to feel it with Savvy. He loved her violently enough to defend her to the death, but Mr. Hyde had been vanquished in him—or so he'd been trying to convince himself since Rori walked out for good and he finally got back on his feet again.

How was he supposed to make Savvy believe what he had with Rori wasn't love—and the reason he knew that was because what he felt now, for her, was the real thing?

He got up and found her in the bathroom leaning against the sink, her hands over her face.

"Why did she stay with you for eleven years if she didn't love you?" she asked through her hands.

Brett shook his head, wanting to touch her but not sure she'd let him this time either. She'd fled at the bar, instead of dancing with him. He'd never danced before, with any woman. Sure as hell not with Rori. Dancing with somebody was too damn revealing, like telling that person out loud "I wanna hold you, become your rhythm like you become mine. Like I belong to you and you belong to me." Savvy wasn't ready for that. He was. God damn him, but he was.

"Your guess is as good as mine. But it doesn't matter."

He shifted closer to her, drawing her slowly against him. She uncovered her eyes, but didn't meet his eyes. She didn't

need to. He could see she'd been crying. He just didn't know why.

"Do you believe it doesn't matter? Do you *really*?"

"Yeah. I really believe that." He leaned closer, resting his forehead against hers with a sigh.

"Why did you fight?" she whispered as her hands stole up to clutch his collar. "We could have found a way to get out. There's always a way."

Running his hands up her spine, he caught the back of her head. "No way I was gonna let him get away with hurting you. No way was I gonna let it go."

She swallowed hard, her eyes soft with surprise. "You fought *for me*?"

The answer, the reason was simple: "He hurt you."

"Is that what you said to him after?"

Brett moved his mouth to her ear. "I told him I was sorry I slept with Dawn, but I had to kick his ass once he touched you."

Her arms went around him, and she pressed her face to his chest roughly. "You were unbelievable. I've never seen anyone fight before—and I certainly don't condone it. But you really—"

Instead of finishing the sentence, she held him tighter.

He pulled back to look at her. "I really what?"

A hint of color rose in her cheeks. "You really turned me on," she said breathlessly, as if the admission embarrassed her.

"You're not gonna call me an animal?" The way Rori had. Every fight he got into led to an argument with her, that eventually led him to another bloody fight.

Why would he ever want that back? He had what he wanted. Right here. He couldn't even tell her without sending her packing.

"Maybe I like animals. Especially foxes."

He gathered her up until she was close enough to kiss. "Is that "a" fox or "the" fox?"

"You. Only you. The one and only Foxx."

His entire body ached from the fight, but kissing her, having her in his arms, went a hell of a long way to making it better. "What do you say we take a swim in that pool-sized tub?"

She nodded, her eyes closed. "Let's."

After another long, healing kiss, they ran a hot bubble bath, then undressed each other. The bruises on her body bothered him. He couldn't tell what came from their rendezvous in the laundromat, the tent or the bar.

"I'm sorry," he murmured when she slid in the water naked, straddled his lap and put her arms around him.

God, she smelled good. They'd been showering at truck stops, so how could she still smell like that expensive, musky perfume he'd associated with only her since he met her?

Savvy shook her head. "Just make love to me."

*But don't love me?* Brett couldn't do one without the other. Not anymore.



Curling his hands around her bottom, he drew her forward, right against his erection. "I don't have anything up here. Everything's down in the saddlebags."

Brett knew exactly what he was doing when he eased his fingers between them and into her mound. He wanted her to say "I'll take the risk. Because I want forever with you."

For a long minute, she simply responded hedonistically to his thumb, stroking the nub that made her pull her bottom lip between her teeth and close her eyes as a moan bled out of her. He eased two fingers inside of her at the same time. Then, when he leaned forward to draw a tight nipple into his mouth, she murmured, "We can call down to the desk, can't we?"

She wrapped her arms around his head. He felt her thighs open wider to his touch. Her trust and distrust of him should have been a contradiction jarring enough to force her out of hiding. Only he noticed it.

"And ask them to bring the saddlebags up and leave them at the door."

She let out a strangled gasp, moving her hips in a deep gyration against his hand. "Brett!"

His name was a groan and a sigh, and he felt a burst of anger that coincided with her climax. The anger passed quickly when she rubbed herself helplessly against his cock.

*What do you expect? She can't commit herself to a time this'll be over, and you want her to commit herself to a maybe baby?*

Crazy as it was, he wanted her to do just that. Instead, he got up before he couldn't and did what she suggested.

Once he had a strip of the condoms in his possession, he held his hand down to her in the tub.

"Where are we going?" She took his hand and allowed him to wrap her in one of the sheet towels.

"This time you get a nice, soft bed at your back, lady. No more bruises."

*And no more disillusioning yourself.* But he had the feeling he'd already arrived too late for that vow.

\* \* \* \*

"YOU KNOW, I always wanted to do this," Brett said in her ear, his voice soft, rough, and so satisfied her body clenched again in response. Her hips rolled. He groaned through gritted teeth.

Savannah looked up at him through heavy-lidded eyes. The firelight played against solidly muscled shoulders, the hollows of his cheeks. He'd already brought her physical fireworks that left her without an ounce of strength. Watching him over her made her heart feel like it'd exploded in her chest.

*I feel so much for you, so much ... I could die if this ever ended.* She had to forcefully bite down on her lip to keep herself from speaking the words out loud.

God, what was wrong with her? When she'd awoke last night to find herself alone, she'd burst into unexplainable tears. She suspected Brett realized she'd been crying when he returned from raiding the snack bar and that was why he'd been both jovial and thoroughly attentive.

"I always wanted to do this at your apartment, in front of your fireplace," Brett elaborated, just as softly. This time a naughty edge crept into his tone.

She nodded weakly, smiling. "I know. You said that before."

"In front of Ol' Phil."

Savannah blinked, starting to speak but couldn't. Brett had flirted with her shamelessly since the day they met. That was his way. She knew he'd done more than flirt with at least one other woman when he belonged to Rori. Savannah never allowed herself to take the flirting seriously.

"Then it would have been in front of Rori, too."

For an instant, he seemed struck by the realization. "I guess it would've. Never thought of her then." His lips glided along her collarbone. "I thought of him, snoozin', and he'd wake up and I'd be undressing you. My mouth all over you, everywhere the firelight glowed."

He reached her ear, whispering something that shocked and excited her at the same time.

The fantasies she'd had back then were similar, but she'd wanted everyone and everything else to disappear, not just temporarily.

Was that all it'd been for him? she wondered as he lifted her arms over her head, kissing her biceps, the inside of her elbow, the side of her breast. Was that all it was for him? Just wanting to one-up Phillip?

"I don't think she would've been surprised, not like Phil," Brett murmured.

"Did you ... did you like it when we talked?" she asked, realizing the timing was off.

He lifted his head to look at her like he wondered at her motive for the question. "You think I'd stay up all night talking to you if I didn't like it?"

His pat answer didn't satisfy her. He closed his lips around her nipple, and she thought *What was it that we did then? Why did we talk if we wanted each other?* Because she remembered the conversations they'd had, almost word for word. Some of them were fun, crazy, oh-my-God-what-in-the-world-is-this? Others ... She'd fallen in love with this man for his dimensions, his depth. He could make her laugh as easily as he could make her cry.

The really insane part was they never talked about the important stuff. She hadn't; he hadn't. She'd been afraid to give away that much or to hear his heart. How could she live without him then?

They'd never talked about his relationship with Rori. Hers with Phillip. She'd never said "I don't love him. I love you. When I sleep with him, I think of you. I see you under me, over me, feel you inside me. And then ... there's so much I want with you that I actually enjoy it. I go wild on him, wishing he was you."

"Brett, did you like talking? I mean, seriously?"

The emotions blocked her throat when he looked at her again, trying to figure out where she was coming from.

"I never talked to anybody like I did you, baby, except my sister. And not even then, like you."

He waited a second, to see if she'd accept that, then took her mouth. She responded instinctively, but the crush of past questions, past fears and desires fell upon her, demanding to be requited *now*.

"Did you cheat on Rori a lot?" she asked after easing out of the kiss. Surely her eyes revealed too much, but she couldn't let it go. She already knew he had—with Dawn, for one.

*Why am I asking?* she wondered, but only knew she had to ask.

Brett laughed shortly, like he couldn't believe she was talking when they were spread out on a thick, plush carpet with only the firelight to answer to.

"You really wanna talk about this, Savvy? You wanna hear I wouldn't cheat on *you*. Is that it?"

*It can't matter whether you would or not* was her first, immediate thought. *Because this can't last*. But that thought was overrun by a more demanding, powerful one. *It would kill me if you ever wanted any other woman*.

He watched her, and she saw something dark and fierce in his eyes. In a low voice, he said, "I get it."

And he did. She knew he got her first thought almost as if she'd said it out loud. The second jealous, possessive tyrant in her mind escaped his notice.

Bracing himself on his heavily muscled and veined forearms, he kept his face only inches from hers. He wouldn't let her out of this, now that she'd forced it out of him. She actually found herself panting in fear as he stared down at her and wouldn't let her look away.

"Yeah. You know I fucked around on her. All part of the punishment. I didn't do it cuz I can't be faithful. I told you that. I did it cuz ... occasionally—when a man makes love, he needs to feel wanted. Rori never wanted me. That's not an excuse. That's the reason."

When he shifted slightly, she felt his manhood, hard again, press against her.

"I can't imagine any woman not wanting a man like you," Savannah said, just as instinctively, just as fiercely as she'd pursued this topic. Rori was a fool. She was a fool for hurting Brett and making him feel worthless, like he wasn't desirable. For making him feel he had to prove himself with other women—

He shook his head at her forcefully. "Don't do that. Don't feel sorry for me. Me and Rori—we're even. I hope I'm not the same man. I doubt she's the same person she was with me."

He moved against her again, then cradled his hands around her face. "With you ... Never been like this with anybody else, baby."

Reaching between them, he made her want him so easily, his words seemed like an extension of that desire.

"You're ... you make me feel..." He shook his head, kissing her and laughing at the same time. "Like Mikey says: You make me feel like I'm *da man*."

Savannah laughed with him, but she felt too much love. Being here with him made her possessive. Now she could finally reach for him with every need. Any need. She could

finally touch him without having a viable reason outside of simple urge.

Damn reality. Damn that this couldn't last. They'd have to go back ... to their jobs, their separate lives. And she couldn't let him get so deep inside her she'd spend the rest of her life hollow.

Brett turned her face to his. "Be with me." He sounded almost angry.

"I am," she whispered brokenly.

He shook his head, somehow realizing she'd tried to protect herself by pulling away emotionally. She knew she hurt him, too. Rori had withdrawn from him emotionally when he touched her. For his sake, for her own, she couldn't do anything but give him everything now.

Pushing him up, she rolled him back and moved over him. "I'm here."

*Nowhere I'd rather be* would have been the absolute truth, something she wasn't ready for any more than she was for her own damn reality.

Brett brought her down to him, heartbeat close. "You better be. You check out, baby, and this animal bites."

He joked, but she could see a ghost of pain still in his eyes.

Savannah swallowed hard, trying to shake the pressure of dealing with all she'd let herself in for up ahead, waiting for her.

"Really? Where would you bite?" she asked, forcing playfulness into her voice.

Forever Man  
by Karen Wiesner

He brought her even closer, so his lips almost touched hers. "Where? Lady, what you wanna know is *how*."

"I like the sound of this."

Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled her until she was under him again. "You're gonna like the feel even better."

His promise was followed by a kiss that brought her basest instincts to the surface. She opened her arms, her legs, her heart and took all of him.

She touched him, memorizing planes, muscles, savoring his groans, sighs, his words of harsh encouragement as she loved all her favorite parts of him. She left nothing out. This time he let her finish, and she did it with a smile on her face.

When she took him inside, he was still hard and her praise and love became one with their perfect cadence.

Regardless of the past, his or hers, he was the only man in the world she'd ever feel this for. The only one she couldn't imagine saying goodbye to so he wouldn't hurt her first.



## Chapter 11

HE DIDN'T need it, but Savvy couldn't be talked, or coaxed, out of getting some fresh air. Instead of opening the patio door and going onto the terrace, she led him outside to the parking lot.

"See, isn't it a beautiful afternoon?"

Brett shrugged. "I'd rather see it from afar. The bedroom window would've done it for me."

She ran into him purposely, grinning up at him, but glided away when he tried to capture her against him.

Brett pulled himself up on a Mercedes, resting his feet on the bumper, while she walked ahead. He liked watching her, liked the way she moved, the way her clothes fit her beautiful body, the way the breeze caught her hair.

Becoming her lover had changed how he looked at her. He still wanted her all the time, but there was more to it. Now when he looked at her, he thought of the future. Crazy things he'd never even considered on his best day in the past. Marriage, buying a house in the country, filling it with dogs and kids.

Definitely crazy.

Across the lot, she climbed onto his motorcycle and took hold of the handlebars. Brett laughed out loud. Damn, she was adorable. If anybody looked more *wrong* on a chopper, it was Savvy O'Brien.

Pushing himself off the car, he saw her turn toward him. "How do you drive this thing? The handlebars are, like, at eyebrow level."

He grinned. "Practice."

She shook her head, starting to dismount until he held the keys up for her. "Give it a shot. It's not as hard as it looks."

For a long minute, she just stared at him like he'd lost his marbles. "You're serious? You're crazy! No way." She pushed the keys away.

"Just like Rori. Chicken," he murmured under his breath.

Savvy stood, still straddling the bike between her legs.

"What did you say?"

Shaking his head, he put the keys back in the pocket of his jacket.

"No. What did you say?"

He'd been joking, yet her expression was on the far pole from that. "Forget it. I didn't mean—"

Her face paled and, contradiction that it should have been, spots of high color rose in her cheeks. "You don't know—"

She could barely speak. Rage and something else kept her from it. Hell, did he miss something or what?

"You don't know what she went through every time I called her and said ... Every time you called *me* from the hospital. Was it serious this time? Would I get there in time?"

Brett stepped closer and put a hand on her collarbone.

"What is this? What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "She didn't want anything to do with this thing." She inclined her head at the motorcycle, doing everything to imply it was an instrument of Satan. "How can

you not understand that? How many times did you almost meet your Maker? And I had to stand there and be the lawyer while she cried and threw herself on you. I just had to stand there."

She was crying, without the tears, but crying all the same.

His joke about Rori being chicken to drive the chopper had triggered something in Savvy, something she'd obviously never told anyone else before. She couldn't seem to help herself now.

"You just called me like ... like I was supposed to say 'Okay. But it's going on your bill.' Like I wasn't supposed to care that..."

She shook her head again, and then she walked away from him, back into the hotel, fast.

He followed instinctively, catching a different elevator, still in shock.

When he found the bathroom door in their suite locked, he leaned against it with his forehead and fists.

What she'd said didn't make sense ... unless she'd loved him. Loved him back then, when she was his lawyer. He'd told himself calling Savvy from hospitals was all part of her job as his lawyer. Besides, she'd *demand*ed he call her when he was in the hospital after some stupid fight or an accident, no matter how *unserious*.

*She'd loved him while he was with Rori.* For a second he smiled, and then the thought was too insane. What would he have done if he'd known? He'd been so damn obsessed with Rori, he couldn't see anything straight then. He never

would've believed it. He would've messed it all up for sure if he'd known.

Knowing it now didn't make anything better. He loved Savvy; she loved him. And she'd still end it once they got back.

Aw hell, he had to get out of here. He had to because he strongly suspected if she came out and he was here, she'd say she wanted to go home.

After considering leaving a note to tell her he'd be back soon, he decided instead to leave his jacket. He tossed it on the chair outside the bathroom door.

Although his memories of being in different hospitals centered mostly on Rori and her anger and her tears and her promises to come back to him, he had brief visions of Savvy, too. She'd always been the first one to the hospital, even when outside of New York. She'd been the first to see him. He remembered her pale face, the tight expression, tightly coiled body—as if she'd wanted to strike or run. She'd never cried ... never in front of him anyway.

That paleness and tightness could have been reined fear.

Hell, what else had he done back then to hurt her when he'd never even considered the possibility at that time? What he really wondered was had he done anything that could justify her fear of being walked out on now?

Two hours later, the sun had set and he told himself “Now or never” as he let himself into their suite. The first thing he noticed was his jacket no longer lay on the chair. He had a moment's dread she'd taken off somehow, but then he heard the TV in the bedroom.

She lay on the bed. Leaning in the bedroom doorway, he saw she wore only his leather jacket. His body clenched fiercely with the ache to touch her. Hell, he could be satisfied just holding her right now. *I wanna be part of your life, baby, whatever it takes.*

She spoke first, sitting up with her long, dark legs under her, and faced him. The jacket slid off her shoulders slightly, cradling the sides of her breasts in a lazy, sexy motion. "Hi. I'm sorry. I don't know what happened down there, but I'm sane now. Promise."

The tentative smile she gave him spoke what she wouldn't, unless pushed: *Don't ask me if I loved you. If I love you. And don't tell me if you love me either. Or it's over.*

Brett had nothing to say anyway. Certainly nothing that could change the past. He couldn't have been the man she needed back then, no matter what.

Moving into the room, he continued his silence. He got into bed, put his arms around her under the warm leather and held her. Just like he knew she would, before long she found it too intimate, too committing. She looked up at him, her hand unzipping his jeans and delving inside to grasp and stroke his erection. "Let's make love. Make love to me, Brett."

And he did it because a man with forever on his mind would rather hear stalling than goodbye.

\* \* \* \*

GETTING BACK on the road again after three days of lazy, yet stressful luxury at the hotel was a shock for Savannah.

She wasn't even sure who made the decision to go. She just knew the trip felt ... over. She didn't want it to be.

Regardless of what happened that crazy afternoon, his motorcycle the instigator, how much she'd revealed, Brett never mentioned it. He'd probably guessed what she'd been unable to escape while sleeping next to him. She was completely and totally in love with this man. That should have shocked and terrified her instead of seeming familiar. When or where or how it happened, she couldn't say, but she'd been in love with Brett for years. Maybe since the first time they met in her office and he'd called her "Savvy" in that bedroom voice of his.

She smiled even now at the memory of the brash, energetic man who'd bounced around her office as if sitting next to his very young girlfriend would confine him too much.

Love. God, *love*. She'd never allowed herself to think in those terms before. Considering her feelings at all with the men in her life had been taboo. When any exchange of emotions began, she bailed out—always working it so she didn't have to take the full blame.

Brett was nothing like any other man she'd ever been involved with. He demanded more of her, and, oh, she wanted to give him anything and everything his heart desired.

She hugged him tighter around the waist on the motorcycle, rebelling against the idea of ever having to let him go. Between the two of them, she couldn't imagine how reality would be held back. She'd withdraw or the road warrior in Brett would emerge again, needing to be set free.

Her father must have had a like warrior that drove him to escape the confines of a loving wife and adoring daughter.

Around late afternoon, Savannah noticed, as if she'd been asleep, that they were out of Canada, back in the States, in a residential neighborhood. Cringing at her own foolish indulgence, spending hours imagining what her life would be with Brett in it all the time, she glanced around them.

She didn't have a clue where they were. Even which state. Nothing looked familiar. But that wasn't out-of-the-ordinary. The only parts of the world she knew intimately were the areas around her office and her apartment.

"Where are we?" she asked immediately after Brett stopped the bike in a driveway.

Most of the houses on the block were well-maintained. Nothing fancy, but nice. This one on the corner was pretty rundown.

When she removed her helmet and got off the bike, she saw the mailbox. At one time it'd probably read "FOXX." Now it read "F XX."

*His parents.*

"My parents."

Had he intended to come here all along? Or had he seen the sign for Syracuse and decided what the heck?

She remembered he'd told her his parents lived in Syracuse long ago, during their long, midnight talks. And she also remembered that he hadn't been all that fond of them.

What she knew was sketchy, given by a frequently uncommunicative Rori. Brett had left home only weeks after his family moved to Syracuse. He'd barely been sixteen years

old. No one came after him. He'd come to New York City, made friends and managed to create something of a name for himself in various trades of the entertainment business. He returned to Syracuse when he was twenty-four. That was when he met Rori, who'd lived a couple houses down on the same block as his parents.

"How do you know they're home?"

Brett had stepped off the motorcycle and now strapped their helmets to it. He didn't look up when he said, "They're home. They're always home. And they know we're here."

Savannah glanced at the house. No lights had come on or curtains parted, no one rushed out to greet them. No noticeable changes. How could he be so certain?

The big question was *why* were they here? But Savannah couldn't get herself to ask him. They'd had four days and five nights together. It seemed selfish to say it wasn't enough.

Why would he want to take time out of their "vacation" to see people he wasn't fond of? Was he bored with her? Or, God forbid, did he want her to meet his parents?

It seemed to her it'd only be uncomfortable for everybody. There was no good way to introduce her. She and Brett were lovers. Nothing else fit quite so nicely, or would sound more inappropriate as an introduction. "Mom, Dad, this is Savvy O'Brien, my current lover."

For what possible reason would he put them in this awkward position?

Instead of protesting, she found herself mutely taking his proffered hand and following him up the rickety porch steps to the front door.



Before Brett could knock or ring the bell, the oak door flew open. Savannah took a step back to avoid the screen door.

A little old woman, frail as a newborn bird, appeared, weeping and throwing herself into Brett's arms.

Savannah heard words like "my firstborn, my baby" and wondered how the woman recognized her son. Brett hadn't been back here in over twenty years, had he?

"Stop crying, Ma," Brett said, but Savannah could see he was affected by her greeting, too. She felt tears sting her own eyes by the woman's outpouring of joy mingled with grief.

His mother ushered them in, barely letting Brett go during the process. Savannah had to school herself into not wrinkling her nose as thick smoke and another familiar odor filled her nostrils.

Sickness. The house smelled like her mother's brownstone during those last few months.

The inside of his parents' home was just as run down as the outside. Despite the passing cleanliness, everything looked in a state of disrepair. Wallpaper peeled, paint faded and chipped, carpets worn down to bare threads.

Savannah only noticed, when his mother stepped away from Brett to look at her, that the woman held her arm awkwardly at her side. She must have had a stroke or something that paralyzed her left side. Had Brett known? Did he return when it happened? His fondness for his mother was obvious, so his departure must have had to do with his father.

"Is this your wife?" The woman smiled slightly, just as uncomfortably as Savannah felt.

"Ma, this is Savannah O'Brien."

The disappointment Savannah felt at his introduction bothered her. Had she expected him to lie to his parents and further the assumption they were married, like he had in the Mall of America?

She smiled as much as she could in her discomfort and mumbled a polite greeting. If Brett had given her any clue they were coming here, she could have at least worn something more appropriate. Fixed her hair.

His mother moved to give Savannah a warm hug. "So nice to meet you, Savannah O'Brien."

This woman reminded her so much of her own mother, she wanted to cry. Brett watched her, so she looked away, even more confused about why they'd come here. That look he gave her ... Had he brought her here in the traditional sense of "meeting his parents"? *Brett Foxx*?

"The place is falling apart, ma," Brett shocked Savannah with his honesty. "The old man stopped taking care of one more thing, huh?"

"Your brother Shane comes sometimes to help, but he's not handy with repairs the way you are. The way your father was." The last sentence trailed off uncomfortably.

Brett started to say something, then a voice came booming from another room: "Who the hell you talkin' to, Liz'beth? Senile old broad." The last part was spoken as if to himself.

Mrs. Foxx led them into the living room, where a huge man sat in an ancient armchair smoking like a chimney.

"Brett's here. I just told you that before he came to the door. Don't you ever listen to me?"

"Why should I? Never say anything worth listenin' to."

The old man made Ebenezer Scrooge look like a marshmallow. Every line of his face spoke of cRankiness and disgust. Savannah went immediately on edge with him.

He gave Brett a dismissive glance. "Never thought I'd see your sorry ass again."

Brett laughed cruelly. "That makes two of us, old man."

He moved around the room, looking at anything except his father. His tenseness vibrated like an electric charge in the air.

"You came lookin' for a handout, boy, you came to the wrong place."

That angry laugh again proceeded Brett's blunt words. "When did I ever come to you for money? I make a hell of a lot more than you ever did."

"Yeah—and spend it like you wallpaper your crapper with it."

"Better than holding it so tight, you starve your family."

The silence that followed made Savannah wish she'd protested this visit loudly. She glanced at Mrs. Foxx. The woman looked positively empty-headed, as if she'd withdrawn to a happy place inside herself to avoid the harsh words exchanged. In fact, her "So, how long will you be staying? You'll spend the night, of course. I insist" was so inappropriately cheerful, Savannah had to wonder if she'd slipped out of the room while no one was looking.

"The upstairs bedrooms haven't been aired out in awhile, but they'll be fine if I run up and open the windows now."

Brett didn't try to stop her. Either he'd planned for them to spend the night (without asking Savannah if she minded) or he was too angry with his father to say a word to anyone.

His mother left the room and an excruciating silence behind her. Savannah would gladly have taken any excuse to escape, but his father took that moment to notice her.

His once-over dismissed her, too. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded as if she'd broken into his home instead of coming in on invitation.

Savannah felt herself flush from head to toe.

"She's my lady," Brett answered in a respect-her-or-die tone.

Her embarrassment dueled with something else now. Pride? She couldn't distinguish from her discomfort enough to be sure.

They heard pounding overhead, then Brett crossed the room, putting a hand on Savannah's back to get her to come with him. She would have gone without the urging.

Given his obvious dislike of his father, why had he brought her here? Even his feelings for his mother couldn't have been much incentive. Especially after two decades away.

They found his mother upstairs, trying to pry open windows that surely hadn't been touched in years.

"Does that sorry SOB do anything around here?" Brett muttered under his breath.

"They really stick in this heat," his mother said, stepping back to let him take over.

"Old man hasn't changed at all."

"Neither have you." She led them out to another bedroom further down the hall.

Despite the fact that Savannah and Brett were more than "of age" to do anything they wanted, they'd be sleeping in separate bedrooms in his parents' house. Much as the idea displeased Savannah, she certainly wouldn't be the one to argue. Brett seemed too distracted to notice or care about it at the moment.

"I've changed, but if you mean the old man still pisses me off—you got that straight."

"Watch your language, young man."

The scolding—to a forty-six year old man!—lacked real bite. His mother slipped out of the room only to come back less than a minute later with a stack of bedding under her good arm.

For a moment, Savannah watched her insert pillows into cases, marveling at how efficiently she worked with the paralyzed limb. Shaking herself, she moved to help.

"Oh, thank you, dear," Mrs. Foxx said at the same time Brett murmured "And you still hear but don't listen."

*Typical middle-class family*, Savannah thought wryly. *Not!* Yup, this was going to be a lot of fun.

## Chapter 12

BY DINNERTIME, Savannah no longer wondered why Brett left home at sixteen.

While she could tolerate his mother on her own, listening to Brett's parents constantly bicker became humiliating and downright excruciating. His father didn't seem to have a single redeeming quality. He rode his wife like he had a whip and she was his miserable horse. She either withdrew or calmly answered him with a little dig always embedded somewhere in her words. He insulted Brett at every turn. Every question he asked was followed by sharp disapproval. "You earnin' any honest money?" "You own a business? Give it a couple more weeks, and it'll go belly up. You don't got the brains to succeed, boy." "You want a beer? Liz'beth, get us a beer." "You quit? What? D'ya drink that sissy wine like some backassed lawyer?"

When he'd barked a question at her, Savannah wanted to excuse herself instead of admit she was a lawyer. Not because she was afraid of the old monster, or embarrassed because she was a lawyer and he so obviously thought little of lawyers, but because she wanted to tell him off too much. She wanted to defend Brett because his mother absolutely wouldn't. She ignored her husband's treatment of their son and then inappropriately started "happy" conversations whenever the angry silence settled.

Savannah answered proudly, "I'm a backassed lawyer. And I love wine," to Mr. Foxx's question about what she did for a living.

Brett touched her leg under the table and gave her a "good going" wink despite his own mood.

His father lit yet another cigarette as if no one would mind trying to eat with a cloud of smoke over their head. He'd barely eaten anything himself, though he'd spent the forty-five minutes his wife took to prepare the meal complaining about how hungry he was.

Growing up here must have been hell. She'd been here maybe three hours. If Brett suggested leaving, she'd race him to the bike like a kid. She might even knock him down on the way.

"So what's your worthless slut of a sister up to?"

Brett stood, slamming his fork down and making Savannah jump. He put his face in his father's face.

"You ever call Darlene either of those words again, old man, and you'll be wearing your balls for earrings."

Brett walked out of the house, slamming the door hard enough to make the windows rattle.

*Thanks a lot, Savannah thought. Thanks for leaving me in here alone with these two lunatics.*

Brett's words to his father hadn't changed the old man's expression at all. He stared at Savannah with the same sour look.

"So, who's for apple pie?" Mrs. Foxx scurried out of the dining room and into the kitchen.

Savannah muttered "Excuse me" and followed Brett outside. He leaned against the motorcycle with one foot on the tailpipe. He'd found a cigarette somewhere. He smoked it like it was air and he couldn't breathe. Seeing her didn't relieve his seething anger.

"So, what *is* Darlene up to?" She could have just as easily asked why they were here, but she knew it wouldn't make him feel any better. Talking about his sister might.

She'd met Darlene a handful of times in the past and had liked her as much as she had Rori. She understood Brett felt there were times in his life when no one else in the world loved him, just Darlene. His love for her was apparently very protective too.

"You remember Jace Radcliffe? You met him once or twice."

Savannah nodded. She mostly remembered Darlene telling her Jace showed up on her doorstep every couple years ... and always left eventually. Darlene insisted it wasn't romantic between the two of them.

"They're married. They got a kid. A little girl. Stevie-Jade's—" he held his hand up "—about this high. Cutest thing you'll ever see. I'm crazy about her."

"That's great. I'm happy for them," Savannah said softly.

Talking about his sister helped. Or the cigarette did. She could see the tension ease in his expression. "I didn't know you liked kids. Rori said you hated them."

Brett shrugged. "I thought I did, too. For a long time. Then I figured it out after Stevie-Jade was born. *He's* the reason." He nodded toward the house.



"Who? Your father?"

But he wasn't listening. He seemed to re-live the past through his words. "We'd be in public. I was like ten years old, and that sorry SOB would hit one of my younger brothers, especially Jeff..."

His jaw tightened. "For years, every time I heard a kid cry in a restaurant, I'd get mad. I'd get so pissed, I'd have to get the hell outta there immediately. I thought it was because of the crying. But it's because I'd be remembering my brother crying and how he'd hit him—like it wouldn't make him cry worse—and I'd wanna tear his throat out. And she'd just sit there like she didn't notice."

He shook his head, dropping the cigarette and crushing it mercilessly under his boot. "I love Stevie-Jade. She's such a happy kid. I wonder how Darlene got such a happy kid cuz she was never happy. I was never happy. It never changes when I come back here. Within five minutes, I wanna rip the old man's fuckin' head off and shake her until she tells me why the hell she is the way she is."

Savannah had no idea what to say. She understood, even if she couldn't imagine living this way for longer than a day or two. She wanted to make Brett feel better, but she knew matters concerning family always affected a person forever and they weren't given to logic.

He stepped closer to her. "This can't be much fun for you," he said, pulling her into his arms.

She shrugged. "Worse for you."

His smile was angry, and then he kissed her. The taste of the cigarette on his tongue reminded her of the times they

used to share cigarettes, during their all-hours talks. That was as close to a kiss as she'd ever come with him.

His simple, damn-I-need-this kiss turned into something violent that surprised her. Almost as much as him pulling away did. "C'mere. I wanna show you something." He led her around the house to an old shed.

Admittedly, Savannah assumed his intentions ran along erotic lines until she saw the antique car inside the shed.

"1930 Hudson Phaeton," he told her. "Great Eight. This is the only thing my old man ever loved. It probably still runs."

He put the top down while Savannah watched, not seeing all that much *to* love. The car was covered in spider webs and dust that Brett pushed away as he let himself into the back door of the ancient thing.

"Climb aboard," he invited, as if she admired the antique anywhere near as much as a man would.

Savannah moved forward tentatively. "I'm not sure I want to sit in this thing."

"You don't have to."

Something in his voice made her look at him closely.

"I didn't mean climb aboard the car."

She couldn't help smiling. She hadn't misinterpreted this tour of the shed after all.

Brett took her hand when she stepped up on the running board. The inside of the car was relatively clean since the top had been up during its years of storage. He brought her over to his lap, facing him, and tucked her legs around his hips snugly.

Without a word, he pushed back her hair, then consumed her in a fierce kiss she had to respond to. She realized the kiss matched his inner fury with his father. Realized he needed somewhere soft to crash. Realized she wanted to be that place for him now.

"Everything's still out on the bike," he muttered between kisses.

His hands pulled up on her shirt, his mouth immediately moving to her bare skin, and she knew in another minute she wouldn't have the strength to resist him. "I'll go get—"

He held her firmly on his lap as if he wouldn't willingly allow her to go anywhere. His eyes were dark, dangerous. "Take a risk for once. Take a chance on me, dammit," he said between his teeth.

"I came with you, didn't I?" Her tone was soft, revealing her surprise at his ... what was it? Desperation? Breaking point of stop or go, no in-between?

Brett shook his head positively. "You didn't risk anything by coming." Despite his conviction, his tone remained gentle.

She started to protest, but then wondered if she could. If she *should*. She'd risked falling in love with him—but she'd fallen in love with him years ago. She'd risked losing her heart. Even there, she'd lost it to him a long time ago, whether he'd wanted it then or not.

He was right. She hadn't taken any risks, not like he had if this was more than an affair to him.

Her decision had nothing to do with if he deserved it. She was free to give and take here. He knew it just like she did. What he asked for was for her to give him something she

wouldn't give anyone else in the world. She *wanted* to give Brett more than she should. But something this life-changing ... She could have claimed that she refused to be that irresponsible.

When he didn't try to seduce her into agreeing, just sat waiting and watching her as if this would decide the future, she accepted there was no way she could refuse. She might never again have the chance to give this man everything.

"How many other girls have you had in this back seat?" she asked lightly, teasing.

He shrugged. "Enough to drive the old bastard crazy cuz he knew I did but could never catch me at it."

The words were facts, not bragging, yet she felt a little twinge of jealousy anyway. "Was it good?"

Pulling her closer, Brett laughed slightly. "I was a teenager. It was over in two seconds every time. How good could it be?"

"You were a teenager. It was probably great."

"If you're fishing for compliments, baby, you know you're the best I've ever had."

She didn't let herself question his sweet words. If for only this moment, *he* believed.

When Savannah leaned down, he lifted his hands to her face, deepening and gentling their kiss at once.

This had to be fast, she realized, or she'd re-think it. The fear of getting pregnant had been a major concern for her with Stephen and Phillip. She'd been extremely careful with birth control, never once losing herself enough to forget.

There'd been a few scares, enough for her to make excuses for a long time afterward.

Her lack of terror now, now that she knowingly took the risk, was something she convinced herself would last only temporarily.

"I've never made love in the back seat of a car. Show me how."

"Not even as a teenager?"

She shrugged. "I didn't lose my virginity until I graduated law school. I went through a long period of I-hate-men-*itis*, even if I was attracted to some of them."

"Then you got a lot to catch up on. And I'm just the man for the job."

Always aware of how the garage door could suddenly open, she helped Brett wiggle her out of her jeans.

"Relax," he said, seeming to read her mind. "They're pretty much house bound. They might be wondering where we are and what we're up to, but they're not interested enough to come looking."

He pressed his mouth to her collarbone, murmuring, "Why don't *you* show *me* how?"

When he led her hand to the front of his jeans, she felt how ready he was. "Hm, what did I do to deserve all this?"

"Perpetual state when I'm alone with you, lady."

"Only when we're alone?"

He laughed under his breath, a naughty thing that used to paralyze her with need back when he was out of her reach. It still made her feel needy, but now she could do anything she wanted with him.

When her fingers danced beneath the waistband of his jeans, he sucked in his breath involuntarily, then groaned as she freed him.

"Ah, babe, I can't take much of that. Not this time," he muttered between his teeth as she stroked him.

His hands delved under the thin fabric of her panties. He urged her hips forward, until he could feel her against him. They moved together, teasing and firing each other. Their mouths locked, hard, deep, fast. Just when neither of them could take much more torture, he yanked impatiently on her panties.

*There goes my last pair,* Savannah giggled to herself.

Her thoughts didn't turn to risks as he slid inside her, every naked inch of him. Instead, her thoughts fragmented—pleasure, satisfaction. Brett. *Love.*

The naked honesty between them brought tears to her eyes. This wasn't like all the other times. Coming together every time, especially now, she couldn't hide her feelings for him. Up until now, he'd allowed her to pretend everything she said was just the heat of passion talking. He allowed her to pretend she could be open with any lover during the act. She never had, not enough to involve her heart. Brett was the only man she gave that to.

Now he knew it as their eyes locked and held as they came together, marveling at the difference with nothing between them, nothing to protect them. For all of a few seconds, she found herself wondering if he could possibly feel the same for her. She hadn't allowed herself to analyze his feelings. Easier

to convince herself he'd want it to end when they went back, too. She'd be out of his system, like he'd be out of hers.

"God, I love you, Savvy." He drew her closer and whispered in her ear. He held her so tightly against him, Savannah couldn't hide from it. He *meant* for her to hear.

He'd said it before; she'd said it. People said a lot of things when they were drunk on sex.

"Forever," he added, and the tears stinging her eyes fell.

Damn him. She didn't want to pull away from him. Didn't want to check out so she could find a way to shift the blame away from herself. She didn't know if she could even control that instinct, she'd done it subconsciously so many times.

"Why?" she demanded, afraid to look at him and afraid to acknowledge within herself that she should have asked before she allowed this. Why would he want her to risk getting pregnant? Why would he break all the rules of their trip by deliberating saying words she couldn't bear?

"You know why. And you've known it from the beginning. Now it's up to you. Your call."

But was it? Could she forget the past, the pain, the need to protect herself above all?

Savannah didn't know.

\* \* \* \*

BRETT WOKE to find his mother in his bedroom, gathering clothes. He rolled over, Savvy rolled with him, then he realized he wasn't dreaming.

By the time he looked back, the door closed behind his mother.

His parents slept in the bedroom downstairs. When he climbed into Savvy's bed last night, he'd thought they'd never be caught. They both lay flat-out naked, without even a sheet to cover them since the room felt like an oven. Last night had been even hotter.

Things had been pretty strained between them after leaving the shed. He'd figured *This is it. She's as good as gone*, but when he'd sneaked in here she was waiting. They'd used the condoms he pressed into her hand, but the fact that she still gave him as much as before created some hope in him.

He glanced at her sleeping, curled up into his side.

*You belong to me now*, he thought. *You gave yourself, and I never let go of what's mine.*

His gaze traveled down her sun-kissed body to her smooth belly. *Why did you really let me have you, no barriers?* He couldn't imagine. Some people would call it irresponsible, but he fully intended to be in Savvy's life no matter what happened. Even if she tried to say she'd had enough.

Brett touched his finger to the gentle conclave of her belly button. She moaned, shifting automatically to give him access.

All the condoms were in the other bedroom with their spare clothes. No way he'd go out there buck naked with his mother wandering around where she shouldn't be.

He wanted to love Savannah now, even if it wasn't all the way.

Her legs opened with the slightest coaxing, and he lowered his mouth to her already responsive flesh. She moaned softly,



continually, rocked her hips wantonly up and down against his tongue. Only once did she look at him, showing him eyes soft with vulnerability and half-gone desire. Everything about her addicted him. No way back.

When he felt her body coiling against him, he held her in place, driving his tongue inside her. She wept above him and he knew she couldn't take much more. Taking that into account, his licks softened against her. Brett closed his eyes, breathing her in, immersing himself in her.

She reached for him, pleading with him to come to her. She wanted more and offered him the same.

"Later." He kissed her mouth, feeling her exhaustion there, even as her tongue wrangled against his. Without a doubt, he knew she'd accepted him again without protection if he urged her. She wouldn't say a word about it either. That part would bother him, make him feel like he took advantage of her. "Go back to sleep, baby."

She didn't need much more urging than that and his embrace. When he knew for sure she slept, he leaned down and whispered, "I love you, Savvy" in her ear. She moaned contentedly, smiling for an instant.

Brett waited just until his erection, already battered from last nights' workout and the greedy desire for more anyway, eased, then he put on his jeans without a shirt.

His mother sat down in the kitchen sipping coffee. The washing machine clunked away from the recessed corner of the room.

He wasn't about to bring up her breach of privacy earlier. Anybody who'd enter somebody else's bedroom deserved a

little shock. She was lucky she didn't get more than an eyeful of bare, entwined flesh.

Apparently she didn't want to bring it up either. "What can I make you for breakfast?" she asked while he poured himself coffee. He didn't want the taste of Savvy out of his mouth, but he was damn tired.

He shook his head. Still too early to think about food.

"Old man still asleep?"

Nodding, she confirmed Savannah's state, too, then dropped her bomb. "Are you planning to marry her?"

Brett all but choked on the hot coffee.

"Well, you love her. It's not as if I'm asking you something too personal. Any fool can see how you feel about her."

But it was too personal. He wasn't about to discuss a complex subject like his feelings for Savvy, hers for him, with his mother.

"What makes you think I love her?"

He saw the faucet, dripping like a hose with a hole, and walked over to it.

"You brought her here. Coming to see your mother has never been incentive enough for you before. You must love her if you brought her here to meet your parents."

"Doesn't the old man fix anything around here anymore?"

He'd fixed loose table legs, the oven, and the TV antenna last night. His old man had let the place go to hell over minor repairs he used to make on a daily basis.

Brett went out to the shed for tools, hoping his mother would quietly watch him work, but she repeated her question about marrying Savannah as soon as he got back.

"Yeah I love her. Yeah I wanna marry her. Satisfied?" he bit out.

She didn't say a word behind him, simply sighed contentedly and let him fix the faucet. After she put the clothes in the dryer, he adjusted the washer legs so the drum wouldn't spin out of control anymore.

"Why'd you marry the old man?" He realized he was pissed because his mother asked him something he couldn't even ask Savannah. Not if he wanted her to stick around for awhile or forever.

"Why does anybody get married?"

The noncommittal answer made his mood worse. "He didn't give you any reason to stick it out."

"Why would I want to leave?"

Oh shit! He could have laughed. Instead he let go of his anger. "I could give you a dozen reasons, at least! Why the hell do you always defend him? Why do you let him treat you like he does? Why'd you let him treat us like he did? You'd just check out and let it happen instead of defending us. You even let him tear Darlene apart. What if he'd done worse?"

His implication clearly shocked her, but he didn't let up. "You're right. There's no incentive coming here. I left cuz I couldn't stand his bullshit and your passiveness. He's the meanest motherf—"

Her hand flew out, striking him without sting. Just enough to cut off his fury.

"What have I told you about that language? You don't know anything about your father. A woman stands by her husband. That's enough."

This time Brett did laugh. A short, angry laugh that defied her conviction. "Love? You think you know what love is because "you stood by"? I learned how to love watching you two. And you know what? It's not love. It's bullshit. I got out before it destroyed me. Why would I wanna come back here? Why would Darlene?"

His sister would have to be kidnapped, bound hand and foot, to come back here. The first time he'd left, he vowed never to return, even if it meant never seeing Darlene or his brothers again. The one person his father didn't hit was his wife, but he didn't need to. His abuse in every other shape and form had been just as violent as physical abuse. Every time Brett hurt Rori on purpose, he'd seen his old man's reflection in the mirror. Was he any better than his old man? Without the drinking, he didn't feel the old anger, the need to hurt Rori any way he could as much, but did that make him a saint? Redeemable? He'd never been sure.

His mother got up and silently refilled her coffee cup. She'd checked out again. Brett could see it.

Why did he come here? Savvy sure had to be asking herself that. Whenever he came here, he felt consumed by blackness. The only way out was escape. It'd never change.

"He has cancer. He has for years. The doctor said he'd die soon, but he holds on somehow. I never wake up without wondering if he won't get up today."

Brett could see she was going to cry, and *he* wanted to check out immediately. Instead, he got up to pull her into a hard hug. He cared about her. Even if he couldn't stand being here, he cared. "I'm sorry, ma."

"What would I do without him? He's my husband. He takes care of me. What will I do without him?"

Dammit, there were no easy answers here. Getting within a hundred feet of his old man lit his fuse. Nothing would change that. So what did he do about his mother? He couldn't stand being here, but he'd have to come anyway. Get Darlene to come too, if he could.

"You're just like him, Brett. That's why you can't say a civil word to each other."

He shook his head. Since Rori walked out on him, he'd been asking himself if he was any better than his old man. Now the answer rose in him instinctively. "Maybe I used to be like him, but I'm not anymore. I'd never treat Savvy the way he treats you." *The way I treated Rori.*

"You're like him. You'll always be. He came to the hospital after my stroke. He didn't want me or anyone else to know he did, but I know he was there. And I know you were there."

He didn't like hearing that someone thought he was like his old man. He didn't like it at all; he wouldn't accept it either, inside of himself.

His reason for going to the hospital had been simple—to make sure she wasn't dying, but if she did, he'd see her one last time. He hadn't gone for any other reason.

"So you're going to ask her to marry you soon?" she asked as if they hadn't been talking about a sensitive subject.

Backing away, Brett murmured, "Yeah. Sooner or later." And he'd be wearing track shoes when he did.

## Chapter 13

RATHER THAN admit his mother caught them in the buff when Savvy asked if he'd brought their clothes down to be washed, Brett muttered an affirmative sound. Then he turned to his mother. "What's Shane up to?"

Of his three younger brothers, Shane was the only one speaking to him. Jeff and Ty had taken off as soon as Ty graduated. When Brett came back here that one time, the time he met Rori, they hadn't forgiven him for walking out with the intention of never looking back. While Jeff and Ty ignored him angrily, Shane had given him a piece of his mind.

It was another part of the guilt Brett didn't want to feel. Before he left, Shane did everything short of worship him. He probably would have left a lot sooner without Shane's misplaced admiration. Seeing his baby brother all but grown up at fourteen and glowering at him for as long as it took to explode hadn't been easy on Brett. "You left us! You were supposed to protect us. How could you just walk out when we needed you? You didn't plan to ever come back, did you?"

Momentarily, Brett had felt everything Shane intended him to feel—guilt, regret, shame. Then he shook his head. "I was supposed to stay and protect you? If I'd laid one hand on him, I would've killed him and you know it. Is that what you wanted?"

Shane had believed he was capable of it; he'd seen Brett's anger before.

"No. I got out. If those two passed on any brains to you, kid, you'll do the same. The second you can, run like hell and don't look back. Not for nobody. Not for nothing."

Still, Shane's jaw had been tight. "You should have took us with you."

Brett had burst out laughing. "What the hell was I supposed to do with four kids? I can't even support myself most days."

The reason he'd gone back that time was because Darlene asked him to. She'd made it sound like a matter of life and death. When he found out she'd just wanted him to come home, nothing had changed, he'd been furious ... until he realized she'd lost her virginity to Jace Radcliffe. She'd looked for love in whatever form she could get it, too.

Things had actually gone Brett's way after he left that time. His career took off, and he made more money than he ever dreamed. He sent thousands of dollars home for his brothers and Darlene, but most of the time it came back with notes from Ty like "We don't want your charity" or "You can't buy us now that you shit on us." They didn't realize he wasn't trying to ease his own conscience. He'd tried to get them out of there the only way he could. Darlene had told him, when she moved to New York City, that Ty left home, taking only Jeff with him because Shane and Darlene had refused to go, and none of them knew where their two brothers were. It satisfied both Brett and Darlene that their brothers were free.

"Shane is married and Laura just had their second son. Shane works at a fishing lure factory in Buffalo."

Brett got up to get Savvy a cup of coffee.

"They'll be here within the hour," his mother announced as if the news would either make him go or stay.

"How'd he even know I was here?"

When he set the coffee in front of Savvy, she murmured, "Thank you."

"I called him last night. He asks about you every time they're here. He wanted me to tell him if you ever came."

Shane had spoken to him that last time, but nothing alleviated his anger. Did he want to give Brett another earful? He guessed he was man enough to take it again.

"Would you mind if I used your shower?" Savvy asked.

The old man still haunted the downstairs bathroom.

"The shower upstairs hasn't worked in years," his mother offered apologetically.

Brett growled in his throat, getting up and grabbing tools. "Give me five minutes."

The whole house was coming down around their ears and still the old man refused to part with any money to fix it up. Had he even made a will? Who would take care of his mother when the old man went? Had the bastard planned for that?

As far as Brett knew, his mother hadn't held a job in her whole life, and since the stroke, she couldn't get one anyway.

Just another thing Brett didn't want to feel responsible for, but he couldn't shake the sense of obligation. He couldn't expect Shane to take on all of it indefinitely. God knew Brett hadn't wanted the burden when he was too young to be saddled with it.

Shane and his family didn't show up for over an hour and a half. Long enough for showers all around, breakfast, and



plenty of the old man's grumbling. The grump didn't let up even after Shane and his family arrived. He insulted everyone and everything. He went on and on about Shane's oldest son's not-too-pleasant smelling diaper even after it'd been changed. Finally, Brett's mother shut him up with a single statement: "You don't exactly come out of the bathroom in the morning smelling like sandalwood yourself, mister."

Brett wondered what Savvy thought of his family. She quietly watched him play with his nephews most of the morning and part of the afternoon, laughing occasionally when the boys did. She talked to his brother and his wife.

Things were drawing to a close and he knew it.

Brett followed her into the kitchen after a late lunch, expecting her to ignore him. Instead, she settled back against him when he put his arms around her. "Was I just having an incredible dream this morning or was I really that selfish?" she said softly, her cheek turned toward his mouth. "I'm sorry if I was."

Brett spun her toward him slowly. "Never apologize for a toss-up, baby."

"A toss-up?"

"Yeah—who got the most outta that, you or me."

She smiled; he kissed her and felt her sigh against him.

When his brother walked in the room, she murmured, "Excuse me", her cheeks flushed, before leaving them alone.

"So you're not mad anymore, huh?" Brett didn't bother with a roundabout conversation. His brother had been friendly and interested in his life all day.

Shane shrugged. "I stopped after you left last time. Ty wanted me and Darlene to hate you. But I realized you weren't to blame for *him*. For wanting to get away from him. Besides, you come back once every twenty years or so. They left too, and they've never come back."

Looking not much older than the last time, Shane shook his dark head. "Laura's family lives in New York City. Maybe when we go there for holidays, we can drop by. See you and Savannah and Darlene. I've never even met my niece."

Brett nodded. "Sure. But I live alone. Savvy's got her own place." *Got her own life and future—one that might not include me for much longer.*

"Ma said you two are pretty hot for each other," Shane teased.

Brett grinned, realizing after a second that his mother *had* mentioned walking in on them this morning—to Shane. "Did she? Guess she'd know."

Shane laughed, then stood there by the sink, getting more sober by the second. He finally looked at Brett. "I'm glad you came back. I wish you'd come back more often or let us know where you are. Family can drive you insane, but ... sometimes it's all you got and you won't have it forever. Better not to have regrets while you've got a choice, you know?"

Their parents wouldn't change. Brett wouldn't change enough to care about his old man. But Shane was right. If the old bastard went, Brett didn't want any regrets on his part.

He went back out to announce he and Savvy had to get going.

"He's got cancer," she said while he strapped the saddlebags to his motorcycle and eased the pictures Shane's wife had taken of Brett with the kids, with his brother, of him and Savvy inside.

"How'd you know?"

She shrugged casually, yet swallowed hard before saying, "I can see it. Smell it. My mother died of cancer almost a year ago."

Not knowing what to say, Brett said nothing. Just handed her her helmet.

"Why did we come here?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her. No, she really didn't want to know, he could tell, but she couldn't keep from asking. He'd give her the truth because it was all he had for her.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yeah. You got me thinking about family, Savvy. You got me thinking about a lot of things, especially when you were holding that little guy in there."

She paled. A minute later, she flushed. How he knew, he couldn't say, but he realized she'd been thinking about the same things. About him. About them.

They drove straight through, back to New York City, where he dropped her off at her apartment. Ignoring her insistence that he didn't need to walk her up, as sure as he was, apparently, that he had nothing to lose at that point, he went with her to her door and kissed her. She closed her eyes tightly.

"I love you, Savvy."

She didn't want to hear it. She did everything short of scream her defiance with her shuttered expression.

He walked away without another word.

\* \* \* \*

HER HOME no longer felt familiar.

After Brett left, Savannah let herself into a place that suddenly could have been a museum for all the warmth it held for her. Yes, she'd been part of the silent decision to return to their respective abodes, to their separate lives. But, God, everything felt hollow when she was without Brett.

For a full five minutes, she floundered over what to do with herself. Then she went through the motions of showering, putting on a robe and getting a glass of wine.

Regardless of how much Brett terrified her with his words and his feelings, his honesty couldn't have rocked her more than her own.

If she'd ever had a biological clock, she'd told herself it broke long ago. Seeing Brett with his brother's children, seeing the older boy's happiness at his new playmate, seeing Brett act like ... God, like a *father* had made her chest impossibly tight. And then, when he'd held the baby and the tiny creature curled up to him like a trusting kitten....

Savannah shook her head. How cliché to think she wanted to have Brett Foxx's baby.

Brett was *not* a man who would stick around long. He was a restless spirit, listening to the call of the wind. Even if he loved her, someday he'd leave just like her father had.

Letting him go now would be easiest. She could even put half the blame on him. He'd left without asking her for a future. She could just ignore the implications of the way he'd handed her his heart. She could. But could she ignore her own heart?

The doorbell rang, first startling her, then accelerating her heartbeat. Maybe she wouldn't have to be alone after all.

She flew to the door, her heart in her throat, so excited it took her longer than it should have to realize her visitor wasn't Brett.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Clearly disappointing you," Phillip said, a rare joke, coming in when she walked away leaving the door open. He'd come from some ritzy party, based on the tuxedo he wore.

Why didn't she have any friends? The only people she'd ever been able to talk to were Brett and her mother. Her mother was dead. She couldn't talk to Brett about Brett. She couldn't talk to Phillip either, but she was just desperate enough to entertain the thought.

"How did you know I was back?" she asked, picking up her wine glass from the kitchen counter.

"I have telepathy where you're concerned."

Savannah laughed in disbelief. He'd come here every night. That was how he knew she was back.

"Do you want a glass of wine?"

He nodded and, while he took a seat at the counter, she got it. His jealousy act was gone. If he'd really been stinging with jealousy, wouldn't he be even more possessive now that

she'd become Brett's lover for however short a time? Maybe Phillip had realized he was over her during her absence.

"So how'd it go?" he asked without an ounce of embarrassment at his presumptuousness.

She wanted ... *needed* to talk to someone. Phillip was the last one she should, but she found herself admitting, "It was too much and not enough. It was perfect and I don't know how..." *I'll go on alone now.*

Leaning on the counter across from him, she looked down at her wine glass. "You were right, and I guess I just never wanted to face it. I've been hung up on Brett Foxx for years. I think since the first time I met him. I don't know what to do about that."

Phillip could have been a mirror she talked to instead of a human being. She didn't pay any attention to him until he shot to his feet.

"You little fool! Don't you realize that's what these kind of men want? They get an ego rush out of making women fall for them. Then they discard them like old socks."

Savannah stared at Phillip, who'd been so calm, even a little playful, a minute ago. Now his face and neck flushed red and his shirt collar seemed to be strangling him.

"He doesn't love you. And you're just infatuated with the sex. It'll wear off, I assure you. Everybody needs one purely sexual relationship in their life. But you let them go as easily as they come because they can't last."

Savannah stared at him in shock. Had he heard a word she'd said?

"Now, I'll move back in here next weekend and we can start—" he started, very calm and precise.

"Are you crazy? I just told you I'm in love with Brett. He loves me. And you think when I say I don't know what to do about it that I want *you* back?"

No logic accompanied his thinking. No more than in hers when she got involved with him because she couldn't be with Brett.

"Look," she said, her voice softer. "I know this can't be pleasant. I shouldn't have said anything to you tonight. But I really think deep down you realize we weren't meant to be. Don't you think it's just hard for you to admit to yourself I was everything you thought you wanted in a wife, yet you didn't love me?"

For all of a moment in time, Savannah thought she'd gotten through to him. Then he shook his head. "No. You're the one with unrealistic ideas. Do you think he'll marry you? Where is he if he's so in love with you? Did he even commit himself to an "I'll call you later"? You're disillusioning yourself, Savannah. Don't expect me to be around to pick you up when you realize it."

He started out of the apartment, pausing only long enough to add, "You're not the person I thought you were."

*I never was the person you thought I was*, she thought instantly, but didn't get a chance to say.

When he was gone, Savannah felt as though she'd missed something. Had Phillip finally faced the truth? Had he realized he didn't love her as much as the *idea* of her?

Forever Man  
*by Karen Wiesner*

Whatever victory she'd achieved in convincing Phillip and in allowing Brett to leave here felt hollow. It led her no closer to Brett, to moving away from her past, her fears, to trusting love not to betray her eventually.



## Chapter 14

"HEY, WHERE have you been?" Darlene greeted him upon opening the door of her apartment. "I tried calling you like six times yesterday. Doobs was asking about you too."

Other than Mikey, Brett had avoided his old friends for the last couple months. Being around Doobs, a guy who went through women like one was company, three was a *ménage à trois*, especially got Brett in trouble. Easier to stay away.

Their mother apparently hadn't gotten to Darlene yet. She called Darlene every weekend to lay on the guilt for not visiting. Brett dropping by with Savvy would give her enough to work with for many, many weeks if Darlene answered her calls.

He shrugged, moving inside. "Jace here?"

"Well, hello to you, too. Did you come just to see him?"

Surprised by her tone, he glanced back at her as she closed the door. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. Stevie-Jade was really cranky this morning, and I *finally* got her to nap. And I'm always on edge when I'm pregnant."

Feeling like a cartoon cat outdone by a mouse, Brett's jaw dropped.

"Sorry. I didn't plan to tell you this way either."

He probably wouldn't have noticed on his own—he was too distracted—but there was definitely a slight swell to her stomach again.

"Did you two plan this?" he asked, not sure how to react because she wasn't giving him any clues to her opinion on it. She seemed tired and cranky herself.

"Well, we talked about it. I'm not sure we would've done it so soon, but we both want another. It just kind of happened. One of those too-gone-to-be-responsible times."

He couldn't help thinking of Savvy and their one too-gone time. His intention had been to get her to give him what she wouldn't give anyone else. He hadn't been thinking about getting her pregnant. If she ended up pregnant, he'd do whatever he needed to, for Savvy and their baby.

Damn, he liked the sound of that a little too much. Too much for an up-in-the-air future.

"Do you want some lemonade?" Darlene called from the kitchen. By the time he entered, she'd already poured him his own.

"I went to Mom and Dad's."

Might as well have said he'd gone to the moon for Darlene's stunned reaction. She almost dropped the glass pitcher. She did set it down, hard, and looked at him, just as hard. "Why?"

Brett took a glass and leaned with it against the sink. He shrugged. "The old man's got cancer, but he's not letting go easily. Still pinching the old pennies, too. House looked like it could come down at any minute."

"Did you go away with Savannah?"

She just stood staring at him tenaciously, unwilling to allow him another shrug for an answer.

"How'd you figure that out?"

"Deduction, Watson. I called the garage. Mikey said you were on vacation. Then I called Savannah's law firm and they told me the same about her. So what happened? And don't tell me you brought her to Mom and Dad's for the whole trip because that would drive her away for sure."

If Brett had driven her away, it had nothing to do with his parents. He'd just said the words she'd only tolerate in the heat of passion. That way, they required no commitment or conviction of the heart from her.

"Well?" Darlene demanded, pushier than ever.

"Look, I don't have any answers, okay? I don't know what happened or what's gonna happen. So just let it go, okay? Let it work itself out."

He'd told himself to do that last night. If Savvy wanted him, she knew where to find him. Hopefully her need would outweigh her fear like last time.

Now he thought about it as he said the words to Darlene. Could he stand by and let it work itself out? Savvy belonged to him. He was her man. That possessiveness wouldn't allow him to passively wait for an undefined amount of time. More this style, he'd love her six ways to Sunday. She couldn't fight the inevitable any more. Brett Foxx was nothing if not tenacious.

Jace showed up and agreed to do Brett a favor without bothering to ask what. Brett drove the two of them to his garage. He had to return Savvy's car to her and then he needed a ride back.

"So Darlene's pregnant again, huh?"

"Yeah. What do ya know? My boys can swim."

Brett grinned, shaking his head. "You seemed awful eager to get outta there."

"And I'll pay for it too, when I get back. She sure does get moody when she's pregnant. She'll either throw a brick at my head or cry her eyes out."

"You gonna stick it out?" Brett demanded, not liking the sound of this complaining. Jace was just as much of a vagabond as he used to be. But now he had responsibilities. Brett would hold him to them.

Jace looked surprised and then repentant. "Hey, I didn't mean I was ready to bail. I just needed to get out for an hour. I couldn't stay away from her for long if I wanted to anyway."

Hearing what he needed to, Brett relaxed. He was in the same boat with Savvy. Even if he wanted to say, "To hell with this", he couldn't. They'd created too much in only a few days.

He drove Savvy's car down to Midtown while Jace followed in his. On the way, Brett bought a single white rose from a vendor.

After he asked Savvy's secretary to deliver it to her without saying anything about the sender, Brett glanced inside the door of her office and caught her brushing the petals over her upturned lips. Just like she had the last time he bought her a white rose.

"Did he say anything or leave a card, Daniel?" She looked out the window, down at the street.

Her secretary glanced at him, unsure of how to proceed. Brett moved into the room.

She looked back at that moment, completely off-guard at his appearance. That was how he wanted it, too. If she'd made any decisions about their future, he didn't want them revealed here. He wanted to be able to use any and all options available to him.

Her secretary took his leave, closing the door after him, and Savvy darted behind her desk as if she needed a place to hide.

Brett dropped her car keys on her desk before walking around it toward her. "Your car's downstairs. I got a great parking spot."

"Is that—?" she started.

Her reaction to his nearness resembled something between panic and anticipation.

"Is that why I'm here?" He shook his head, snaking his arms around her. She wasn't prepared enough to push him away, if she told herself she should.

"I wanted to make sure you know you got yourself a forever man. And there's not much you can do to talk me out of it, now."

He could see she stood at some crossroads between the past and the future. Yet she made no attempt to push him away when he kissed her. With last night's loneliness still weighing on him, he couldn't make it a simple remember kiss. He gave her everything he had and everything he was. Then he turned away because he couldn't take the possibility of seeing indecision on her face.

Ol' Phil stood in the doorway. Brett doubted Savvy had seen him, he disappeared so fast. The guy didn't look jealous

anymore. He looked like someone let the air out of his tires. Instead of feeling sympathy, Brett thought *Get your own lady, man. Savvy's mine. She always was.*

Now to convince her of it....

\* \* \* \*

SAVANNAH limped up the steps into her apartment building and got onto the elevator, where she removed her shoes. She'd put in a long day on purpose, and in one day she'd caught up on seven days of work.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was 7:30. Why hadn't she grabbed take-out instead of forcing herself to forage at home? She hadn't been shopping in weeks.

As she got out of the elevator, the scent of garlic, tomato sauce and fresh baked bread assailed her grumbling stomach.

She glanced longingly at the door of the other occupant on her floor. She only knew the man by name. He'd indulge in an Italian feast while she'd have to scrounge processed cheese and crackers.

Yet the heavenly aroma got stronger as she neared her apartment. She punched the code into the security system, wary now because of her suspicions. No one had the access code, so who could be in her apartment—cooking? She'd changed it after Phillip moved out. Surely....

As soon as she stepped in, she knew Brett somehow had gotten into her apartment. His leather jacket lay in a heap on the Queen Anne chair in the entry hall.

Brett was here. Brett was cooking.

Savannah couldn't help smiling. Everything was so crazy. Sometime between last night and Brett's unexpected visit to her office, she'd decided not to see him for at least a week. Maybe two if she could manage it. In a week or so, she'd be cooled somewhat to him and could think logically, she'd told herself.

Having him come to see her never occurred to her. She'd assumed the next contact would be a phone call. The ball was in her court, after all. But Brett broke the rules. She should have assumed *that*. He was nothing like the other men she'd been involved with. And that explained why she had a hard time listening to her head instead of her heart.

After setting her things on the matching Queen Anne desk, she moved into her apartment.

If she'd been asked, she would have said Brett Foxx definitely would not look comfortable cooking in anyone's kitchen. So okay, he didn't look like he belonged in hers either, but that made the fact that he *was* in her kitchen cooking even more touching.

With a lump in her throat, Savannah stood watching him.

*Why do I have to end this?*

A timer went off, and he glanced first at his watch then back to her. He didn't seem at all startled to find her home.

"Right on time."

She tried not to smile, watching him put on her black and white checked oven mitts. "How can I be right on time? You couldn't know when I'd get home. *I didn't even know.*"

Yet everything pointed to him knowing. The candles on the beautifully set dining table had been lit only moments ago.

The dish of lasagna he pulled from the oven looked done to perfection, the garlic bread he'd been slicing still had fragrant steam rising from it. She bet the wine in her glass was chilled to just the right temperature too.

She moved over to him as if beckoned by too-tantalized hunger.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. She couldn't get her voice to cooperate with scolding.

She'd tried to convince herself Brett would back off after his cocky, "You're mine, I'm not going away" routine this afternoon. Not for one minute could she convince herself she didn't want him to keep coming back.

He put an arm around her, pulling her close for a slow kiss of greeting that almost made her cry. "I'm cooking for my lady. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"But how did you know I'd work late tonight?"

He shook his head with a small, half-grin. "No big mystery. I just know you."

Turning away, he removed one of the oven mitts. "Hope you like lasagna."

Savannah glanced at his creation. He'd personalized the dish with little, filled-in hearts of black olive slices.

"I love it," she said softly, trying to talk around the tears clouding up in her throat. What could she do with this romantic, silly, wonderful man who made her feel powerless, happy, dizzy with longing and ... God, with love.

"Woah. Hey."



She suddenly realized her emotions weren't all that made her dizzy. Brett had his arm around her and he led her to the table. "When's the last time you had anything to eat?"

By all rights, he should have scolded her. She'd been dumb for putting it off so long. She'd had a carton of yogurt for lunch and a bag of peanuts in her office at 4:30. During their stay at the hotel in Minnesota, she'd had a low-blood-sugar attack and he'd worriedly watched her eat her way back to coherence. He hadn't said a word about it; just seemed glad she was okay when it was over.

The roiling sickness in her head and stomach didn't allow her to answer his question. But she heard him say, "Drink this, Savvy" and cooperated when he lifted a glass to her mouth. Once she'd had a few sips, she realized it was grape juice from his glass, not wine, which would only make it worse until she got something substantial in her stomach.

Brett left her when she could hold the glass herself, then brought the bread to the table. "Go ahead and start."

"Aren't you going to lecture me?" she asked weakly, taking a slice. "Phillip always did."

"Why would I lecture you?"

"For not eating when I know I should, even though sometimes it comes on without warning anyway." Like it had at the hotel. She bit into the bread, almost too hungry to notice how delicious it was.

"You're sick. I don't lecture sick people. I don't like to lecture at all. I'm not like the other guys you've been with. You're just gonna have to accept that."

He'd been right about that all along. She'd expected him to be like the others. They went away. Even Phillip did. He'd ignored her today in the same, embarrassed way he'd made his final vow to her last night. Apparently she'd been right, and he realized now he didn't love her. Maybe Brett would realize the same in the future, and then where would she be?

"Did you make everything yourself?" she asked, able to eat more slowly since the dizziness had passed.

"Everything except the ice cream for dessert."

*Why did you do all this?* she thought to ask, but she already knew his answer. He wasn't ready to let go. She wasn't ready to admit she felt the same.

For some reason, the thought made her instinctively put her hand to her abdomen. After going over the time factors last night, she'd faced she could very well be pregnant. They'd made unprotected love at exactly the *right* time in her cycle for her to be ovulating.

The prospect kept her awake most of the night, torn between major terror and a tiny flame of hope. But she wouldn't tell Brett any of it. Not now. She'd probably get her period soon anyway. No sense having them both worry.

While they ate the most delicious meal she'd ever tasted, he asked her about work and talked about his shop. Conversation remained light, thankfully, in contrast to the meal, and cleaning up the kitchen together after followed suit. It wasn't until she put the last dish away that she confronted the ways the night could end.

Afraid to face him, she made a show of rearranging a few things on the counter. His arms came around her from the

back, so natural she didn't know how to tell him he couldn't spend the night, couldn't make love to her.

"Walk me to the door," he said softly in her ear.

Her surprise made her cooperate as he turned her, took her hand and led her to the front door. He wasn't even going to *try* to seduce her?

Before her disappointment could overwhelm her, he brought her into his arms and kissed her. Her entire body melted against him, making sure one of them made the attempt at seduction.

It worked only too well. Need softened her will into pure compliance. The same need made him hard and completely ready for her. He groaned and she felt it vibrate through all her empty places.

Yet he pulled away and opened the door with a "See ya, sweetheart."

Whatever game he played jumbled all her thoughts. Her first instinct was "I'm not playing. He *wants* me to ask him to stay. He *wants* me to admit I need him and want him and—God no, I can't do it again!—love him."

"Don't forget your jacket," she murmured, retrieving it and holding it out to him.

He touched it but pushed it against her gently instead of taking it. Then he dropped an even gentler kiss on her mouth. "I wanna know you're sleeping in it tonight."

Whatever instinct made her insist to herself she couldn't play his game almost did a one-eighty now. The word "Stay" was a mere second from crossing her lips. The only thing that

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held her back was answering her earlier question: *Why do I have to end this?*

She had to end it because *he* would end it sooner or later. The last time he'd walked away from her with a casual message to the firm's switchboard operator. That had shattered her. Now ... now it would kill her. The only way to save herself was to end it now, on her own terms.

## Chapter 15

"I'M TAKING off early," Brett shouted to Mikey over the hard rock music pounding through the garage.

Mikey surprised him by shooting out from under a car on the creeper. "The lawyer?"

"Yeah." Brett grinned.

Not that Savvy expected him. He planned to do the opposite of what she'd expect, like yesterday and last night.

Last night ... that part of the whole thing hadn't been easy. He wouldn't have needed verbal permission. Savvy wanted him in her bed just as much as he'd wanted to crawl in there on top of her and be near her again. But she refused to give him more than the physical. He wanted all of it, or none.

Being noble wasn't a first instinct for him, especially when he'd woke up with a kind of exhausted, "erect" hangover caused from a need for Savvy that refused to go away. After seven days, he was used to reaching for her and having her whenever he wanted her.

"Well, get laid for me, would ya?" Mike said before shoving off and back under the car.

Brett laughed wryly. Chances were, he wouldn't be so noble tonight, if he could even talk her into seeing him again.

Upstairs, he showered and called his sister to confirm, then he headed for Savvy's office. Her secretary was away from his desk, so Brett didn't bother waiting for a pass. He went right into her office.

"I'm right on time, but as usual you're not ready to go. That's okay though. We've got a little time."

She'd been pulling a book off one of the shelves, but dropped it when he barged in the door.

He couldn't tell, from her annoyed expression, whether or not she'd expected him. For some reason, he sensed she had. That was why she acted so on-edge and overly irritated.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, scooping up the book. "I can't go anywhere. I've got—"

"—plans. We're having dinner with my sister. You said you liked Darlene, didn't you?"

Pulling out big guns pretty early, but he hoped she wouldn't put up much fight.

"Of course I like her, but—"

"If we hurry, you can meet Stevie-Jade. She goes to bed around seven."

He grabbed her pumps off the floor near her desk, right where he knew they'd be, and held them out to her.

Savvy stared at him for a long second, shook her head, then strode over to take her shoes from him. "When are we supposed to be there?"

"6, 6:30."

After easing her feet into the bright red, four-inch pumps that matched the scrap of sexy lace beneath the black pinstripe suit she wore, she got her purse.

"Then we've got just enough time to stop by the bakery to get dessert."

Knowing he shouldn't, yet unable to stop himself, he put a hand on her shoulder, turning her for a kiss. A kiss six

different ways more than a mere greeting. He wanted her so bad, the only thing that held him back were the bruises she was sure to get from that hard, mahogany desk of hers.

"Yesterday..." she said in her car, on the way to the bakery. "How did you get in my apartment?"

He'd wondered why she didn't demand to know that last night. Brett laughed. "I saw you punch the code in a couple times, remember? Besides, that thing you call security would be a play toy to any thief worth his salt."

She glanced at him from the road. "But the front door is security access. Who let you in?"

Shrugging, he told her, "Somebody was coming out and held the door for me since I was carrying all those heavy grocery bags."

He didn't bother telling her successful thieves understood the benefit of pretending to be at home anywhere they happened to be. That was a skill not too many people possessed. Her building was safe enough.

"Thank you," she said suddenly, keeping her gaze steadfastly ahead of her. "For making me dinner last night and ... taking care of me."

Brett realized how hard it was for her to acknowledge something that both embarrassed and touched her.

He ran the back of his hand over her forearm. "All part and parcel to the whole forever man gig, ma'am."

"Is that what it was?" She smiled, obviously glad he'd taken a lighter approach.

He didn't *like* the way she expected him to avoid admitting his feelings for her. "I love you, Savvy. I'll always be around for you, whether you think you need me or not."

She yanked the car across a lane toward the bakery. Horns blared in the wake as she double parked.

"I'll be right back." She got out.

"Lady, now I know why you never wanted a car," Brett muttered under his breath.

She hadn't put up much fuss about coming with him, but obviously she'd set some ground rules again, expecting him to fall in line.

*Not sorry at all to disappoint you, baby.*

It took her over twenty minutes to come out with a box. She murmured something about the line, then shot off down the street, not bothering to look at him when she confirmed Darlene's address.

A part of him marveled at her memory. She'd only met Darlene a couple times, and she'd never been the one driving when they visited. So why would she remember the way? What else did she remember?

Maybe he didn't want to know.

Stevie-Jade was one unhappy little babe when they arrived. She only cheered up slightly to see her uncle. Darlene looked like she was at the end of her rope again as she told them the kiddo napped less than an hour all day.

"She had dinner earlier, but I knew you'd want to see her, even if she is Miss Cranky."

Stevie-Jade's otherwise sweet little face, chubby cheeks and bright eyes were marked with an expression of



frustration. She rubbed her eyes almost continually with a tiny, vicious fist.

Brett picked her up and kissed her. "Looks like it's time for bed, marshmallow." He ran a comforting hand over her thick, dark hair, which made her lift both arms and swat herself there angrily.

"We can do this another time if this isn't—"

Darlene shook her head positively at Savvy's suggestion, taking her daughter. "No way. I need to *not* be a parent, even if it's only for a couple hours. Stay please. I'll be back soon." Even as she said it, Darlene kissed and soothed Stevie-Jade in a way no one else could.

Jace got them drinks, and they made small talk until about ten minutes later, when they heard some hard crying from the bedroom.

"She usually does that. Her final surrender," Jace offered by way of explanation.

Sure enough, all fell silent in another minute, then Darlene came out. She didn't have to say "Thank God!" It was written all over her face.

"Everyone has something to drink?" she confirmed.

Jace jumped up like he'd been caught dozing. "Sit. I'll get you something."

Darlene sank into a chair, giving Savvy an apologetic smile. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm not handling this second pregnancy so well. Everything I feel is magnified."

When Jace handed her a glass of juice, she turned away from them to wrap her arms around her husband, saying something softly to him.

Brett glanced at Savvy. All the color seemed to have drained from her face. For a minute, he was about to ask her if she was sick again like last night. But then she put a hand against her abdomen, and he conceded that this was a whole different animal.

Was she pregnant? Was she worried she might be?

Savvy recovered from her lapse quickly enough, but Brett couldn't shake the questions. The idea of having a kid with Savvy appealed to him a lot. No, he didn't want their relationship to be at some crossroads if she was pregnant, but his base instincts ran about as primitive as they came.

\* \* \* \*

BRETT INSISTED he could get his car from her office later, then she drove him home. When she parked in front of the garage, he shifted closer to her.

"It was nice to see them again," she said.

Apparently spending time there made it impossible for her to withdraw from him completely. In fact, when he kissed her, she gave as good as she got.

"Maybe I should go," she said after the first, hot kiss.

He eased even closer. "Maybe you should stay."

One minute she tried to say goodbye, the next they were up in his apartment over the garage tearing each other's clothes off in animalistic need. He had no memory whatsoever of unlocking the door, ascending the stairs, closing the door to his apartment behind them.

The image of her drawing him down with her to the bed brought him back to reality, only seconds before she took him

inside her body with a whisper he barely heard: "I missed you."

Driving himself all the way home, hearing her sob his name after her confession made him a little insane. *Never leave. Never leave me alone, baby.*

He roped his arms under hers, staring down at her. The fact that she allowed him to see her cry surprised him. He wondered if she expected him to believe it was passion, nothing more.

"Missin' me makes you cry?" he asked, and she surprised him again when she nodded.

Her legs rose, surrounding his waist, and she was so open to him, he let go of the tension of the last couple nights and just lost himself in her.

The blinding rush was spent within minutes, ending with the words she didn't want to hear but she didn't even try to stop this time. Brett rolled over, and she turned into his arms as if he had any intention of letting her go.

For a long time, the only sound was their harsh breathing. He knew if he didn't say something soon, she'd insist she had to go.

"You said you'd never throw a shoe in the heat of passion," he managed.

"What?" she sounded startled and lifted her head to look down at him.

He pointed to her red pump, with its heel caught in the open cassette player of his stereo.

Uncontrollable laughter burst from her throat, and she buried her face in his chest to stifle it.

It felt good to hear her laugh again. But he couldn't hold back needing to know for even a second longer. "Are you pregnant, Savvy?"

If he'd startled her before, her reaction this time tripled it. "What? No!" Then she slid away from him, sitting up and hugging the sheet to her front. "I don't know."

The uncertainty in her voice undid him. "It wasn't safe that time, was it?"

She glanced back at him. "No. Not at all."

At least she gave him that much truth. Considering how easy it would have been for her to claim she wasn't fertile that time, he should have let it drop.

"So what do you plan to do if you are?"

She swallowed hard in the silence that followed, then she turned to him. Her eyes stared into his steadily. When he touched her arm, she turned away. "Well, what do you want me to say? What do you want from me? We made a deal. No regrets. No plans. No promises."

He shook his head. "We're way past that, babe, and you know it. Just like you know what I want from you. I want everything you got. And not just this. Not just you gracing my bed every once in awhile. I want you in my life, dammit. Permanent. Forever."

She swallowed hard again, then got up abruptly and went into the bathroom.

Without moving, he waited, fully expecting her to emerge, dress, and walk out. No words. But Savvy surprised him yet again. When she came out, she turned out the light and got back into bed, back into his arms.

No words.

\* \* \* \*

"FOOL," SAVANNAH cursed herself, circling Brett's bedroom looking for her clothes. One item at a time. "Coward."

She'd had every intention of leaving here last night, but she'd come out of the bathroom, looked at Brett and remembered sleeping alone in her big bed the night before. Even with his jacket, she'd been lonely without him. She slept like a baby in his arms, as opposed to waking every hour, laying in the darkness or going into the living room and turning on the TV to block out the emptiness.

Brett was down in the garage now: she could hear music and tools clanging. At 6 a.m., she doubted any of his employees had reported for work yet. She wouldn't be caught by them and she wouldn't be late for work herself since she'd arranged months ago to take today off.

*God, you can't keep doing this,* she scolded herself. Every day Brett wore her down more. She found herself giving in with hardly a fight each time he appeared. If she could fight herself ... well, the war would be over.

After finding her purse under the jeans Brett wore yesterday, she gathered what little courage she could and went down to face him.

Savannah almost turned around and sneaked out. Anything to avoid confronting him. He looked so content. So peaceful. She didn't want to take that from him, unintentionally or otherwise.

Before she could sneak away, he saw her. She couldn't look at him without facing her own feelings for him.

"You can sleep in one day, you know," he said, coming to kiss her. She couldn't respond. Her emotions this morning hung like a spider web too fragile to touch.

"I..." She took a deep breath. "I have to go."

His expression altered. Teasing to enlightenment. Peaceful to angry. His jaw tightened visibly, then he nodded. "Yeah. So go."

Rage darkened and narrowed his eyes even more.

Her vulnerability couldn't stand the thought of him angry at her. Not today. "What?" Only after did she realize her soft-spoken inquiry would infuriate him more.

"*What?* What do you mean 'What?' Is this what it's gonna be? We fuck, you bail?"

Even she was aware she had a lot of nerve being hurt by his synopsis. What else *could* he believe?

"Fine. Go. Do whatever the hell you want." He turned his back on her. "I'll be here."

When his last, softer words penetrated, she choked on a sob. She didn't want it to be like this. Last night, after she came out of the bathroom and got back into bed, he'd made love to her as if she was the most valuable thing he'd ever touched. Now he'd turned away from her like he couldn't stand the sight of her.

Tears squeezed out of her eyes. "You bailed on me, too."

He glanced back, and she wanted to hide. She couldn't move. Not when he seemed not to know anything about what

she said ... yet at the same time sensed there *was* something. "When did I leave you?"

"You called ... You called the *switchboard* and said..." Savannah swallowed, but the memory raged too painful to control. "You left a message with the firm switchboard operator: 'I don't need your services anymore.'"

Her voice broke on another sob. He swore under his breath, catching her when she instinctively tried to flee.

"That was different," he claimed gently, but she heard the guilt in his voice. "How was I supposed to know you wanted anything else from me?"

She shook her head. "We were friends! We were ... And you just ... I never would have seen you again if I hadn't come here by chance a couple weeks ago!"

"It's not the same." He turned his mouth toward her ear, holding her so tight she could hardly breathe. "I'd never do that now. You know I wouldn't."

*That's what he said*, Savvy thought and out loud the bitterness matched. "Sure you wouldn't."

He let her go with an under-the-breath growl. "Dammit, I'm not your daddy. I'm not gonna walk out on you. If he could do that, he never loved you or your mom. *I* love you. I'm never leaving you."

He moved around her until he faced her. Then he pulled her into his arms. "I love you, Savvy. I'm sorry I hurt you back then. I didn't know you felt anything for me, friendship or otherwise. Why would I know that? I was a fucked-up lawbreaker who couldn't give you a damn thing."

How could he have known back then? She wouldn't have admitted it to *herself* back then—and it had nothing to do with his law troubles, what he could or couldn't have given her. She didn't allow herself to realize her own feelings until she'd gotten his message and everything fell apart. Besides, he'd been with Rori.

She nodded. "I have to go."

Impatience filled his expression like a black cloud.

"I'm going to my mother's grave site," she said softly.

"She died exactly a year ago today."

He swallowed. "Oh. Do you want me to...? I can—"

She shook her head. "I need to be alone."

His guilt bothered her. He had nothing to be sorry for. Yet he apologized.

"You couldn't have known."

She drove to the cemetery, remembering her mother's words. "*You love this man.*" Her mother had never met Brett, although she'd heard his name often enough. After hearing Brett's farewell message, Savannah had gone home and cried her eyes out like she'd lost a lover instead of a client, apparently all Brett had considered himself. Phillip had been away on business, but a part of Savannah already decided it was over with him when her mother showed up at her door. Like an idiot, she'd admitted why she was home during work hours, why she was so obviously miserable.

And she'd promptly blown up at her mother's suggestion that any of her actions had to do with love for Brett. The first time her mother asked if Brett called her after that, Savannah had cut her off at the knees.



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"But you were right, Mom," she said out loud, kneeling on the grass next to the gray marble stone. "I loved him then and I love him now. Tell me how you could love a man who could destroy you so easily? How can I trust him? How can I trust *me*?"

No answers solved the questions in her heart.

## Chapter 16

*MAN, YOU trying to win her or lose her? Couldn't tell in all that macho finesse.*

With a snort of disgust, Brett threw a crescent wrench into the toolbox. He'd treated Savannah like she had a terminal illness and he was mad she'd gotten back late from a doctor's appointment.

The garage door opened with the sound of a cowbell and Mikey walked in, startling Brett.

"Hey, boss."

Brett muttered a greeting. He should have taken his own advice and slept in today. Savvy would've sneaked out; he wouldn't have had to deal with knowing he probably wouldn't see her again. Instead, he would've gone on with his I-won't-go-quietly routine. Now ... Well, what else could he do? He had to back down while she fought her own demons.

The bell went off again. He heard Mikey say in that wounded, we-could-have-had-something voice, "Hi, Darlene."

Mikey had a crush on just about everything with breasts. He'd played the martyr at Darlene's wedding too, even if nobody took him seriously.

"What are you doing out so early?" Brett asked Darlene when she appeared with Stevie-Jade in her arms. The little munchkin squealed happily and tried to squirm out of her mom's hold.

"Guess who woke up at 4:30 this morning."

She let Stevie-Jade down, but kept an eagle eye on her.

"Anyway, I wanted to say I'm sorry for last night. Savannah must have thought—"

Brett shook his head, moving an open container of oil out of Stevie-Jade's reach. "We had a good time. Don't worry about it."

"Really? ... No, no, sweetie. That's not safe." Darlene straightened again. "So, are you—?"

In mid-sentence, she took off, getting her daughter only seconds before she could start a chain reaction by yanking on a rag, which had carburetor parts on it. "Can we go in your office?"

When he closed the door behind them, dreading the upcoming conversation, Darlene said, "So are you and Savannah serious? You look really ... forever together, you know?"

"What do you want me to say?" He concentrated on child-proofing what he could in his cramped and crammed office.

"You say that every time. Is it not working out or something?"

Instead of trying to avoid her, he gave his sister what he could. Otherwise he'd be here all day. He knew she wouldn't leave until she had her answers. "I was right, okay? She's love shy. Her old man walked out on her and her mom when she was just a kid. She thinks I'm gonna do the same."

"Why would you do that?"

Stevie-Jade slammed her fingers joyfully on the computer keyboard. "Is it okay if she does that?" Darlene asked.

Brett shrugged. "It's off."

He poured himself a cup of the burnt, mud-brew coffee he'd made at five o'clock. Tasted as bad as his own guilt when Savvy cried and told him, down to the minute details, how much she remembered about their past. He'd only remembered his farewell words to the switchboard operator where she worked when Savvy said them. And then they didn't sound at all like he'd intended when he said them. He'd actually spent a couple hours trying to get that farewell just right, never once dreaming he might hurt her with anything he said.

Why would he believe anything else except that she'd be glad to be rid of him back then? In his wildest dreams, he wouldn't have imagined a woman as sophisticated, as fun, as downright incredible as Savvy O'Brien could have feelings for *him*. He'd been too damn mean and fucked up to see it anyway.

She'd cried. Dammit, she'd cried like ... like she loved him and he betrayed her mercilessly.

"I've never been all that settled. Why should she believe I'd stick around now?" he muttered without looking at his sister. He didn't want confirmation he didn't have what it took to heal Savvy.

"Does she know you love her?"

"Does it make any difference? I can't bring her daddy back. And I can't convince her I'm any different than he was."

He'd given all he could give. Done everything he could. Said everything that needed to be said.

The rest came down to her mercy and her willingness to take a risk on forever with him.

\* \* \* \*

THE CD changer clicked as it skipped to the next disk. At the sound, Savannah woke with a start.

She found herself on her living room carpet, wearing only Brett's jacket. Her head throbbed. Next to her sat a bottle of vodka.

God, when did she buy that? She never drank anything stronger than beer or wine. When she picked it up, she saw the seal hadn't been broken. She hadn't drunk it.

Rolling onto her side, she curled her legs up close to her belly. She couldn't remember much after leaving the cemetery. Anger, desperation, too many decisions pounding at her ... But the thought she might be pregnant kept her from drowning her sorrows in alcohol. Whatever problems she had wouldn't end in harming an innocent baby if she was pregnant.

The telephone rang, and she reached for it automatically. If she thought about it, she probably wouldn't have answered for fear, for hope it would be Brett.

"It's me. It's Phillip. Don't hang up."

Savannah rubbed her sore, too-dry eyes with her free hand. "I'm not hanging up, unless you give me a reason to. What?"

The way he'd avoided her at the office lately convinced her he'd realized how right she was. Love had nothing to do with their previous arrangement. And it was an arrangement they'd had. Not a relationship.

"I didn't think I could face you when I said this..." His tone sounded hesitant. "I guess I need closure."

*Or the last word*, Savannah added to herself.

"You were right. I never loved you." Right on the heels of his declaration, he rushed to say, "I'm sorry. That sounded insensitive."

She could have said, "You can't hurt me. I don't care about you that much", but, despite that truth, she had no desire to hurt him. "It's okay. Go on," she encouraged, raising her knees and wrapping an arm around them.

"I stayed because you ... you're so aggressive about getting what you want. It rubbed off on me. I actually thought I could be a United States Senator while I was with you." He laughed sheepishly. "I thought 'If I had her focus—'"

Savannah could almost see him shaking his head.

"And then there was the sex."

He didn't say it casually, licentiously or even boldly. He said it as if he felt the same embarrassment she did—in spades—at the confession.

"I've never been with a woman as uninhibited as you are in the bedroom. I guess I got addicted to it."

A feeling of shame and horror washed over her until she fought the need to hang up on him, quit the law firm—anything to avoid his implication.

"I knew you were hot for Brett Foxx. I always knew it ... and I could always count on getting a whole lot out of it once he and his girlfriend finally left."

Savannah's flush heated her the same way sitting too close to a fire would. The images of how she'd often woke

Phillip once Brett and Rori left for the night or when they got back from a get-together with them, how she'd acted out all her fantasies of Brett on Phillip....

Oh God. And he'd known. All along, he'd known and accepted it. Even *enjoyed* it!

"When I heard you'd seen him again ... well, now that we're not together, I guess I got jealous that you wouldn't be coming to me anymore to be 'the middle man', so to speak."

It was sick—the vision his words brought, and Savannah wished he'd found closure alone instead of bringing her into it.

"You're so strong, Savannah. I guess I never understood how you could love somebody and ... *ignore* it, hoping the feelings would go away. I hope he loves you more than you love him. You need somebody stronger than you. Otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life alone just because you wouldn't take what you wanted when you had it in your hands."

Her jaw tightened, not in anger, but pain. The pain of reality.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine, Phillip. I hope you're happy. I mean that sincerely."

"You, too. I'll see you at work."

Grateful he wasn't pursuing a 'let's be friends' course, she hung up after a mumbled farewell.

There had to be some answer, she thought, alone again with her problems. Something that could allow her to keep her pride *and* to keep Brett. But what?

The answer revealed itself to her aching head as if she'd spent the night racking her brain for it. Maybe she had. Find her father. Confront him. Demand to know why.

Savannah sat up, telling herself she didn't even know where to start. But some part of her did. She got up and went to her storage room. After her mother's funeral, she'd thrown what little personal possessions her mother owned in boxes and brought them to her apartment. She'd never gone through them. Somehow that seemed like an invasion of privacy to her then, and her mother valued her privacy above all else.

Now Savannah didn't care. She looked at everything, she read cards and letters from her mother's old friends. When her husband left her, her mother had withdrawn from everyone except Savannah. Savannah never bothered to acquaint herself with her mother's friends anyway. She didn't even know their names. None of the correspondence gave a clue to anything. Her mother didn't even have an address book.

The instant Savannah uncovered the scrapbook, she knew it'd never been about an invasion of her mother's privacy. She hadn't wanted to find this because she knew there would be a scrapbook. Photos of her parents, their wedding, Savannah's birth....

She wiped the tears stinging her already over-cried eyes angrily. Why were her parents so happy? What right did her father have to look happy when he'd destroyed both of them? How could he have walked out if he was happy? And how could her mother hold on to everything like ... the good outweighed the bad?



*You were my daddy. I trusted you more than anyone else in the world. How can I ever trust anyone again, especially if I love them?*

She was about to close the book without looking through the rest of the pages when a scrap of newspaper fell out.

*"Matthew O'Brien, age 28, died..."* she read.

After re-reading it three times, Savannah still couldn't understand it. Or she simply couldn't accept it.

*"Matthew O'Brien, age 28, died of a heart attack. He is survived by his wife, Margery, 28, and daughter Savannah, 5."*

Not until her gaze traveled to the top of the paper did the truth hit her. The date matched the exact day and year her father had supposedly walked out.

Died? He'd *died* and her mother let her believe he'd walked out? Why? Oh God, *why?*

Savannah stood, driven by grief, anger and determination. It was time, past time, to find out everything her mother couldn't or, more accurately *wouldn't* tell her.

## Chapter 17

BRETT CLENCHED his teeth to keep from slamming the phone down. 3:30 in the morning and she wasn't home.

*Or she's ignoring you.*

He'd tried calling her for four days. He'd gone to her office and her apartment. She'd disappeared, and Brett didn't know whether to be mad or worried. Her secretary made every effort to appear like he was in control of the situation, but when he'd slipped, asking Brett if he'd seen Savannah, it'd been pretty obvious she'd bailed even at work.

Setting the phone on the window sill, he looked down at the picture of him and Savvy at his parents' house. Even in still-life, she looked wary of committing, dammit. He dropped the picture on his night stand and picked up the slip of panties. She'd either left them on purpose last time or didn't find them tangled with his clothes. He let the silk glide through his fingers. *Torture any way you look at it.*

He was about to lift the silk to his nose when a blare of horn shot him out of the chair with a curse.

Below, a car parked on the garage approach. Savvy got out, looking up at his windows. She was dressed in jeans, a top and her little sophisticated leather jacket.

Since when did she dress so casually? The only time she got comfortable like this was in her apartment. And on the road with him. Had she gone on her own road trip?

Brett unlocked the window, yanked up on it hard to get it to open, then looked down.

"Did I wake you?" she asked almost shyly, after blasting her horn mercilessly.

"You know what time it is, baby?" *You know I'd just as soon strangle you as grab you and never let go?*

Four days, and suddenly she appeared, dammit! Like a genie out of a bottle.

"I'm sorry. I can—"

She made this soft sound almost like a sob. He somehow heard it over the sound of cars and music a block over.

"Hold on."

He swore under his breath as he headed downstairs turning on lights. In the short time it took him to get to the garage door, he got a chance to wonder why she was here. Was it the end this time, and she wanted to make it crystal clear? Or had she battled her demons and now she was ready for him? More likely her purpose lie somewhere in-between. Something that could never be enough for him.

When he opened the door, she drove her car in, which clearly meant she planned to stay, even if only temporarily.

Moving around to face her as she got out of the car, he waited for her to speak. She didn't. She just stood there slumped against the car door, her arms wrapped around herself. She looked like a little girl waiting to be punished.

For some reason, it made him mad. It reminded him of Rori and her hide and seek games—*I don't wanna be here, but there's nowhere else for me to go.* He didn't want to see that in Savvy's eyes.

"You gonna tell me where the hell you were? Why the hell you're here now? Or you just looking for another throwdown, baby?"

He wasn't thinking. He reacted. Reacted to what was inside him, that pissed-off little knot of tension that'd been building since she left to go to her mother's grave site. He didn't react to what was right in front of him. The fact that she didn't look well. She was pale and didn't seem up to a fight at all.

It wasn't until she actually swayed on her feet that reality got through to him. If he'd moved even a second later, he wouldn't have caught her.

The second his arms grabbed her, she started crying hard enough to drown him in guilt and fear.

When he laid her on his bed upstairs, she turned toward him, begging hoarsely, "No. Don't let me go."

Brett lay next to her, holding her as tight as she needed, but the questions screamed through his head. How could he comfort her? He felt as helpless as she must.

"Brett, she lied ... She didn't even *lie*. She just let me believe something that wasn't true. How could she?"

"Who?" He realized his face was wet and tried to tell himself they were her tears. He hadn't cried since he was a little kid. He hadn't even cried when Rori left him for good. Why now?

"It's so stupid. It's so ridiculous, it's even funny." She shook her head, not making any sense to him, especially when she started laughing hysterically. Even that ended on sobs of hyperventilation. Before he could ask her what

happened, she said, "He didn't walk out on us. He *died*. He died of a heart attack."

"Your old man," he guessed. Brett sat up slightly to look at her.

"I found his obituary. It said he died that day, the day I thought he left us. And I had to know everything. I tried to find out from the hospital, and they told me who the attending physician was, but he'd relocated to Dallas. So I went there. He remembered. He remembered because of my mother. She kept saying, "I can never tell her." Tell *me*. And this doctor kept saying she had to. She thought she'd killed him and she was embarrassed..."

Brett shook his head. "You're not making any sense. What happened? What wouldn't she tell you?"

Savvy sat up, calmer but still as pale. "He had a heart attack and died while they were having sex."

She laughed again, borderline hysterical again, and Brett gave into a chuckle himself at the irony.

He stopped as soon as he saw her instinctive, shocked amusement give way to angry pain.

"How could she keep it from me? Even when I was an adult? I hated him; I wasted my life because of him. And it was *her* fault, for letting me believe a lie just because she was mortified at the circumstances. God, she didn't have to tell me he died during sex. She could have just said he died ... ! I feel so stupid. My whole life was based on a lie."

She'd said it, and Brett couldn't ignore it even in the face of her grief. "Is that what I am to you? A waste?"

Savvy looked at him, really looked at *him*, for the first time since she got here tonight.

Shaking her head, she murmured, "I never stopped loving him, even when I wanted to hate him. And I felt too much for you ... even when I shouldn't and I couldn't and I didn't want to. I wasted so much time. It's not even fair to ask you to give me another chance."

She leaned forward, touching her cheek to his with her eyes closed. "I never meant to hurt you, Brett."

She'd hurt him, but mostly she'd hurt herself.

"Ask me anyway."

She opened her eyes, put a hand to his face and kissed him. "It's not fair."

"Nothing's fair, baby. Your old man dying that young. Your mom not telling you. The way I left that message at your office. We hurt each other. It's life. It's love. And there's nothing I wouldn't do to have you. So tell me you want this to happen as much as I do."

She smiled slightly. "Will you have me, Brett?"

He had to laugh, then he kissed her, long and sweet. "Try and stop me, lady."

\* \* \* \*

"I DIDN'T KNOW there was another way up here. I wouldn't have honked from down there if I'd known."

On the other side of the room, Brett closed a door to a fire escape and stairwell. It led down to the back of the garage. He came over to the bed with a bag of delivered Chinese. "No reason you should know," he said on a shrug.

Her stomach practically leapt at the wonderful aroma of the food when he passed her a box with chopsticks. She'd eaten on the flight back from Texas, forced herself to really, but all the stress, the lack of sleep had taken its toll.

As hungry as she'd been once she landed, she never once considered going anywhere other than to Brett.

"Tell me the truth," he said as she dug right in, feeling like a steam shovel that couldn't get the food in fast enough. "Are you pregnant, Savvy?"

The question stalled her. "What would you do if I were? Would you be okay with it?"

He looked at her, telling her she was dense like he thought she deserved. If he thought the answers were obvious, he was dead wrong. One thing to think about having a family, quite another to suddenly find out you were going to have one.

"Would you be happy?" she repeated, more firmly.

He set down the box he held. "I've spent my life making damn certain no one I'm with gets pregnant. But I want you to be. Yeah. Hell yeah, I'd be happy. So, are you?"

She took another bite of the Szechwan pork. "I don't know. I mean, I haven't seen a doctor or used a pregnancy test, but ... I think I might be. I'm late, my body feels ... different, I'm hungry and emotional all the time." She shrugged, trying to hide how much she'd accepted being pregnant and how much she wanted it to be true, scary or not. "But it could just be stress, thinking I wanted you but couldn't have you." Stress. That was an understatement.

Brett seemed to see right through her. He leaned forward, raising her chin with a knuckle. "What are you afraid of?"

The tears burned again. Again, she was helpless to stop them. "I'm scared the warrior will hear the road calling again someday. And then where will I ... where will we be?" She pressed a hand to her belly.

Anger crossed his face first, but he must have realized her fears weren't completely unfounded. Her fear that Brett would walk out wasn't wholly grounded in how she'd believed her father walked out. Brett *had* left her before. He had the spirit of a vagabond. He couldn't deny that.

"What do you want me to do, Savvy? How can I prove I'm not going anywhere ... if I go, you're coming with me? Tell me what you want and I'll do it."

She didn't know what to say. Looking at him, all she wanted was to grab hold and never let him go. She wanted more than words or promises.

"Marry me."

His proposal shocked her as much as the aggression behind the words. She simply couldn't imagine Brett Foxx uttering such a commitment.

"I love you, forever. I wanna marry you, have a baby with you. I wanna grow old with you, lady. No more torture, okay?"

What she planned to say, even she didn't know, but she opened her mouth and a sob broke free.

"Is that a yes? Can I take that as a yes?"



Savannah pressed a hand to her mouth, but she ended up laughing anyway. He looked like such a little boy. Sweet and hopeful.

Taking his hand, she pressed it to her abdomen. "You can take that as a yes. Daddy."

Brett leaned forward, easing her top up, and then kissed her stomach. He whispered, "Hey there, kiddo."

*I'll never let you go*, she thought. *Not this time. Not ever again.*

"What would you think of doing it in Syracuse?"

"Getting married there?"

He nodded against her, and she stroked his head.

"Because you want your family there?"

He laughed slightly, lifting his head. "Not everybody, but yeah. It'll take a lotta talking to get Darlene there. She might not go either, not even for me."

Savannah put her hand to his cheek and urged him to look at her. "Why would *you* want to go there again?" she asked softly. "Your parents make you miserable."

"I know. I hate my old man. He'll never change, she'll never change. They piss me off like nobody else..." He shook his head. "But I've changed. Maybe nobody else'll ever believe that ... but *I* know. I'm not my old man. Not anymore."

He didn't need to convince her. She'd never met two men more opposite than Brett and his grouch of a father.

"And they're gonna die soon. I wanna make sure I don't have any regrets."

Forever Man  
*by Karen Wiesner*

She kissed him, this wise man, and he cradled her face with both hands. "Don't be mad at your mom forever, Savvy. She did a pretty lousy, stupid-ass thing. But don't waste your time or anger. Just let it go."

Savannah had a hard time understanding her mother's actions, but she did understand the motives behind them. She understood the personality. Wrong or right, her mother let her own fear and guilt keep her from admitting the truth to Savannah. Better to just let it go at that. Her parents were already lost to her.

She nodded, and Brett kissed her again, soft enough to make her cry. The tears fell happily this time.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he asked, looking into her eyes.

She swallowed hard, then offered him a wobbly smile. "Just that I love you to the ends of the earth, forever man."

Forever Man  
*by Karen Wiesner*

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