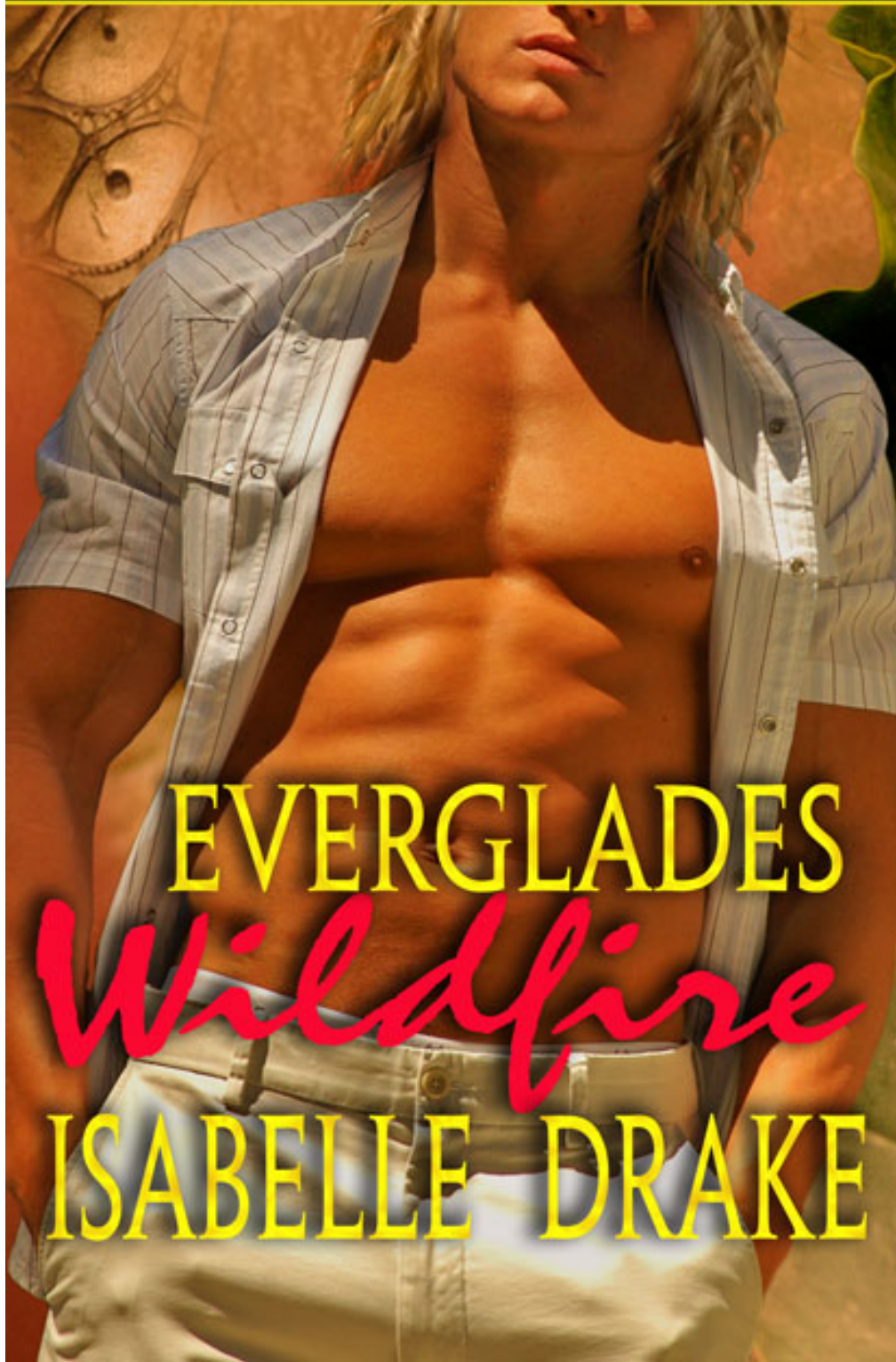


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



EVERGLADES

Wildfire

ISABELLE DRAKE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Everglades Wildfire

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EVERGLADES WILDFIRE

Isabelle Drake

Dedication

For WL, the ultimate Everglades tour guide.

Chapter One

It only took Amber Hill one glance to realize how completely wrong she'd been. She stared at Rick Belleair's powerful backside as he went through the simple motions of tossing feed bags and fought against the swell of emotion threatening to weaken her resolve and good sense.

Bright, southern Florida sunshine glinted off his blond ponytail, a mass of locks like some windblown pirate's hanging halfway down his bare back. He looked and moved like the rogue she remembered, but he wasn't some fantasy man she'd conjured up. His bare feet were planted firmly on the ground, not on the deck of an eighteenth-century schooner.

There was no denying the truth—he was exactly as she remembered. Each inch of him had been imprinted into her memory, from the wild curls barely contained by the piece of string binding them, to the smooth muscled arches of his size fourteen feet. Amber swallowed hard.

Being a sensible girl from the Midwest, Amber figured that once she got close to him the spell would be broken. She'd been so very, very wrong. She was a long way from over him.

But she needed him. The documents in her glove box had to be signed. By him. The sooner she got him to cooperate, the faster she could be on her way back home, to the full life that was waiting for her there.

Before she could finish her approach, Rick turned. The gaze of his icy blue eyes flickered over her body, not lingering as hers had, but skimming. His face reflected none of the emotions that churned through her.

The air between them, already hot and humid from the threatening afternoon thunderstorm, thickened. Amber's throat tightened. What exactly had she planned on saying?

With the swiftness of a man born and raised in the dangerous Everglades, Rick moved to her, wrapping his fingers around her neck. The rough calluses of his palms chafed her skin as his mouth took hers.

Amber sucked in a sudden breath, the scent of hard work and dirt assailing her. How familiar it was.

How it turned her on.

The sweet caress of Rick's lips moving across hers. Completely in control, gentle but demanding. She grabbed him and pulled him closer. She parted her lips and was rewarded by the strong flick of his tongue over her teeth.

Amber arched into the embrace of the man she'd fantasized about for months and then tried so desperately to forget. The solid plane of his wide chest pressed into hers. Her body melded completely, wonderfully to his. From his lips, delivering a demanding kiss, to the unmistakable hard press of his arousal, she ached for every taut inch.

Rick lifted his mouth from hers to whisper into her ear. "Good girl Amber back for a fuck?"

The husky whisper sent shivers down her back. Yes, she did want that. She looked up. A smear of dirt ran across his cheek. Sweat trickled over his sun-darkened skin.

When her gaze met his, she saw the unmistakable desire that matched hers.

With his thick fingers still curling around her neck, he glanced at the ground and then asked, "Do you want to do it here? Or take the time to go up to the house?"

This was not the way things were supposed to go.

Her hesitation was long enough for him to shove her away. She stumbled back, barely catching her balance. He grabbed a grubby T-shirt from a nearby fence post,

yanked it over his head and turned to the bags he'd been moving. The long curls of his hair swayed as he twisted from side to side. Sweat glistened on his forearms.

Amber shifted on her feet.

"Rick..."

He continued to ignore her.

Everything had seemed so simple when she'd thought it through back home. All she had to do was get him to sign the contract allowing her to use the hatchling growth rate research they'd gathered the previous summer and leave. Once home, she'd finish her graduate degree and marry Christopher. That was her plan anyway.

The past months of lonely, late night fantasies of Rick meant nothing. All she'd accomplished during those hours of longing was reliving a summer that never should've happened. She was letting the memories of great sex block the security she was going to have as Christopher's wife.

With Rick's signature, their only tie would be cut and she could get on with her life. He'd just be someone from her past.

"I came to..."

He turned. At his full height, he towered almost a foot over her and weighed nearly a hundred pounds more. The strength in his arms and legs radiated from him, circling her. Heavy muscles stretched, filled out each inch of denim and cotton covering him.

Even as he loomed over her, staring at her with dark contempt, she wanted him and hated herself for it.

He rested his hands on his hips and leaned down. "What do you want, Amber?"

Her fingers fluttered around the wisps of her hair shifting in the slight breeze. She needed a way to deny her feelings for him. "I came...to ask...to tell..."

"What?"

"I'm..." she started, but the words faltered and she looked away.

Why couldn't he be the one for her?

But he wasn't. She had to believe that Christopher would be the man to love her. The one who'd give her the things she'd longed for her whole life—stability, a family, a home of her own. All she had to do was get the papers signed and forget Rick.

To push him away, keep him from touching her again, she said, "I came to tell you I'm getting married."

After the words were out, she waited, hoping...praying...that the electric charge sparking between them would vanish. Why did he have such a hold on her? Why couldn't she wish it away?

Rick unloaded the last of the bags from the bed of his rusted-out pick-up, wiped his palms over his thighs and then folded his arms across his chest.

"Come over here, Amber."

He spoke softly, but the insistence of the demand was loud and clear. He was a man who gave orders and people obeyed or suffered the consequences. Her first step was unconscious, but her will to oppose him took over.

When he saw her pause, he ordered again, "Come to me."

After two more steps, she stood at an arm's length from the man she'd once thought of as her lover.

His gaze darted from her to the ground at his feet. She obeyed the silent command, moved closer. With only inches between them, his breath whispered across her face when he leaned down to speak. "Kiss me again."

No, anything but that.

That kiss a minute ago had been a mistake she was not going to repeat. There was a chance she wouldn't be able to stop at a kiss. Not when she knew what Rick was capable of doing to her body.

Overhead, a storm cloud blocked out the sun. A rumble rolled through the air. As though he controlled even the sky above, he didn't blink at the threat from the heavens.

“Do it, Amber. I’m sure your man won’t mind. After all, you’ll save the best for him, won’t you?”

She heard the scorn in his voice and knew she had to hide the truth from him, from herself. She could handle a kiss. Rising on tiptoe, Amber reached for him.

Her last glimpse of his eyes, just before her own fluttered shut, was enough to send her heart racing. When his lips brushed across hers with the lightness of the morning sun, she instinctively pressed harder.

Even with his hands tucked under his arms, the hold he had on her was potent. A hold she’d been trying, unsuccessfully, to shake ever since he’d let her walk out of his life at the end of last summer.

Yet now she greedily demanded more from him and he quickly complied. Hungrily she accepted his tongue when he thrust it into her mouth. Within seconds he had her panting, wanting him so badly she throbbed with need.

Rick broke off the kiss abruptly. “You’re not getting married.”

The cruelty of his teasing burned through her, mixing painfully with the desire he’d ignited. The temptation to shove him away in rejection, the way he’d pushed her a minute ago, battled with the need to pull him down and kiss him until he ached for more the way she did.

Either action would have severe consequences.

The first of the heavy, summer rain splattered onto the ground. The fat drops fell softly, soaking the back of Amber’s shirt. Soon rivulets ran down her face and she blinked against the moisture that settled in her lashes.

Rick tilted his head back, looking upward, letting the water fall onto his face. “We may as well finish this somewhere else.”

His control made her mad. “There isn’t anything to finish.”

Without waiting for her to agree, he grabbed her hand, pulled her under an overhang. The rain pinged on the metal roof, drowning out any possibility of talking, so she stood by his side, watching the rain pour down around them.

* * * * *

Tiny streams of water rolled across Amber's skin then disappeared down the low neckline of her T-shirt. Each curve defined by the damp material was just as Rick remembered. As he traced the outline of her breasts with his gaze, his palms burned with the need to touch her. Her nipples would pucker. Soon he'd have her begging, then moaning.

Right, he mocked himself, like she'll be moaning for her new husband.

He let go of her hand, jerked his gaze away from the tantalizing sight below him. All those months ago when she'd left him he'd known he couldn't have her, but to hear her say that she'd soon belong to another hurt more than he could've thought possible.

He wiped the sweet taste of her off his lips. He shouldn't have kissed her that second time but after the first one he'd had to be sure. Even though she'd given herself to another man she really wanted him. She did then, did now and always would.

At least he had that.

The rain let up as quickly as it had started.

All signs of the kiss were gone from her face. He could bring the fiery flush back if he wanted to. He touched her rounded chin, but as much as he wanted to, he didn't take her mouth.

"I remember the summer storms," she said softly.

"You remember a lot more than that."

Her green eyes widened before she looked away, back to the water drizzling around them. "That's not why I came."

"Yeah, right, you came to tell me you're getting married." He dropped his hand. "Why did you think I'd care?"

She turned away, said over her shoulder, "I don't know."

Unable to keep his hands off her, he grabbed her waist, yanked her to him. How the combination of her hard, narrow hipbones and the soft swell of her bottom wreaked havoc on his hardening cock. The sudden flow of blood throbbed painfully but he didn't let go.

Instead he pushed harder. To let her feel the effect she had on him. To let her remember, as he did, the way things had been between them and could be now.

She squirmed against him. "Rick, don't...please."

"I know you like it." He kissed her soft neck.

With a quick jerk, she pulled away to face him. "That's all it ever was with you. Sex. It may surprise you to know, some men care about more than that. Some men offer commitment and want to have families."

Rick's guts twisted. Her new man had happily-ever-after to offer. What did he have? What would he ever have to offer a good woman like Amber Hill?

Nothing.

That didn't stop him from wanting. The demons that tormented him in his darkest hours knew he wanted.

Careful to keep his expression unreadable, he stepped back and leaned on one of the posts. Out in the yard, puddles that would soon disappear glimmered faintly in the streaks of sunshine. She had a reason for coming to him and he intended to know what it was.

"Answer my question. Why did you bother to come all the way down here?"

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her cut-off shorts, stared at her sandals.

"Tell me, Amber. I'll get the truth out of you one way or another."

That made her look up, her gaze fixed on him, and he knew he was right. She had an agenda.

He'd never seen this side of her. Last year she'd been wanton and free, sexual and hot. Now she looked determined. He liked the change but knew the other woman simmered beneath the surface.

Much to his disappointment, some of the spark went out of her eyes. "I guess I was wrong to think you'd care."

"Oh I care all right."

"Only because..." Her words trailed off as her gaze skimmed over him.

He reached up, bracing his palms on the low beam supporting the roof, and rocked toward her. The muscles across his shoulders stretched, relieving some of the pain his work caused. A flash of satisfaction shifted through him when he noticed her looking at his rain-dampened shirt. He arched his back, leaned closer.

As Rick swayed above Amber, she knew he was mocking her for wanting him. The smooth underside of his biceps glistened with moisture. The damp cotton of his T-shirt clung to the curves of his muscular abdomen.

Finally, Amber pulled her gaze away. If only she'd used that messenger service instead of coming down in person. If only she didn't long for him in a way that tore her heart to shreds.

If only.

Her future depended on her breaking all ties with him. She backed away to walk between the pens. The gators lay still, looking like plastic toys, but soon they'd grow to full size. The deceptive calm, so much like their keeper. Rick was perfectly suited to raising alligators. He thrived on the physical work and solitude. He could handle anything the wild beasts dished out.

Rick dropped his arms. "Come up to the house."

Again he took her hand without waiting for an answer, pulled her along. His heat spread through her, but she had to resist the desire to cling tighter to his strong fingers.

He led her between the pens, past the large storage shed and up to the cottage where he lived.

When they reached the steps, he let go, went inside. The battered screen door smacked behind him. It wasn't as though he had her captive. She didn't have to put up with his rude treatment, but she had a reason for coming, one she was going to take care of. There was too much at stake to weaken now.

Amber turned at the squeak of the hinges and Rick offered her one of the longneck beers in his hands. She shook her head. "I have to drive."

He took a long drink and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No, you don't."

She sighed. "It's a little early, isn't it?"

He stepped closer and wrapped her fingers around the cold bottle, squeezed gently. "Have some, honey. I have something to tell you."

A trickle of apprehension crawled across her shoulders. She licked her lips, lifted the bottle to drink. He waited, watching, his gaze not missing even the tiniest movement.

After she lowered the bottle, he reached for her, shoving his warm fingers under her shirt and holding onto her waist. The possessive movement had Amber's insides quivering again.

"I know you have another reason for coming here. If you wanted me to know you were married, you could've sent me a postcard from your honeymoon."

To avoid his gaze, Amber looked at the bottle in her hand, refusing to speak, until she had the nerve to ask him to sign the research agreement.

"I know what it is." Smoothly, he nudged her cheek with his nose, ran his lips down her neck. Waves of lust stirred between her legs. "One last tumble with the bad boy you left behind. A fantasy to keep you company while your new man sleeps beside you."

No, that wasn't what she wanted. She needed the memories to go away, to stop haunting her, keeping her awake and restless. "You're wrong."

"Then what is it, Amber? Why are you here?"

Eight months without him and now there he was. She saw no point in denying the way her body reacted to him. "I want to stop thinking about you. I want to forget what we had."

He lifted one eyebrow and kept his unwavering gaze focused on her. "Why?"

Again, only the truth would do. "So I can be happy."

"You were happy with me."

"I need more than what we had. I need everything. I need a man who's going to love me, take care of me." She winced at the desperation in her voice.

"But you want me."

"It's just sex, Rick. That's all it ever was and it's not enough."

He let her go, crossed to the corner of the porch. Even though it was true Amber regretted the words. Spoken out loud they made her feel cheap and used. But she had to stop fooling herself, had to stop letting him make a fool of her. At the end of last summer he'd made it clear he didn't want anything more than a physical relationship. After all, he'd let her walk away.

She turned away, took a sip of the beer. "What do you have to tell me?" she asked over her shoulder.

Silence.

Amber didn't turn around. Looking at him more than she had would be a mistake. She had to keep her mind focused on her future.

Rick had never promised her anything, certainly not forever.

The floorboards squeaked. When he stopped right behind her, she heard him swallow before he spoke.

"I already told you. I know why you came."

That had been a bluff. He'd been ready to tell her something else. "Go ahead, Rick, tell me." She watched a tiny green lizard scurry across the railing and then added softly, "Or are you the one who's afraid?"

Chapter Two

What was the point in telling her? But of course, Rick knew. It would hurt her, maybe even make her despise him. She'd look at him with hate in her eyes instead of the longing he recognized.

She needed to forget him so she could get married, be happy. He'd never be able to chase her from his memories but he could give her what she wanted – a good life in the Midwest with a real man who'd care for her in a way he never could.

He leaned down and whispered, "I'm rich."

That got her attention. She spun around so they stood toe to toe. He took a long swig of beer, sneered down at her, ready to do battle. Ready to let her get her fill of the liar that he was.

"Got it?" Contemptuously he looked down her shirt then back to her face. "I'm loaded."

She smiled and laughed lightly. "No, you're not."

He fought against the wild sensation her laughter caused. "I lied to you."

"Sure you did," she shrugged, took another drink of beer. One, he noticed, that was closer to a swallow than a sip. She turned her challenging gaze to him. "I bet you lied about a lot of things."

A droplet clung to her lower lip. Unable to resist, Rick braced his hands on the railing, leaned into her and gently licked it off.

If the truth wasn't going to send her off, he'd try another approach. He pressed his mouth to hers. He didn't deepen the kiss, instead pressed his lips first to one corner, then the other.

When she shivered, he stepped closer. Her fingers tentatively brushed his ribs then settled on his waist. Did she mean to pull him closer or push him away? Before she could reject him, he lifted his head.

"This little kissing game isn't getting us anywhere, Amber."

She downed the last of her beer, wiped her lips with her fingertips. Setting the bottle down, she still didn't look at him. Instead, she twisted, turning her back on him, shoved her hands into her back pockets.

She stood there, looking over the gator pens and outbuildings, saying nothing. He took his time staring at the curves of her hips and the sexy long legs, which he remembered so well. When his blood pressure began to build again, he turned away.

Maybe she had come back to throw her news in his face. Maybe she didn't even care if he'd lied about his money. He took his confession a step further.

"I lied to you about my whole family being dead and me being broke."

"I don't care about money, Rick."

Of course not. Money wasn't what she needed. Love and children, a Norman Rockwell home, that's what a girl like Amber wanted from a man.

He snorted, disgusted with himself. Even with all his money, he'd still never be good enough for her. He could never offer her what she needed.

Maybe, if she could see his pathetic family, she'd turn from him in disgust or pity. She'd leave him behind without a second thought. Then he could get back to life without her.

He dropped his bottle onto the porch and it rattled across the wood slats. "Let's go for a ride," he said, leaping from the top porch step.

* * * * *

As Rick crossed to his truck, his gait was quick even though the rain had stopped. He gunned the engine and sat waiting, assuming she'd follow. Leave it to him to force

the issue. If she went, she'd be giving in, if she stayed put, she'd look like she was afraid.

She needed him to cooperate with her request. On her terms. She pushed herself away from the railing and planted herself outside of the driver's side window.

"Where're we going?" she asked.

Rick's fingers flexed against the steering wheel. "Get in the truck, Amber."

The frustration of the past months swelled inside her, tearing at her heart. "I don't have to go anywhere with you. Get out and talk to me."

He stretched toward her. Like the Florida sky turning dark seconds before a storm burst, his blue eyes clouded with anger. "If I get out of this truck, right now, you aren't going to like what happens."

Refusing to let him break down her resolve, she crossed her arms, settled her feet. "Try me."

The door swung open and he reached her in one step. When his arms circled her waist, she twisted and thrashed, fighting to get free.

"Settle down," he growled as he swung her over his shoulder. Briefly, she managed to throw him off balance with her kicking, but he quickly recovered, heading toward the truck. With a single swing, he tossed her onto the bench and then shoved her toward the passenger window.

"We're doing this my way." Softly, he added, "You'll be glad later."

Before she'd strapped on her seat belt, he hit the accelerator, heading down the long driveway she'd driven her rental car up earlier. As she righted herself and smoothed out her twisted clothing, Amber glanced in the side mirror.

The ramshackle place was weather beaten, falling apart, but for three months it had been paradise. They'd lived for the moment, never talking about the past or the future. So when the end came and it was time to go back home for her final year of graduate

school, she shouldn't have expected him to say anything other than what he did. "It's been great. Bye."

How, after all this time, could the pain still be as fresh and unbearable as it had been that day? The tiny building grew smaller until it disappeared in a blur of mangroves. If only she could get him out of her heart and mind so easily.

Beside her, Rick flipped on the radio, scanned the stations until stopping on an Eric Clapton song. He turned it up, cutting off the possibility of conversation, taking a right onto a small highway. Hot air rushed in, whipping her hair into her face, the truck rumbled past the roadside pines and palmettos.

About ten minutes later, he turned the pick-up onto a narrow two-track road, crowded with sea-grape trees and a tumble of other plants. Amber glanced at Rick for some indication about what might await her, but he sat with both hands gripped tightly on the wheel, his gaze focused straight ahead. When she looked forward again, her breath caught in her throat.

Never would she have guessed a picture-perfect mansion was right around the corner from his beaten-down cottage. The beautiful white house was a typical Southern style, with pillars, porches and shuttered windows. Unlike the hedges leading up to the estate, the trees and shrubs surrounding the house were neatly trimmed.

Amber braced herself against the dash when Rick braked hard in the middle of the front yard. Anxious to put some space between them, she climbed out and moved away from the truck.

He cut in front of her, blocking her view of the mansion. "My dad's parents built it."

So he had lied about being poor. But that made no difference now. Amber shrugged.

He looked down at the sandy soil then back to her. "I haven't been here in three years, but this is where I grew up."

His challenging stare was unwavering, but his eyes held something she'd never seen before—vulnerability. Her stomach tightened, yet she kept her expression plain. "So? Everyone has to grow up somewhere."

Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned back. With his long hair blowing in the breeze and his hard expression, to someone who didn't know him well, he might look intimidating. It was obvious that he was trying to shock her. A pang of sympathy pierced her heart. Deep emotional pain churned inside him, pain he was trying to use against her.

Why?

"Richard..." A tiny, dark-haired woman, obviously unaware of the tension radiating from Rick, burst out of the house. "It is...it's really you." A huge smile spread across her face and lit her brown eyes.

Confusion swept across Rick's face, but she marched forward, ignoring it, still talking. "We were hoping, of course, once you heard the news..."

The woman paused, finally seeing Rick's hesitation. "You haven't heard? About Henry?"

Hearing the name brought his attention around. "Henry? What about him?"

"He's home. Got home last week."

Shock flashed in Rick's eyes, but just as quickly it vanished and his cool calm returned. He splayed his legs and shrugged. "No, I hadn't heard."

The woman turned her bright eyes to Amber. "Are you going to introduce us?"

With his arms still crossed, he nodded from the woman to Amber. "Maria, this is Amber."

"Who is Amber?" she asked and then waved her hands in the air, still beaming. "Never mind that now. Come on."

She turned and hurried inside, calling over her shoulder, "Richard, stop brooding and bring your lady out of the sun."

Amber raised her eyebrows, silently asking who the woman was. With her dark hair and eyes, she looked nothing like Rick, so it seemed pretty unlikely that she was his mother.

“Want to go inside?” he asked, grabbing her arm, tugging her across the yard. The wide porch, running the length of the house, looked nothing like the one at Rick’s cottage. This porch had planters overflowing with ferns and rows of white chairs. He didn’t give her time to really look, pulling her across the threshold and in through the elegant rooms. She stumbled over the gleaming wood floors.

When they reached a shaded back room, he let go of her hand, dropped himself into a long floral couch. Following his unspoken command, she sat in one of the matching lounge chairs.

Maria bustled in with a tray, holding two tall glasses of tea, setting it down on a nearby table. “Has Richard told you anything about his home?”

Rick cast her a dark look and Maria sighed. “It is your home. You wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t accepted that,” she said to him before turning back to Amber. “After you rest a minute, he’ll show you around, I am sure.” She beckoned Rick. “You come help me in the kitchen. We’ll get some crab cakes, it’ll be like old times.”

Amber expected Rick to scowl and refuse, but he got up. “You wait here,” he said. “I’ll be back.”

Amber admired the tropical paradise surrounding her. The branches of the palm trees shifted in the breeze, spots of red and pink flowers ran across a back fence. This untamed world was so completely different from hers. Her expectation that she could fly down, see Rick, discover that all her fantasies were just that—fantasies, get him to sign the papers and fly back the next day had been ridiculous.

Instead of doing that, she’d turned her life over to him in a matter of minutes, same as she’d done late last spring when she answered the advertisement in the newspaper.

She'd wanted that summer to be a wild, carefree experience. She and her cousin Kate had flown down to Miami, looking for work. They'd planned on having an exciting time, after which they'd head back home to get their degrees and settle down.

But Kate soon realized that life in southern Florida wasn't the paradise she'd envisioned. The traffic, the heat, the crime, were more than a country girl like her could handle. So she'd left. Amber, determined to have an adventure, had answered the ad for temporary help at an alligator ranch. What could be more exciting than that? And more perfect for someone studying marine biology?

Immediately, she'd fallen under the spell of the dominating man who owned the place and soon found herself in his bed. Sure that she'd be able to leave him at the end of the summer, Amber willingly gave in to the passion. Unfortunately, he'd taken her heart in return.

This time things had to be different. She'd leave the Everglades, prepared to give her heart to another man. To make that happen, she had to hold herself together.

Beyond the French doors to her right azaleas clustered around the porch, lush plantings circled the trees, tall egrets perched on fence posts.

Impossibly beautiful. Like Rick.

Could Maria be Rick's mom?

Funny, she'd never even tried to imagine him with a mother. He'd always seemed the kind of man who came from nowhere, tied to nothing. Maybe that was why it was so easy for her to believe him when he told her his family was gone. Always dressed in faded jeans, barefoot most of the time, he'd certainly never showed any signs of having money.

This huge house had been right around the corner and he'd never mentioned it. Why had he lied? Why had he kept this secret from her?

If he'd cared enough to keep information from her, he must have had some feelings for her. After all, why else would he bother?

Reality crept back into her thoughts. She wasn't here to relive her days with Rick, she was here to forget them.

Deep laughter came from somewhere inside the house. As Amber pushed herself upright, a man ambled through the hall archway. He was tall and had Rick's high cheekbones, but his blue eyes glittered with humor. Even though his long, gray hair was braided, she could tell it was curly.

"I found her," he called over his shoulder and then turned to Amber, his face bright with curious speculation.

"You must be Rick's father," she said, hearing the amazement in her own voice.

He swung himself into the room and sat where Rick had. He tossed one long leg over the other. "You sound surprised, didn't you think he had a father?"

Coming face-to-face with another man as handsome and powerful as Rick was a shock. But this man was tempered with age. Gentle. Easy.

"So you're Amber," he said, grinning and leaning toward her.

He looked like a kid on Christmas morning, only she couldn't figure out what the present was. Finally she answered him. "Yes, sir."

"Not 'sir' – 'Ricky'," he insisted, setting his palms on his knees.

His infectious mood caught her. "It's not enough that you two look alike, you have to have the same name?"

He threw his head back, smiling even wider. "Maria," he bellowed over his shoulder, "I love this girl!"

Maria stepped out from the hall. "Leave her alone, Ricky," she admonished, "Richard told you not to talk to her until he got back." She patted Amber's shoulder. "You have to excuse him, he's a little excited." She turned to Rick's father. "Behave yourself, he'll be right here, then you can ask her all the questions you want."

With a swish of her long, colorful skirt Maria left the two of them alone again.

"I'm back." Rick stepped through the French doors and came to stand beside Amber. "You ready to go?"

"Richard," his father cried out, "come and sit down."

The muscle in Rick's cheek twitched.

"Tell him to sit down." Rick's father's command to Amber was gentle, but firm.

But Amber had no power to make Rick do anything.

Of his own will, Rick dropped himself into the chair beside her. He swung one leg over the other, leaned back, looking exactly like his father—yet so different. "We'll stay for a few minutes, but that's it."

The older man smiled, unaffected by his son's sour mood. He looked right at Amber. "So! When are you getting married?"

Beside her, Rick stirred. Impatience radiated from him, pulling her in, making it difficult for her to think of Christopher, her future husband.

Finally, she managed to squeak out an answer. "We haven't picked a date yet."

Rick's father cast a knowing look at his son. "I'm not surprised."

Rick started to get to his feet but froze.

"Henry!" The older man rose and crossed to the French doors. He grabbed the newcomer by the shoulders, pulled him into the circle. Maria reappeared with a bottle of champagne.

Rick's shoulders squared as he sat back down. His gaze turned steely.

"You're just in time," Ricky said, reaching for the bottle, popping the cork. "We're getting ready to toast your big brother's bride."

Amber's stomach dropped.

Maria set glasses down on the table and then scooted aside while the older man poured the wine. Before Amber knew it, Ricky had handed her a glass and she was drinking a toast to the long and happy future she was going to have with Rick.

Amber searched the faces before her. Ricky and Maria beamed with pure joy, yet the one called Henry was staring hard at her. His cold, emotionless gaze sent chills down her spine.

When he caught her staring, he turned to Rick and sneered. "Give the girl a kiss, big brother."

* * * * *

For the first time in three years, Rick glared into the eyes of his younger brother. Every ounce of resentment he'd been nurturing was still there. His right fist clenched at his side.

"Go on," Henry's gaze darted toward Amber. "Or do you want me to do it for you?"

Anger welled inside Rick, swamping everything that even remotely resembled a virtuous personality trait.

He grabbed Amber's arm, yanked her to her feet, laid his mouth over hers, kissing away the sweet champagne. After a second's hesitation, her mouth opened for him and he deepened the kiss, running his tongue over hers, thrusting it further into her mouth and letting himself fall into the sweet sanctuary she offered.

She whimpered in surprise but didn't move away. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him, clung tighter. The need she brought to life in him was instant and he hardened.

His brother's mocking voice echoed in his head and heart. Rick pulled away to search Amber's eyes, the mix of confusion and desire in them edged him back to reality. She responded to him, yet she wasn't his.

But Henry didn't know that.

Still holding her close, Rick turned back to face the three of them, but there was only one.

Henry took in Amber's kiss swollen lips and flushed skin. "I hope you don't act that way in public, Richard."

Anger burned through Rick's veins. There were so many things he wanted to say, but this wasn't the place. "Don't you have somewhere to go?"

Henry chuckled. "No, as a matter of fact I don't." He tossed himself across the couch, grabbed the bottle and drank from it.

Rage pounded through Rick, even though he'd gotten what he wanted. Amber had seen his family, now knew exactly where he'd come from. Filled with hate for Henry and a good dose of it for himself, he turned to Amber. "Henry just got out of prison."

Henry ignored the comment to take another drink from the bottle. "So you're going to marry, big brother," he said after he'd swallowed.

Marry Amber.

Rick sucked in a sharp breath. In that instant he knew desperation. How he wanted it to be true.

But it wasn't and his brother would enjoy laughing in his face when Amber corrected the mistake.

"I'm glad you're enjoying the celebration," she said quietly.

Henry's attention jerked away from the bottle. "Got a minute, bro? I got to talk with you in private."

Rick glanced at Amber, trying to read her expression, but saw nothing. Not pity, disgust or even annoyance.

"Afraid she's going to run off?" Henry said, rolling to his feet.

Unable to keep his fury under control any longer, he growled at his brother. "Shut up, Henry."

"I'll be fine, Rick." Amber sat, as though waiting for him was the most natural thing in the world. "Go ahead."

Rick followed Henry's cloud of insolence, stepping quickly until they were at the far end of the garden, half-hidden by a cluster of zamia.

Henry set one hand on the trunk of a pond apple tree, assuming an air of nonchalance. "So where is it?"

"It?" Rick replied, even knowing exactly what his brother was referring to.

"It's gone, I'm guessing you sold it, so I'm guessing you have the money."

He crossed closer to Henry, speaking quietly even though they were well away from the house. "You actually thought it would still be here after three years?"

"No," Henry lifted one shoulder lazily. "But that doesn't change the fact that I want my money."

"Do you realize, if the cops found it, they would've seized the house? Left Ricky and Maria homeless?"

"Guess that means you would've been homeless too, huh?"

How like Henry to assume everyone was motivated by greed.

He ignored Rick's scowl and spoke again, "Well, thanks for makin' sure we all didn't end up homeless." He dropped his arm yet hesitated to step forward. "I still want my money."

Even if Rick had it, he wouldn't have given it to Henry. "Fuck your money."

"I'll get it from you one way or the other. Or make you sorry..."

Rick gave in to temptation and shoved his brother. Henry stumbled, dropped onto the rocky soil.

Efficiently, he righted himself and then dangled his arms across his knees. "You're getting married at a really convenient time, aren't you?"

So Henry believed the engagement story. Instantly, Rick saw a way to use it to his advantage. "Doesn't that make you think you ought to go find another place to live?"

"You aren't the only one around here with plans, you know."

To keep from coming at Henry again, Rick forced himself to step back. "Whatever bullshit you have planned, keep it to yourself."

"It's not just me," the ever present arrogance in his gaze flared. "I've been in touch with Mother."

Rick let the shock roll through his system, waiting until his words would be plain, seemingly unaffected. "You and Anna were pen pals while you were in prison?"

"That's right. She read about poor ole me in the paper, started sending me homemade cookies and shit like that." Henry rolled to his feet and smoothed his hair back. "Did you know she owns half this plantation?" Seeing the disbelief on Rick's face, he continued. "That's right. Seems Daddy gave it to her as a weddin' gift. Isn't that romantic?"

Always one to sense the best time to escape, Henry brushed past Rick. "She always did like me better..."

Chapter Three

Rick flipped on the radio as soon as he started the engine. After crossing the yard, he sped down the two-track, letting the truck bounce and lurch as the tires ran over rocks and holes.

He hadn't said anything since coming back from the quick conversation with his brother. He'd just grabbed her hand, pulling her to his truck. She was secretly thankful she hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to Ricky and Maria. After the excited way they'd toasted the engagement, she'd hate to be there when Rick told them there was no wedding.

At least not for her and Rick.

Absently she touched her lips. She'd done nothing to stop them from believing their engagement was real either, kissing him that way while they all watched.

Her reaction to Christopher's kisses didn't even compare to the way her whole body came alive for Rick. That didn't matter. She'd learn to love him over time. They'd have a couple of kids and live in a nice place. Their families were friends too. It would work out. It had to.

After years of being shuffled from one foster home to the next before finally being adopted as a teenager, she longed to belong to someone. She loved her parents, the extended family they'd made her a part of, yet somehow their love wasn't enough. She desperately wanted someone of her own to belong to.

Ricky and Maria seemed so genuine and sweet it was too bad they had to get mixed up with the stupid situation between her and Rick. Their love for Rick was obviously sincere, why had he lied about them?

"Is Maria your mother?" Amber asked over the howl of the wind and the music.

"No. I guess they got married though, about a year ago."

There was more to the story, she was absolutely sure. "Do you have any other brothers?"

Rick didn't look over when he answered. "Isn't Henry enough?"

Amber turned toward the window. Forget about him and his piss-poor attitude. Think about the future. Christopher.

Were the dresses her sister picked out for the bridesmaids periwinkle or lemon? Her mother had chosen the dinner, a sit-down roast with potatoes and salad. No, she corrected herself, it was a spaghetti buffet.

It was no use. Everyone had been so ecstatic when she'd told them Christopher had proposed, they'd never even asked if she'd said yes. Her mother and sister and even her stodgy aunt Eloise had spent hours leafing through bride magazines, making lists. No matter how hard she'd tried, the enthusiasm never caught up with her. After she'd realized she couldn't get excited about the wedding because she still had lingering fantasies about Rick, the crazy idea to come down, to show herself once and for all that they'd never really had a relationship, just great sex, took hold and wouldn't let go.

Rick turned off for his ranch. They'd be back at his place soon, right back where she'd started, and nothing had changed.

No, that wasn't really true. Things were worse. She'd learned that Rick had a whole side she knew nothing about. Last summer she'd been so hungry for his sex that she'd never bothered to try to learn anything about him.

Amber slanted a look his way. With his gaze focused on the road she couldn't see his eyes, but she could tell by the way he gripped the steering wheel that the visit hadn't been easy for him. Why had he put himself through that?

She gazed at his hands, remembering the rough texture of his fingers brushing across her neck when he'd pulled her to him. Had that kiss held more than physical desire? Did she mean something to him?

That line of thinking was nothing but trouble. She should know, she'd been down it too many times to count, always coming to the same realization. There was no point in fantasizing about Rick. If she wanted security she had to marry Christopher.

Rick braked sharply, shaking Amber out of her thoughts. He turned off the engine, tossed the single key onto the dash.

Instead of getting out Rick fixed his blue gaze on her, obviously trying to tame the storm brewing inside him.

A flash of shame overwhelmed her. She'd been so ready to believe what he'd told her about himself. That he was a poor gator rancher living from day to day. She'd never even tried to learn the most basic things about him. Like where he went to high school, or what his dreams were.

Unable to bear his scrutiny, she looked away.

"Like my family?" His voice was low, held a note of challenge.

She pressed her lips together, trying to hold in the painful mix of emotions twisting her insides. Why hadn't she tried to get to know him?

Maybe she'd been glad that he, like her, had no childhood ties. Believing him to be a kindred spirit had made things easier. But he wasn't abandoned as a child like she'd been. He'd had a family.

The oppressive temperature inside the cab weighed Amber down. The call of an egret and the buzz of a fly that had flown in through the open window broke their silence. The palms next to the cottage shifted in the wind.

Finally, unable to take the strain any longer, she turned. His blank expression was gone and in its place was a startling blend of longing and vulnerability. For the first time that day, she saw raw, untamed honesty.

Struggling against the hunger he brought to life in her, she sought words, anything, to break the pull of her attraction, to keep her from falling back under his spell. "Maria and your father seem nice."

He didn't respond to her words, instead touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers. When he rubbed his thumb across her lip, his gaze lowered to study her mouth.

The easy touch sent shock waves through her, lighting a fire in her belly, as hot as the one he ignited with his demanding kisses. She opened her mouth. He pressed his thumb inside for her to lick. Unable to resist him, she eagerly complied. His rough skin tasted salty and of him.

"You know how badly I want you, don't you?" His voice, low and husky, sent a shiver of pleasure down her back. He grinned with male pride when she reacted to him so openly.

He shifted over and pressed his mouth across hers. In the back of her mind Amber knew something was wrong, but as he ran his tongue ever so lightly across hers all rational thought fled.

She moaned with pleasure when his calloused hand moved under her shirt and caressed her midriff. His fingers curved around one breast and squeezed gently. Her body kicked into overdrive, sending her pulse racing, her senses reeling.

She twisted to get closer to him, frustrated by the small confines of the truck's cab. He sensed her need, dropped the hand from behind her head, to push her down onto the bench. Once he had her settled, he jerked off his T-shirt, tossed it to the floor and grabbed at hers.

Within seconds, it joined his on the floor. He loomed over her, his gaze on the lacy white bra holding her breasts. He bent to trail kisses across her collarbone, then moved his hot mouth lower. Amber sucked in a breath, arched up to him, wanting more.

She reached for him, tangling one hand in the blond curls falling across his back. Her other hand possessively squeezed his thick shoulder, urging him to take what he wanted.

His shaking fingers struggled with the front clasp of her bra. Cursing, he gave up, yanked the lace down, freeing her breasts. He took one nipple into his mouth while he

pinched the other with his fingers. The combination of the binding pull of her bra and his hot touch sent fresh waves of need through Amber. She bucked against him.

He lifted his head to rub his bristled cheek against the side of her smooth face. "I know, honey," he whispered in her ear.

He braced himself with one hand while he loosened his pants with the other. The split-second break was enough to bring Amber to the brink of reality. In her passion-drunk state, she reasoned that this was exactly what she needed. Making love to Rick was the perfect way to get him out of her system.

When she felt him pulling down the zipper of her shorts, she knew she'd arrived at the point of no return. Willingly she crossed it.

Driven by an intense animalistic urge, Rick yanked off Amber's shorts, grabbed at the scrap of lace underneath, hesitating. A woman, this beautiful, this sexy woman lying below him... No matter how much he wanted her... He'd done a lot of wrongs in his life but taking a woman who didn't belong to him had never been one of them. He had to stop.

With one last taste of her he'd pull away. He ran his tongue across the smooth hollows of her neck, meaning to ease back, but she lifted her hips, pressing into him. He found himself reaching down, tugging at her panties.

She murmured in his ear as he cupped her soft mound with his hand. How he wanted to be inside her, pounding into her hot pressure, watching her breasts bounce each time he slammed down.

Using what small amount of resolve he could gather, he straightened. She grabbed at him. "Make love to me, Rick." Her uneven breath whispered across his face. Hot desire flashed in her eyes.

Her desperate command shattered him. With a shaking hand, he opened the glove box and rummaged through. Papers fell to the floor until he found one of the condoms that had been there ever since she'd left.

She grabbed at his hand, "You don't, Rick..."

He stayed focused on his task. It wasn't a time for words. Carefully he tore the plastic wrapping with his teeth then sheathed himself. Amber stretched and spread her legs.

With one thrust he impaled her. Months of pent-up desire fueled his need for release. He drove into her, harder and harder with each swing of his body. She gasped. He held back, slowing the rhythm of his movements, reminding himself to bring her pleasure first before allowing himself release.

Her hand tangled in his hair while her lips parted in pleasure as the first contraction tensed her body. Pounding deeper, allowing himself the freedom to concentrate on her beautifully soft, female body, he caressed her breast. Its yielding weight filled his palm, the tight nipple begged to be tasted. He bent to take it in his mouth, but she cried out, so he plunged harder, faster, gave himself over to taking her deeper into the pleasure.

He groaned as his own climax took him. She wrapped one leg around him and grabbed his hip. Her fingernails dug in, urging him to pump harder. He ground his hips into hers, until the spasms tore through his body.

Finally, the last of the waves washed over him. He bent down to place a kiss on Amber's forehead. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Just like I remembered," she said.

"Me too," he replied, running his hands across her skin one last time, his fingertips ran across a tiny beige patch stuck below her hipbone.

"Birth control—contraceptive patch."

"Guess I didn't need this," he said, rolling the condom off and easing himself off her, giving her room to breathe. She didn't reply to his comment, instead she looked away, pushing her breasts into her bra. When she glanced down at her clothes scattered around the cab, a red flush crept over her cheeks. He grabbed her T-shirt and handed it to her. He pulled his own over his head, turning away.

With his need for her temporarily quenched, his mind backtracked. After he pulled his jeans up, he tugged the band in his snarled hair, tiny bursts of pain pinching his scalp.

He'd been stupid to let himself lose control. Not because they hadn't wanted to, but because it had felt as perfect—as powerful—as it had all those months ago. Now he had a fresh memory of how sweet Amber was. How much he wanted her.

* * * * *

Amber zipped her shorts and smoothed out her rumpled shirt while Rick struggled with the knots in his hair. Before, when they'd been lovers, she would've helped him.

What were they now? It was ridiculous to think she could label him "someone she used to know". Yet aside from their bodies, they'd shared very little. He'd lied to her and she'd kept the truth about herself from him. She'd never told him that she'd spent thirteen years of her life moving from one foster home to the next.

It was too late to change any of that now. She had to get the papers signed, leave. She swung the door open and got out.

He circled the truck to stand beside her. "Come check out the hatchlings."

The gentleness in his voice made her pause, but she stepped back anyway. "I have to get something out of my car."

"It can wait," he said, heading to the smallest out building.

Her flight home wasn't until the following morning. She didn't have anywhere else to go. A few minutes, long enough to look at the babies, and then she'd get the document.

He hadn't bothered to tie his hair back again. The unruly strands hung loosely down his back. The sun-lightened curls caught the late afternoon rays, nearly glowing with a life of their own. His shoulders swayed while he walked, his long, graceful strides moving him across the ground twice as quickly as hers.

It didn't seem fair that a man could be so strong, so utterly masculine and so beautiful. Too many things in life weren't fair. Amber had had more than her share of them. Now she'd put them all behind her and move on.

He ducked under the low, tin overhang of the dark building that housed the hatchlings. Once they were inside, he pointed. "Only about a week old."

The creatures' hides glistened under the red heat lamps. The tiny reptiles managed to be both cute and frightening.

Turning from the pen, Rick said, "Before you leave I want you to tell me the real reason you came." The hard edge was gone from his voice. Even in the darkness Amber saw the defeat in his gaze.

Even if she thought she could mend whatever had broken him, he didn't want her. "I'm getting married, Rick."

"That's what you said earlier."

"It's true." She tried to muster up the same excitement her mother and sister had. "We're already making plans."

"But you said you hadn't picked a date yet."

"That's true too. Christopher is out of town on business. We're going to pick a date when he gets back." She failed to add it had taken a lot of coaxing on Christopher's part to get her to agree to that.

"You haven't been acting like a woman about to get married." The biting edge was back.

Resentment took hold. Amber turned his anger back on him intentionally asking a question she knew would push him away. "Why was your brother in prison?"

He worked to keep his pain out of his voice. "He broke the law."

"Obviously, Rick."

To avoid her scrutiny, he reached into the pen, snatching one of the small gators. It twisted in the confines of his hands. "Drugs. Using...selling..."

Rick didn't add the rest of the story, that his own brother had forced him into a vile life, almost two years of living in the shadows, spending time with lowlifes who had friends in prison, people who wouldn't hesitate to "take care of Henry" if Rick didn't do their bidding. It was only by finally becoming one of them that Rick was able to break away. It was only by staying hidden on his ranch that he was able to avoid being pulled back.

How he hated Henry for what he'd done, for forcing his hand, making him choose between protecting his family and abiding by the laws created to protect the people they'd grown up with. And the only thanks Rick had received for what he'd done after Henry went to prison was the disintegration of his family and himself.

Now, with Henry hanging around, a loose thread ready to unravel... What damage would he leave in his wake this time?

"Rick?"

He turned at Amber's voice. His gaze met hers. "Why did your dad think we were engaged?"

"The last time I saw him, he told me not to come back until I was ready to settle down."

"He meant get married?"

The tiny reptile wrestled. He realized he'd been holding it too tightly. "Yeah, get married, have kids, work at his place. All that."

Her lips formed a small circle, not saying anything. No doubt she was thinking about how all that was waiting for her back in Ohio.

The tiny creature scurried into a corner after Rick set it back under the lights.

"When was the last time you saw him?" she asked.

"Three years." Rick shrugged, stepping away from the pen. "Give or take a few months."

"You had a fight?" she asked as they stepped back into the yard.

He nodded.

"I think he's over that, whatever it was. He and Maria seemed really happy to see you."

"Yeah. That warm welcome caught me just a little off guard."

She laughed lightly at his understatement. "You're going to have to tell them about their mistake," she said. "Soon. It's not right to let them think we're engaged. Especially when they're so excited."

The slanting sun brightened the reddish sparks in her dark hair and made her already rich eyes glow.

"You're lucky to have a family who loves you," she said.

Lucky?

She had people back home, a decent, loving family. What did she know about the loneliness of being an outcast? He brushed past her, stepping down the walkway.

Showing that new stubborn side, she trailed behind him. "Did you and Henry get along before he went to prison?"

Her gaze circled his face, searching. She'd discovered one of his secrets but wasn't running yet. Did he need to tell her more?

Instead of driving another wedge between them, he found himself thinking back to how things had been before. "A long time ago, we were best friends, but that changed when he started high school. He had different goals, expected different things."

"Is that what he wanted to talk to you about, what he's going to do now?"

"Something like that."

Edgy, Rick headed toward the shed for one of the wide brooms. The mindless chores of his ranch kept him moving, occupied his mind most of the day. Going to bed bone tired each night was the only thing that kept him from going crazy.

"You aren't going to tell me any more, are you?"

"There's nothing you need to know," he replied, starting to sweep the walkway surrounding the out buildings.

"Rick—"

Again, she was staring at his face, searching. He glared back, challenging her to admit to what she saw — a worthless man with nothing to offer her.

"There's something I need from you."

"I don't have anything for you, sweetheart. Not unless..." He cut his gaze across her breasts then settled it between her legs.

"You're wrong." She backed away and headed to her car.

No, she was the one who was wrong. He had nothing to offer but pain.

Chapter Four

With her backpack slung across one shoulder, Amber slammed the trunk and crossed the yard. Just watching the muscles in Rick's forearms flex as he pushed the broom was a thrill. His body made the most mundane tasks a turn-on.

As she approached, the smell of him drifted over her. She breathed deeply. The mixture of sweat and hard work mingled together to make the scent that was uniquely his. There would never be another man like him for her.

Abruptly he stopped pushing his broom.

He eyed her backpack. "Want to stay for a few days?"

At first she thought he was baiting her again, but when he kept waiting for a reply, she shook her head as she dug for the document she'd prepared.

"Why not?" He reached out, ran his fingertip across one breast. Her nipple hardened instantly. "It'll give you a few days to get me out of your system. That's why you came down here isn't it?"

She ignored him, digging the document out of her bag and then shoved the contract at him. "I need you to sign this."

Frowning, he read it once and then again. It was all right there, spelled out. She needed his permission to use the data they'd gathered on hatching birth and growth rates. Without it, her entire graduate research project would be worthless. Years of struggling, working late shifts to pay tuition, hung in the balance.

Finally, he handed it back to her. "You need something from me, I need something from you."

"You don't want anything from me."

"Pretend to love me."

Pretend?

Anger sparked through her veins. "What are you talking about?"

"Pretend to be engaged to me. For a few days. A week, maybe."

"You mean lie to your family?"

He nodded.

"You want to use me?" She held the paper in front of her. "And then you'll sign it?"

His gaze was hard as he nodded. She shoved the papers back into her bag, threw it toward her car. She was actually considering his offer. Because without his signature...

"What do you get out of it?" she asked.

"Let me worry about that."

Her spine stiffened. More lies, more secrets.

He wasn't giving her any real choice. She could lie to herself, by ignoring her doubts and forging his signature, or lie to Rick's family.

No matter how much she hated the idea of lying to people who truly cared for Rick, she was not going to lie to herself.

But... "Your dad and Maria seem nice, maybe—"

"You're not going to get to know them."

Pretending to be unaffected by him, she grabbed the broom and picked up where he'd left off, pushing the sand and dry leaves across the cement walk. Maybe he was right, spending a few last days with him would get him out of her system.

What if it didn't?

She'd be no worse off than she was already. The memories she took home with her would be fresher, but they couldn't be any more powerful than the ones already keeping her awake.

She would know for sure if he was the kind of man who could make passionate love to a woman and then walk away unaffected. She'd be certain that despite the

gentleness of his touch and the sweetness of his caresses, he was a cold man, uninterested in committing or in caring for one person for forever.

She finished the row she'd been sweeping and walked back to shove the broom in his direction.

He snatched the handle, leaning onto it.

"I stay for no more than a week. Then you'll sign."

"That's the deal."

Shoving aside her doubts and trying to convince herself that she was in control, she said, "Okay, Rick, we'll do this your way."

"We'll act like two people in love. I touch you whenever I want." He tossed the broom aside. "However I want."

In her heart, lust and panic became one. "Like I said, we'll do it your way, as long as I get what I want, I don't care."

He ran his finger across her cheek. "What about sharing you, I bet your man back home would care about that."

"I haven't—we haven't—" As the words tumbled out of her mouth, Amber wished she could take them back, but Rick's gaze was already clouding with doubt.

"Had sex?" Pieces of hair drifted around his face when he shook his head. "I don't believe that. Not for a minute. What kind of man could wait?"

She threw his speculation back in his face. "It was my choice. A choice, Rick. Something you've taken away from me."

He lifted an eyebrow. "But the patch?" he asked, ignoring the first part of her response.

Since she'd already agreed to his deal, she let that go too. "The doctor told me to try it out now, before we get married, to be sure I didn't have any side effects."

Rick smoothed Amber's hair from her face. Her brown eyes were wide, her lips swollen from his kisses. Her body softened so easily in his arms, it was as though she was made for him.

That was another piece of the puzzle that was his life—that she would fit so perfectly but not be his.

He had a few days to pretend and pretend he would. With her and with his family. For the first time in a long time, fate was on his side. Their pretend engagement was just what he needed to keep an eye on his brother, as well find a way to keep him from causing the family any more damage.

"We're having breakfast with my dad and Maria tomorrow morning."

She tilted her head, silky strands of her hair slipped across her shoulder. "They invited us to breakfast?"

"You're surprised? In case you hadn't noticed, my dad was a little excited."

He kissed away her frown. "I'll keep my end of the bargain—you keep yours."

"Lying to your family—that's not right, Rick."

If Amber knew he'd inherit the whole spread—the plantation and the money—if he married, what would she think?

Would it lower her opinion of him? Raise it?

He didn't care. As long as he got what he wanted.

"You let me worry about what's right."

He slanted his mouth across hers, reached down to cup her ass with both his hands, squeezed. "Come inside."

"Now?" her gaze went to the rental car, the bag on the ground next to it.

"Later, Amber. We have a deal."

She turned away from him. "I know what you want, Rick." Without looking back, she stepped toward his cottage, stopping at the steps to unzip her shorts and let them fall. The creamy white skin of her well-rounded ass flexed as she threw the shorts onto

a chair. She crossed her arms, ready to slip off her T-shirt, but he was behind her by then, grabbing at the scrap of lace nestled between her legs. It came down easily, but she stumbled, falling forward onto her hands and knees, the panties twisting around her ankles.

The silky skin of her thighs, the high curve of her ass. Each time she twisted, he got another delicious view of her cunt. Greed exploded inside him, the desire to possess her flared deep in his loins.

When he saw her wiggling to right herself, he ground out his command. "Be still."

"But," she started to move herself up, so he laid his foot across the supple small of her back, pushing her back down, forcing her ass to tip up and her center to open for him. "I said, be still."

Sensing his intent, she whimpered and inched her knees apart.

Rick's focus narrowed, he unzipped his jeans. His pulsing erection, uncompromising and ready, was solid for her.

He could take her, but not this time.

This time she would give herself to him.

Willing and sweet.

He knelt behind her, but instead of thrusting himself into her, he grabbed Amber's waist and slid her back toward him, entering her slowly as her body came back to him, only stopped when his own ass was on his heels and hers in his lap.

He sucked in a deep breath and tensed, holding himself back from pounding into her. "You set the pace."

The first time she rocked against him, her back was straight, her head forward. The second time, her head dropped back, her hair fell against his chest, the silken strands dancing across his rigid nipples. The third time, she shot back, taking in all of him.

"Go ahead, honey," he whispered in her ear, "I know you want me." Rick arched back, rested his palms beside his feet.

Her next thrust was harder, the one that followed quicker. Each time her slick sheath slid across him, he clenched his teeth, holding back, waiting, but his gaze kept falling on the sweet round curves of her butt... the way her waist dipped in... he could imagine her breasts swaying each time she rolled forward. The heavy pants of her breath, the musky scent of her love, the coil of hunger in his gut was too tight, uncontrollable.

A groan echoed in his chest, his cock jerked as his seed spilled into her and he lifted his hips, angling forward to get deeper inside her. Amber slammed against him, her pounding fury picking up intensity, making her lose control until she was depleted. She settled against him, curved back to smile, but said nothing.

Chapter Five

The next morning, Rick braked to a stop in his father's front yard. Ricky was seated in one of the tall white wicker chairs waiting, with a newspaper spread across his lap, the way he always had before. The man had aged during the past couple years but still had the same powerful build, the same commanding presence.

Rick had left as a son—they'd never had the chance to relate as man to man. Where did they stand? The antagonism between them seemed to be gone, but what had it left in its place?

Amber was already wrapped in his father's embrace by the time Rick reached the porch.

"Mornin'," he said, pulling Amber to his side.

His father didn't miss the possessive gesture. "Don't you worry, son, I'm not going scare her away."

Maria appeared in the doorway. "Don't worry, Richard. I made him promise to be on his best behavior." Her openness, the tidy starched apron...it was the same as when he'd left, which now, suddenly, didn't seem like a lifetime ago.

"Good morning, Maria."

"Stop being so formal." She reached for him. He wrapped one arm around her waist. She'd never done anything to hurt him. She'd only been around during the falling out.

Awkwardly his father reached out to pull him into an embrace, but he shifted away. Hoping to avoid both close contact and conflict he offered his hand instead. His father paused and then he accepted Rick's outstretched hand.

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air until Amber broke it. "Your yard is fantastic, Maria. Will you take me for a walk after we eat?"

Maria beamed. "Of course, I'd love to." Then she turned to Rick. "You won't mind giving up your future bride for a few minutes, will you?"

He frowned. That would leave him alone with his father, which was no doubt what the women had in mind.

Amber answered for him, "Of course he doesn't mind."

"It's settled then." Maria took Amber's arm, "Let's go in and I'll put the eggs on."

Amber slipped inside with Maria.

His father's gaze followed the two women. He had the look of a happy man, a man whose life was in order, going the way he wanted. Had he really forgotten everything that had happened? The horrible fights? The past years?

Rick sure hadn't.

Still, he couldn't quiet the question that stirred in his mind. "Dad?"

Ricky, still gleaming with satisfaction, turned.

"Did...does..."

He dad cocked his head. "Spit it out."

The image of Henry's sneer, his loitering threat. Rick had to have answers. "Does Anna own half of this place?"

Ricky shook his head. "You're getting married, it'll be yours."

"Dad—"

"You and Amber want the house to yourself?"

Frustrated, Rick smacked his hands across his thighs. "No, of course not. You and Maria will stay here." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "I'll stay over there—"

"You will not. You'll move in here."

Where he lived didn't matter, so Rick let that argument die and steered it back to what did. "Does she? Does Anna own half of everything?"

After a pause, Ricky let out a slow breath and then went over to put the newspaper he'd left on the chair on the porch floor. He sat, gazing out into the yard. "I gave it to her as a wedding gift. I wanted her to feel like she belonged, like she was a part of life here. The attorney who wrote it up called it a 'life estate' I think." He ran his hands over his hair then set them in his lap. "It was stupid of me to think she'd be happy here, out in the middle of nowhere, away from everything. A woman like her, she needed other things. Excitement I couldn't offer.

"Why are you bothering with that now? It doesn't matter. You know the conditions of your grandfather's will. As long as you marry before your twenty-fifth birthday, you inherit everything."

Maria appeared in the doorway. "Do you two want to eat? Or spend the morning on the porch?"

"Eat!" Ricky hopped up and followed his wife inside.

Rick stepped back and really looked around for the first time. The sides of the house were freshly painted, the shutters hung square. Even the rough hewn wood siding showed signs of repair. The place wasn't at all like it had been when he'd left.

He ambled across the porch, turning out to the front yard. It had been a long time since he'd been affected by the savage beauty of an Everglades morning. The way the sun crept across the glass, streaked across the air ferns. How the air felt, easy and smooth.

So Henry hadn't been bullshitting him about being in touch with Anna. But what did that mean?

Rick pushed himself from the railing. Following the spicy scent of the food, he stopped when he came to the doorway of the dining room.

The table was set. The buffet had chips and homemade salsa, which Maria knew he loved for breakfast. As he took a handful of chips, she bustled in with a platter of eggs. Worry pulled on her face.

An unwelcome pang of emotion shot through his chest. He ignored it, pointing at the bowls, "Thanks."

"No thanks necessary, Richard. We're glad you're back."

"I didn't know I was back."

"Of course you are," his father said, rambling in, carrying a tray of sliced pineapple.

"I'll get Amber." He started to leave but she appeared.

"No need, I'm right here."

Maria, the last to sit, set her napkin on her lap and noticed when Rick's gaze fell on the extra place setting.

"He's staying with us," she explained.

"Here?"

"Of course, big brother." Henry's arrogance cut through the room. "I belong here too." His dark eyes narrowed. "Right?"

Rick faked a brotherly smile. "I'm glad you're here, Henry. To get caught up." He leaned back, pretending an air of nonchalance, "Any topics you want to avoid?"

"No." Henry's lip twitched. "What about you?"

"Let's eat in peace, boys," their father broke in. "You two can take it outside afterward if you want."

That had always been Ricky's solution – take it outside.

"Fine with me," Henry smirked. "I learned a few things..."

Rick ignored the bait, instead turning to Amber. To someone who didn't know her, her expression would seem calm, but an undercurrent swam in her eyes.

Good. Let her see the worst. Make sure she never looks back.

The heated conversation gave way to a tense quiet.

Maria passed the egg platter to his father, who after putting a huge helping on his plate and a good sized one on hers, passed it on to Henry. The sounds of utensils clicking against serving dishes echoed in the room.

The food was what Maria had always made for them – eggs and cheese loaded with Cuban spices and dark coffee served piping hot with too much sugar for Rick’s taste. Maria and his father insisted it was the only way to drink it, so he’d always just gone along with it.

That had been his problem though, always trying to please those he loved, protecting them at any cost – his mistake.

He felt the weight of his brother’s stare burning across his skin and looked up, expecting to find Henry focused on him. Instead, he found his brother’s gaze on Amber.

Rick’s fork clattered on his plate.

His brother lifted an eyebrow. “Something wrong, Richard?”

“No.” He picked his fork up, forced himself to relax, letting his own gaze gently fall on Amber’s face. “Something is right.”

Amber tried to get the conversation going several times. However it seemed that each time she thought of a topic to pursue Henry found a new way to be rude. At first she’d tried to convince herself he wasn’t that bad, but after about twenty minutes she gave up.

Maybe he hadn’t been that way before prison. But if he’d been doing drugs in high school, he’d probably always been the sort to make life hard on those around him.

Not your concern, she told herself. Learning anything about Rick’s family, good or bad, would only deepen her ties to him.

She had to think about herself...her future...Christopher...

Maria started with the idle chitchat where Amber had given up. The collective struggle to smooth away the friction reminded her of all the foster homes she'd been part of. Each time she was moved into a new home, she'd always wanted to make the best impression, hoping to fit in and become one of the members. But it never worked. Somehow she said or did the wrong thing. Each time, in the end, she'd given up and kept to herself.

Being part of a family was wonderful, yet Rick refused to even try to connect with his.

Henry finished rambling on about the food in prison. "Hey, Maria, you ever get that citizenship situation taken care of?"

Amber choked down a bite of toast, Rick's jaw tightened and Maria stared helplessly at her husband.

"What's on your mind, son?" Ricky asked.

Henry angled back, wiping his mouth slowly with the white cloth napkin. "I'm only trying to catch up on the latest family news." He turned to Rick. "How're things with you? Other than your engagement."

His attitude set Amber's teeth on edge.

Rick's tone held an implied threat, "You don't need to worry about me."

"I'm not worried," Henry toyed with his fork. "I was just askin'." He went back to eating as though nothing had happened.

Maria pushed herself out of her chair, asking, "Does anyone want more coffee? Eggs?"

Glad to have a reason to leave the room, the pool of aggression swirling in it, Amber stood. "I'll help," she offered, although Maria hadn't asked for help, nor had anyone asked for more.

In the kitchen, Amber kept busy loading the dishwasher.

"Don't pay any attention to Henry," Maria said softly. "He's...adjusting..."

Amber winced.

"Trust me. Rick has a way with him, he'll make sure everything is fine." The older woman turned to the coffee pot, taking her time throwing out the old grinds and refilling it with dark, fine ground beans.

"Thanks for breakfast," Amber said, closing the dishwasher. "It was..."

"It wasn't always like this."

"You mean," Amber paused, her hands motioning toward the dining room.

Maria understood. "The boys, Henry and Richard, were into a lot of mischief as children, but they were good. After Anna, the boys' mother, left, Henry...had problems. He started getting into trouble and it seemed to just get worse and worse. It tore Rick up. Being the big brother he thought he should've been able to stop him."

Amber couldn't hold in her curiosity any longer, lowered her voice. "You've known them all for a long time?"

"I came to be the boys' nanny, stayed after their mom left. Even though it's been rough at times there isn't anywhere I'd rather be than here with Ricky."

Amber was ready to cast all her hesitation aside when she saw Rick leaning into the doorjamb.

"Thanks for taking care of my bride."

A hot current of awareness shot through Amber when he curved his arm around her waist.

"Thanks for bringing her, Richard." The bittersweet reflection vanished from Maria's eyes, she looked open and happy in the moment. "You've made your father a very happy man."

Rick stiffened.

"Maria, is someone supposed to be burning off the brush today?"

Maria turned on the water and started scrubbing the skillet. "No, it's Saturday. You know your father won't let them work on the weekend. He thinks..."

Then Amber saw it too.

Thin spirals of smoke stretching up to the sky.

Rick bolted, shouting over his shoulder, "I'll get Dad. Maria, find Henry."

Maria rushed out the back door, Amber ran to the front yard.

Outside, Rick and his father were climbing into his truck.

"Wait!" She grabbed the driver's door as Rick was slamming it shut.

His eyes sparked and he pulled on the door. "Stay here."

Amber held on. "I'm coming."

Ricky stretched across the cab. "Let her in, we don't have the time for this."

"All right." Rick swung out of the truck, Amber scrambled in.

Ricky pointed to a back corner of the yard. "Rick, take the back way."

"But—it's been—I haven't—"

"I've kept it cleared."

The two men exchanged a look, then after the slightest hesitation, Rick gunned the engine and roared forward. The tires ground against the gravel as the truck sped over the two-track road.

She grabbed the dashboard as Rick turned sharply and the pick-up bounced over a rough field. The smell of the smoke clouded the sweet morning air. The rumble of the engine roared in her ears, mixing with the increasing pounding of her heart. Ricky's tight face stared straight ahead, no doubt expecting the worse.

The smoke disappeared for a few seconds when the ground lowered, then came back into view. An ominous odor swirled around them, filling the cab.

The minutes stretched, the truck rolling ever closer toward the smoke. Another stand of trees appeared as they reached the bottom of the hill.

"Almost there, son," Rick's father said. "Maybe it won't be too bad."

Rick didn't respond, only pushed the truck harder. The road narrowed as they approached some trees, but still he didn't slow. Branches scraped the sides of the truck, leaves and twigs flew in through the open windows.

Then the brush cleared away.

It was Rick's large storage shed, on fire.

Rick and his father tumbled out of the truck.

Amber remained seated on the bench, frozen with anguish.

Cruel, dark smoke billowed out of the windows, thick flames licked the side of the building, stretching toward Rick's small house. Everything he owned, what little there was, ready to burn to the ground.

Rick ran to the main yard hydrant, scooped up one of the hoses, flying toward the flames, he tossed the hose down in front of his father. "Wet down the house."

Ricky snatched the hose, started spraying the side of the house. He waved through the smoke at Amber, "If we keep it wet, it'll be fine."

Rick shouted from the door of the flaming shed. "I'm going in." A thick wave of smoke swallowed him up as he disappeared inside.

Ricky spun. "It's a loss, son, get out of there."

Panic beat through Amber. Another hose—behind the house, with the smaller garden hydrant.

A beautiful coil of green and yellow.

Relief gave her strength. She lifted the handle, welcomed the spray of water. After grabbing the hose off the metal arch where it was kept, she ran, trailing it behind her.

As she approached the burning shed, the crash of falling boards was followed by a muffled cry.

Rick!

Tugging the hose along, she crossed the threshold. Smoke filled every corner. Flames flickered up from the floor.

She inched in, gasping against the smoke. Rick, backed against the wall, burning boards between them.

Amber's throat tightened. "Ricky, bring the hose!"

But he was already there, ready.

She pressed her thumb across the spray of her hose, widening the stream of water. The flames flickered, fighting, as she was, for air. Beside her, Ricky gasped against the smoke but stayed steady.

Amber spoke to Ricky, pointing, "Spray in the center, over there."

"Rick," she called, scanning for any sight of him, "come to my voice, we're over here by the door."

Then he appeared, sidestepping the flames and dashing through the cloud of ash. Still hacking, he took the hose from his father and jogged over to start spraying the side of his house. Amber joined him, Ricky, coughing desperately, headed away from the worst of the smoke.

Amber called to Rick. "What were you thinking?"

"More research," he tipped his head to a sheaf of papers she hadn't noticed, sticking out of his waistband.

Research. For her?

Rick ignored her shock. "Keep spraying the house. It'll be okay."

* * * * *

Exhausted, Amber trudged through the wet smoky mess, falling down onto the battered grass. The sun loomed overhead, beating down harshly, but the rays were light compared to the fire.

Rick dropped down beside her, Ricky, still coughing occasionally, stepped over and sat with them. Their faces were smeared with smoke and sweat, the shed gone, the house saved.

With the hoses still on, the water hissed into the yard, making puddles near the porch. Restless, Amber got up to turn them off. As she lowered the garden hydrant handle, a car rumbled up the drive, stopping just behind her rental car.

Henry slipped out of the small blue station wagon.

"Maria said you were having some trouble, big brother. I came to help out."

Rick got to his feet, his muscles flexing as he stalked forward. "I don't need your kind of help."

Henry raised his hands, his palms stretched outward, defensive. "Hey, man, take it easy. I didn't mean anything."

"Pipe down, both of you." It seemed to take all of Ricky's air to speak. "I'm too tired to listen to your bickering."

Henry stepped through the mud to the remains of the shed. "Sorry mess, huh, Rick."

Rick narrowed his gaze, Henry's response a self-satisfied grin forming as he spoke.

"Guess you all don't need me." With that, he slipped back into the wagon and backed out, disappearing down the long driveway.

"Come on, I'll take you home, Dad," Rick said to his father.

When Ricky headed toward the truck, Amber started to get up, but Rick brushed past, ordering, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

She ignored his command, stepping toward the truck, but he cut her off. "Be a good girl, do as I say." Then he bent down, kissed her gently on the mouth.

Chapter Six

Minutes later, Amber sat alone, her blood still thrumming. The sides of the cottage were smudged by the smoke, the stink of the burned wood loomed in the air.

Judging by the way he'd come to help his son, without any hesitation or fear for his own safety, Ricky loved him.

Three years was a long time, but not long enough to stop Ricky's love. Despite what Rick said, she'd seen glimpses of Rick's love for his father as well.

The past loitered in the distance, threatening to ruin the future, hers – and theirs.

Families were supposed to stick together and help each other. Not tear each other apart.

Anxious to get away from the damage, she got up and stepped across the freshly swept walkway between the covered pens.

Why had Rick chosen to isolate himself here, in this overgrown jungle? He hadn't left Florida, as he easily could have. Something kept him there. But what?

Forget Rick.

Think about Christopher.

Amber turned the corner, starting back toward the house, but switched directions when she spotted the rental car. A change of clothes...

She took out her bag and then scooted around to set it on the hood. Quickly, she peeled off the dirty, wet shorts and tossed them next to the bag. Her T-shirt, bra and panties followed. The delicious Florida sun willingly chased away the dampness, heating her bare skin.

After grabbing her travel shower bag, she crossed to the yard hydrant, flipped it on and pulled the hose away from the house. The icy water was a shock to her skin, but a welcome one.

Clear rivulets skimmed down her arms, back and stomach.

Rick. Going after that research... For her.

How could he be so passionate, demanding, tender—yet be so willing to let her walk away from him?

Rick. Bringing her soul alive... even with a simple glance.

Thick waves of need rolled over her, turning her skin liquid, making her body ache for his hands, mouth...

She had to find a way to stop wanting Rick... and start wanting Christopher—and only Christopher.

She set her hand between her legs, slid her fingers between the folds of her skin and caressed her clit. Readily, the pressure built.

Christopher. Think of Christopher. Concentrating on the security she found in his arms, she imagined him on top of her, thrusting, but the image wouldn't fully form.

She winced, yearning for release.

Although they hadn't made love, they had been naked together countless times. His legs were long, his buttocks rock solid. The hard planes of his chest... the heavy weight of his arms when he grabbed her and pulled her hard to him. The tangle of his hair.

She quickened the movement of her fingers, sliding them inside her slick channel and then flicking her clit again. There was no need for gentleness, her center was near climax. In her mind's eye, she lifted her gaze from his chest to take in the beautiful lines of his face. The face wasn't Christopher's.

Rick.

Heat shattered inside her, wrapping her in rich, searing waves, sealing in the truth. Rick's touch was on her, even when he wasn't around.

* * * * *

Branches raked across his truck as it bounced and jerked, but Rick ignored the leaves scraping his arm and gunned the engine. He didn't let up until his truck rolled up to his place.

Amber wasn't where he'd left her.

After tossing his keys on the dash, he cast a passing glance at the rubble that had been his storage shed then his charred house and he crossed the yard to look among the pens. The walkways were empty, so he looped around back to the partially enclosed area he used as an office.

He found her sitting on his desk, brushing her hair into a ponytail. She'd changed her clothes, washed away the smoky smudges.

"Hey," she finished wrapping her hair. "Is your father okay?"

"Sure. Still coughing some, but Maria will take care of him."

She scooted off the desk, came to him. "I was wondering..."

He dropped into the chair and turned to face her. "What?"

"Why didn't you call for help, from the police, fire department or somebody?"

Bitterness rose in his throat. "I take care of things myself."

She ran her fingertips lightly across his jaw. It wasn't her gentle touch that made him want to tell her the truth, it was the way she was looking at him—as though he mattered. "Ever since Henry..." Resentment chased away the gentle stirring in his heart. "It doesn't concern you."

He couldn't stand it when she inched away from him, so he reached for her hand.

She looked at their intertwined hands. "I was scared, Rick. When you were inside..."

"I'll never die," he said, adding to himself, *it would be too easy.*

Disapproval danced in her gaze. "I want to know more about you. And your family."

His father and brother? Family?

Last summer, when he'd been with her, they'd lived from day to day – the outside world didn't exist. His family didn't exist. But that had been a fantasy and like all fantasies, it had come to an end.

"What about your mother?"

He dropped her hand and leaned back.

"Last I heard she was living in Miami, but that was a while ago." He kissed her hand. "You're not like me. You have a great family."

She pulled back. "My mom and dad are good friends with Christopher's family."

Christopher. The man she was going to spend the rest of her life with. "That sounds great." He tried to add enthusiasm into the words, but he didn't manage it. "Perfect."

With her bright future nearly assured, she should've looked radiant, yet he'd never seen her looking so lost and unhappy. Gently, he slipped his arms around her, pulling her close to protect her from whatever pain flickered in her heart. He knew only one way to make her feel better. A kiss. Slow and easy, not like the others.

He touched her hair, the smooth dark strands slipped through his fingers. Every inch of her was so sweet and soft. He lifted his mouth to place a few kisses on her throat, then chuckled. "Your hair still smells like a camp fire."

She laughed lightly, but he heard the husky undertones and his body responded. Blood pounded through him, making him impossibly hard.

"Your clothes are all black."

He smirked and whipped his shirt off. "Better?"

She licked her lips as her fingers trailed a path over his shoulders then down his chest. The weightless touch burned through him, making his shaft swell. She trailed her fingers lower, over the zipper of his jeans, stopped to cup his balls. Instantly, the need to sink his cock into her tight wet pussy blocked everything else from his mind.

He stopped forward, pinning her to the desk. "It's because of you," he said as her fingers traced the outline of his erection.

Her gaze swirled with passion, her breathing got short, her fingers toyed with the zipper tab. "I want —"

Want was too weak a word for what he felt.

Rick swung around her to sweep the pencils, folders and unopened mail off his desk to prop her sweet ass on the edge of the desk. When he grabbed the hem of her shirt, she stopped him.

"Is this right, Rick?" she asked, her warm fingers curled around his wrist.

Ignoring her question, he slid the shirt up, over her bra, traced the swell of her breasts with his tongue. She sighed and dropped her head back, giving him the freedom to explore her inch by inch. If only the invisible rope of kisses was real, he could tie her to the desk so she'd never leave.

He slid his palm across her belly and caressed the soft skin. "I don't know about right or wrong, Amber. I only know what I want."

"But...I...we..."

The tightness in his groin caused him to shift, trying to ease away the pleasant pain. "You're killing me, honey. Either tell me you want me, or let me go so I can stand under the shower."

"Make love to me, Rick." Her words were clear as she lifted her head to gaze into his eyes.

She arched up, pulling off her lavender T-shirt. With slow, leisurely movements he knew were meant to torment him, she unzipped her shorts. He yanked them off, then, as he was climbing out of his jeans, enjoyed the view of her peeling off her lace panties.

"Spread your legs."

No hesitation. She leaned back on her palms, letting her head fall back as she separated her knees. Dressed only in her pink bra, with her legs wide, her slick cunt open for him.

He set the tip of his cock at her opening, waited a heartbeat, thinking he'd take his time, but slammed into her instead. The release was immediate. For him.

But she was still panting, her body tense and flushed, her eyes glazed with need.

Rick laid her across the desk, spread her legs and slid his tongue between her soft, swollen folds. He flicked her sensitive nub with his tongue, as he reached up to grab one breast in each hand, alternately stroking the sides and rubbing his fingertips across the nipples.

He lifted his mouth, "Tell me what you want, Amber."

The reply was soft, but sure. "More."

He dropped down to lick her again. Once, twice—the third time she started to come. High breaths made her body shake, her legs jerking as the tremors took over. Ruthlessly, he licked and sucked until she whimpered his name.

* * * * *

Amber awoke slowly, shifting on the mat they'd moved to and listening to the pines rustle in the wind.

The slanted afternoon sun snuck across her bare skin. She checked for any signs of an afternoon thunderstorm but didn't see a single cloud.

Rick's expression was gentled with sleep, his wild hair tangled, covering his shoulder. Careful not to wake him, she skimmed her fingers across his rock-hard arm. The ordeal with the fire had worn him out.

Their scattered clothes were within reach, yet she didn't care about getting dressed. Lying out in the open with every inch of her skin exposed to the air was decadent and wonderful. She'd never do it at home.

Life in Ohio seemed so distant, almost unreal. Christopher was in Boston finishing up some project he'd been working on for his company. He'd told her about it several times, but the details never stuck in her mind.

He was a good man. Dependable, affectionate, committed. He was committed to his job, his family, to her.

Would he make passionate love to her the way Rick did? The kisses they'd shared weren't the same. Maybe that would change after they were husband and wife.

She'd never told Christopher about Rick. If she had, she wouldn't have been able to explain her reluctance to make love before their wedding. He'd accepted her decision to wait.

Rick's want was obvious in his darkened eyes and tightened jaw. Even his body gave her signals. She could never remember Christopher looking at her the way Rick did, drinking in every inch.

It wasn't right to compare the two. They were very different men, each offering different lives. It just happened that Christopher was offering her what she craved, what Rick could never give her, security.

If only she could give up her lifelong dream to belong to someone. She sighed, it just wasn't that simple. The emptiness that came from being abandoned had eaten away at her insides from as early as she could remember. It wasn't going to go away. She had to face that. She had to live with it. In order to do that, she had to take the only chance she had, she had to marry Christopher.

He loved her. In time, she would grow to love him too. Maybe she'd even feel for him the way she felt about Rick. It just didn't seem fair, but as she'd been told often enough — life isn't fair.

"What're you thinking about? You look too serious."

Rick's sleepy eyes were only half open.

Chasing away her thoughts, she asked, "Do you want to go look at the mess?"

"I know what it looks like, like there was a fire."

She smacked his arm. "Grab our stuff, let's get dressed."

"I want payment in advance." He kicked their clothes farther away. "For buying you dinner."

Once again Amber lost herself in him. Not so much because she wanted to, but because when he touched her, she couldn't hold back.

Chapter Seven

Sunday morning Rick awoke to the familiar shrill ring. He hauled himself away from Amber, asleep on her side, and twisted out of the sheet to get the phone on his bedside table.

"I hope I didn't interrupt." His father's voice boomed out of the phone. "What time are you and Amber coming over for breakfast?"

Rick flopped onto his back, considering, but his father didn't wait for a response. "How about forty minutes?"

Rick glanced at Amber, those long legs really needed to be wrapped around him. Or maybe stretched out, just like they were and he'd pull her ass toward him. His cock sprang to life and started to throb. Either way, he could make do with a quickie. "Forty minutes. Fine."

"Rick..."

Pinpricks of apprehension pierced Rick's shoulders. "What? Henry?"

"Yes, he may be here. Come anyway."

He agreed to come, then hung up, shoving the concerns about his brother aside.

"What is it with you and your brother?"

Not wanting to waste his time with Amber talking about Henry, Rick wiped away the scowl that had settled on his face. "You don't need to know any more than I already told you."

She lifted up on her elbow. "He's your brother, part of who you are."

That's what I wanted her to think...

So why, now that she was making the connection, did he want to convince her that he wasn't a waste of humanity like Henry? For the first time, he started to dread the moment when she found out just how much like Henry he really was.

But that time hadn't come yet.

His gaze inched across to Amber's gloriously naked body. "We have better things to do than worry about my brother." He lunged forward, flipping her over, sliding her arms above her head and pinning her to the bed with his weight. Her breasts bounced, her nipples turned hard. He used his grasp to shake her slightly, making her breasts jiggle again.

He covered one nipple with his mouth, pulled the tiny peak in and flicked his tongue across it. A satisfying groan rumbled in her chest and she wrapped one leg around him. He pushed it down, rolled her onto her side and thrust his pulsing shaft into her smooth heat with a single furious motion.

She gasped. He drove harder, thrusting in fully, blood rushing through his veins. The explosive jerks of her orgasm squeezed him harder, his release started in a flash. His mind flooded with need and his body took over. Driven by his own want, he pounded into Amber until the last wave washed over him.

As his heartbeat began to slow, he ran his lips across her collarbone, murmuring, "Was I... Did I hurt you?"

She arched back to look him in the eye. "No, why would you think that?"

"I..." But he left that unfinished.

How could he ever tell her that his need to possess her was so great, so mind-blowing, that each time he made love to her his control shattered? Rick kissed her lightly then rolled to his feet and headed for the shower.

* * * * *

Ricky nearly leapt from the porch as soon as Rick turned off the ignition. "I have a surprise for you two."

Rick had to wait for Amber to ease down from the truck seat. The short skirt he'd bought her in Fort Meyers looked fantastic but didn't give her much room to move. He grinned at the memory. They'd gone shopping before dinner and she'd teased him with a parade of skirts, each seemingly shorter than the one before it, until he'd threatened to corner her in the fitting room and take care of his throbbing erection. Amber, a traditional girl at heart, did not want to get kicked out of the store for having sex in a fitting room.

"Come on," his father called as he bolted into the house.

Rick twisted his mouth and stayed put. Amber poked him. "Let's go see what he has."

"He thinks we're engaged. Whatever it is, it probably has to do with that."

She slipped around behind him and pushed on his back. "Come on."

Inside, Maria was loading the table with food. Ricky helped Amber into a chair then moved around to pull out the chair for his wife. Rick sat across from Amber, his father across from Maria. There was no fifth place setting.

"He might be by later," Ricky said, but then instantly lightened his tone to continue. "You have to wait until after we eat, then we'll tell you our surprise."

Rick, glad for the reprieve, flipped his napkin onto his lap.

Maria picked up a basket of muffins, passing it to him after taking one herself. "I'm so glad you and Amber weren't hurt in the fire." She looked to Amber. "I heard how brave you were."

Accepting the muffins, Amber said, "It was no big deal. All I did was spray a hose. You would've done the same thing."

"We're really thankful for what you did," Ricky said. "We're lucky to have you as part of our family."

A bright pink flush crept up Amber's face.

"Now you've embarrassed her, Ricky," Maria scolded, swatting at his arm.

"Let's not talk about the fire anymore, okay?" Rick shot a pointed look at his father.

"Agreed." His father winked at Maria. "We have better things to discuss."

Rick's stomach knotted. He really didn't like the sound of that. Hoping to hold off the inevitable, he asked, "After we eat, right?"

Maria and Rickey nodded.

Plates and serving bowls moved around the table. Rick dug into the food with more enthusiasm than he'd expected. After last night's huge dinner, he hadn't anticipated being so hungry. Of course last night's dinner had been followed up by a very long—very physical—night. Something he was going to have to repeat. Those hours of sex didn't even come close to dousing his need for Amber.

His mouth watered, thinking of the sweet taste of her skin, the musky scent of her sex. He could hear her moaning, feel her writhing body pressed against him. The way she responded to him, so swiftly, so perfectly, it was as though without each other they weren't complete.

* * * * *

Rick found himself sitting on the back porch with Amber by his side, while his father and Maria shared a wide lounge chair. The heat of the day hadn't risen yet, the languid setting so at odd with Rick's dread. He knew what was coming, what his father had planned.

Ricky grinned. "Curious, son?"

Amber wiggled. "I am, aren't you?"

Rick braced himself, dreading the words. "Okay. Tell us the surprise."

"We want to host your wedding." His father sat back, beaming and waiting.

Rick mustered up an appropriate expression, surprise mixed with happiness.

His father clapped his hands. "Good idea! Right?" He hugged the woman in his lap. "We'll take care of everything."

Maria poked her man. "Not everything, Ricky. Amber will want to make some arrangements herself." Maria turned her dark eyes to Amber. "Right, dear?"

Amber cast a sidelong glance at Rick before replying. "I haven't thought about it much yet."

Maria leaned forward. "You haven't?"

"That's really nice of you two," Rick broke in before they had time to gang up on Amber for not planning a wedding that was never going to happen. "We'll think about it and let you know."

"What's to think about?" his father pressed. "It's obvious —"

"We haven't planned that far ahead," Amber cut in.

"Why don't you tell father what you're really thinking, you want him to mind his own business."

Henry. Unwelcome as always.

"This doesn't concern you," Rick said.

His brother lumbered closer, staying just at the edge of the group. "But it does concern me, doesn't it?"

Rick started to rise, but Amber stopped him by laying her hand across his arm.

Henry sneered. "You just going to sit there, Richard?"

Rage took over in Rick as he sprung from the couch, his fist grazing Henry's mouth and cheek.

"That's it?" Henry taunted, wiping a smear of blood off his lip.

The protective shield Rick had always held for Henry cracked. Why had he constantly worked to protect someone so thankless? Why had he felt responsible?

Henry rubbed his hands onto his pants. "Too bad things didn't work out differently. You could've been in there with me — learning how to be a real man."

"That's enough." Their father stepped between them, trying in his own way to defuse the hostility. "I can't believe you two are acting this way, in front of the ladies."

Henry's insolent gaze shifted to Ricky. "It's all about appearances, isn't it, Dad?" He turned to Maria, his voice instantly becoming lighter. "Sorry I messed up your morning, Maria."

Rick flinched at his brother's attempt at sincerity. But if Henry was trying to manipulate him, it was working. Whatever problems he and Henry had, they should take care of it on their own, the way they had in the past.

"I apologize too, Maria, Amber."

Amber nodded.

Maria busied herself by smoothing out her skirt. "No need, boys. I've seen your quarrels before." Her tone was neutral yet worry clouded her gaze.

Henry retreated, dropped himself onto a chair, his way of letting everyone know he didn't intend to go anywhere soon. Ricky sat back down.

Pretending as though the whole argument had never happened, Henry grinned over at Rick. "So when are you and your woman getting hitched?"

Beside him, Amber sucked in a sharp breath.

"Soon enough," Rick offered.

Henry leaned back, hooking his legs at the ankle. "Is that enough of an answer for you, Amber? If I was in your shoes, I'd be pretty anxious."

She offered Henry a cool smile, still refusing to answer him.

Maria, always one to smooth over rough patches, came to Amber's rescue. "You can't even imagine what it's like to be a bride."

Henry chuckled, letting his gaze soften, smiling at Amber. "No," he said to Maria, his eyes staying focused on Amber. "You're right about that, Maria."

Maria scooted over to sit beside Amber. "After you left yesterday, I realized we didn't get a chance to go for that walk. Would you like to now?"

Relief wiped across Amber's face. "I'd love to." She turned to Rick. "You don't mind, do you?"

As if reading his mind, Maria patted his knee and said, "I won't keep her long."

After the two of them stepped off the porch, Maria led Amber over to the far corner of the yard, pointing to a mass of butterfly orchids.

Once they were out of earshot, he chose to ignore Henry, turning to his father instead. "That's a generous offer, but honestly, I wasn't expecting you to take care of things."

"You're my son, Rick. I want you to be happy."

"I am happy," he lied.

His dad shook his head. "No, you're not." He stabbed a glance at Henry, "Neither of you are."

"Don't worry about us, Dad," Henry said. "We don't have to have a big place and a woman to make us happy." He looked pointedly at Rick, saying, "Right?"

Rick had no idea what he needed to be happy. His lot in life was living day to day. He'd leave being happy to other people, like Amber, who deserved it.

"I'd change the past, if I could." Ricky got to his feet, moved to the wall. Tapping his fingers across the tackle boxes filling the shelves, he said, "I should've been there for you boys, I wasn't. But I can't go back and change what happened. None of us can."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Dad, if anyone would want to go back and change the past, of the three of us, it's me."

Swinging back, Ricky said, "But if I'd been there for you, maybe..."

Rick knew exactly what his father was thinking, because he'd thought the same thing. Too many times to count. Yet somewhere along the line, Henry should've accepted responsibility for himself. "Dad —"

Ricky squared himself in front of Henry and Rick. "Let's get on with life—the future—our future. The three of us, together. But to do that, we all have to be willing to let go of the past."

Henry flashed a crooked grin at Rick. "Forget everything, I don't think so. But get on with the future? Oh yeah."

Rick let his gaze bounce between his father and brother. He was fairly sure his father's perfect future involved Rick and Amber living happily as husband and wife, while Henry found a worthwhile way to contribute to society. But what was Henry after? No telling. But whatever it was, it was completely at odds with what Ricky wanted.

Neither man was going to be content. But he wasn't going to be the one to point that out. Pushing himself to his feet, Rick said over his shoulder as he left them behind, "I'm going for a walk."

* * * * *

Amber waited on the front porch. Her walk with Maria had left her tired, but relaxed. The tour had been fascinating and complete.

Maria had described the swamps. How they'd been drained so the land could be used for growing sugar. But environmental concerns had changed—now restoring the land back to swamp was a high priority.

She scooted up one step and leaned against the railing.

"He should be back soon."

Amber was struck again by the similarities of father and son. They had the same strong features and commanding presence.

Henry's rage... it might well stem from jealousy...

She pushed the musing aside. Her place in Rick's world was temporary.

"Maria showed me around. It's beautiful here."

"I'm glad you like it. This kind of living isn't for everyone. A lot of women get bored. I'm lucky to have Maria."

"She knows so much, I have to admit I was surprised. Not because she doesn't seem smart, but because she's so quiet."

“Keeping quiet and listening to others is a good way to learn.”

They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes before Rick’s father spoke again. “She was the boys’ tutor.”

Amber looked up and nodded.

“I thought you didn’t know. Does Richard talk much about us?” His voice held a note of sadness. “There might be a lot of things you don’t know about our family.”

Amber felt the truth in what he said, wanted him to know she didn’t have reservations about any of them—except Henry. “I’m glad he brought me to meet you.”

Ricky patted her hair. The awkward gesture reminded her of Rick. Expressing tender emotions was always tough for him too.

“I thought I could trust you.”

Rick’s father didn’t ease back at the sound of his son’s voice instead leaned closer to kiss the top of her head. “You can, son.” He chuckled. “My heart is already taken, you know that.”

“Let’s go home.” Rick reached for her, pulling her to his side in an easy motion.

Over her head, he called goodbye to his father.

Amber waved. “Tell Maria I said thanks for the walk.”

She climbed into the truck and scooted over. Everything seemed so natural that she could almost convince herself the charade was real. That would be dangerous. More heartbreak would ruin her chance of happiness with Christopher.

She leaned back, watching the now-familiar sights pass. She spotted a cluster of dark clouds to the west, an early afternoon storm probably.

Speaking over the rush of air coming in the open windows, pointing to the sky, she said, “We should get started on the chores right away.”

He checked the sky and nodded.

The ride back to his house went quickly. Soon they were pulling into his driveway. He parked next to her rental car, pointed at it.

"Let's return it."

"How will I get back to the airport?"

He twisted his mouth. "I'll take you, Amber."

The car was the last link to the plan she'd arrived with, taking it back would leave her too dependent on Rick. That wasn't what she wanted. When she did go, she'd be going by herself. It had to be that way. "I want to keep it."

Rick frowned as he got out, shoving the keys in his pocket, heading for the pens. Amber pushed open her door and climbed out, following behind him.

Keeping the rental car was a pathetic attempt at keeping control of herself, which was really a lost cause. When it came to Rick, she had no control.

Chapter Eight

Rick knew Amber wanted to be free to leave as soon as she got what she wanted. She was, after all, living up to her end of the bargain. Dealing with Henry's threats was his problem, which he had to deal with on his own. Same as before.

"You take care of the east row, I'll do the west?" he asked her.

She called out her agreement, obviously hungry for some distance, and jogged away from him. After he filled the feed buckets with scraps, he loaded them onto a flat cart and worked his way down the row, pouring the feed in. As usual, the gators merely blinked as he passed. There was no telling when they'd get the urge to strike. Unpredictable. Like Henry.

Rick was beginning to accept that he couldn't save Henry from himself.

But he could protect Ricky and Maria.

Finishing his end, he went to stand beside Amber. Two days had been enough for the sun to redden her face. A cute dusting of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose.

She gestured to the sky. "Let's go sit in the office. After it blows over we can clean the carts and buckets."

Not answering, he simply took her hand, leading her to the small room where they'd spent so many blissful hours. He'd taken the pleasures of her body, over and over, they'd become one.

But as she'd pointed out, it had only been sex. Nothing more.

The first drops beat the ground as Amber got out the mat he kept in the closet and unrolled it. After she took off her shoes, lay on her side, she patted the empty spot beside her. He lowered himself down, but instead of kissing her, pulled her up tight so her back was against his chest, with her sweet ass pressed against his groin. She felt so

right in his arms, with each curve of her matching his, as though she'd been made for him.

No. He had to stop thinking that way. He could enjoy her flesh, but her soul belonged to another man. He had to force himself to accept that. "I want to hear you say the words, I want to hear you say that you love him."

Silence and then she spoke. "He says he loves me."

"That's not what I asked of you."

She tried to shift away, but he wrapped his arms fully around her and held her. After she stopped struggling, she said, "You don't know everything about me, Rick."

Her past couldn't come close to his. "What do you mean?"

"You aren't the only one who held back the truth."

"I did more than hold back the truth. I lied."

"In the end isn't it pretty much the same?"

He rose up on his elbow and nuzzled her neck. "What are you getting at, Amber? What could you possibly have to lie about?"

"I was abandoned. My mom didn't want me, she left me with some friends, then disappeared. After a while the friends passed me off on the child services people."

"You told me about your parents and —"

"They adopted me when I was thirteen."

"Thirteen?"

Thunder rolled overhead. The rain continued, washing away the rest of the world.

"I spent about twelve years being moved from one foster home to the next. One couple almost adopted me, but before it was legal, she got pregnant with their own child. Then they didn't want me."

He squeezed her hard, kissing her neck. "I'm sorry, honey."

Humorless laughter jerked her shoulders. "You didn't do anything."

The thought of Amber alone, feeling unwanted and unloved, tore at his heart. She should never feel that way again.

"I know," he buried his face in her hair. "I know what it's like to be left behind, I know what it feels like to be lonely."

She lifted up and rolled her shoulder back to look at him. "When your mother left?"

He shook his head. "I was thirteen."

"Henry?"

"Ten. It hit him hard, I tried to protect him. Take care of him, keep him out of trouble..."

Amber settled back down. Streams of rain rolled from the roof splattering onto the ground. "Why did she leave? Do you know?"

Easy. "She was bored."

A tight breath caught in Amber's throat. "That's it?"

"Yep."

"Maria told me a bit, about Henry..." She angled her arms across his rib cage. "I don't understand —"

"There's nothing to understand," Rick interrupted. "Henry —"

"No, not about him," she lowered her arm to rest her hand on his hip. "About you. Why did you feel responsible for him?"

In a flash, his most recent image of his younger brother burst into his mind. Henry, not more than an hour after Ricky's "let's band together for a better future" pep talk, loitering near the back corner of the tractor shed with the same losers he'd been hanging around three years ago. Assholes Rick had spent eighteen months getting rid of.

Amber's question hung in the air, mocking Rick.

"But your dad was there," she said, "to look out for him."

"He was around, but not really with us, if you know what I mean. He missed my mom, I guess, kept waiting for her to come back."

"Did you miss her?"

"At first, but I got over it. It doesn't make any sense, missing someone who left you behind." He thought of Amber, how she'd left him behind as well. He'd missed her plenty.

"I missed my mom and I never even met her."

He set his hand over hers, interlaced their fingers. "You do belong to someone, your mother, father, your sister..."

"I know," she whispered. "And I do love them with all my heart. It's just...I want..."

"Someone all your own?"

Her head bumped his chin when she nodded. "That's why I have to marry Christopher." She spoke so softly, she could've been thinking to herself. "He's the first person who ever said they wanted me forever. He's going to buy me a house...we'll have kids..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'll finally belong to someone."

He dropped back down and stared at the ceiling. Restlessness ran deep in his bones, confusion swam in his heart.

As he lay beside her, listening to the rain and watching it drip from the trees, he wanted to take her pain away. The watery curtain protected them from the outside world, even though it was only temporary, Rick was glad for the break from reality.

* * * * *

"The conditions of that will are ridiculous. You're too young to get married."

Unbelievable. After all this time, Anna, seated across from him, acting as though the past decade never happened. Acting as though calling him up and inviting, insisting, they "meet for tea" was the most normal thing in the world.

At least she'd had the decency to choose The Hammocks, a small café minutes from his place, just off Tamiami Trail, instead of some pompous, overpriced restaurant in Naples. Although, judging by her stiff bleached hair and expensive-looking casual

wear, she probably would've preferred to be inside, in air-conditioning. Still, he had to admit, with her intriguing toffee eyes and well-shaped face, she was an extremely attractive woman. He could tell by the way she carried herself, she made a habit of using her looks to her advantage.

She set her steaming cup down and pursed her well-preserved mouth. "Stop gaping, Richie."

He winced. Richie. Her name for him.

She set her hot pink fingertips on his wrist. "Trust me, you don't want that place and neither does she. No woman is going to stay there. It's —"

"Boring?" he supplied.

"Yes. It is." She picked up the cup again, took a small sip. "So be smart about this, cancel the wedding, join forces with Henry and me. I've already talked to a real estate agent from Miami. He's talking big money for the land. We'll sell. A three-way split. That's fair."

He pulled back. Her hand fell onto the crisp, white tablecloth, next to his untouched drink. "Fair?" Disgust uncurled inside him. "What about Ricky and Maria?"

"What about them?" She rolled her eyes, like Henry. "They've had their turn with the place, now it's ours."

"It's their home, Mother."

"So? They'll live somewhere else." She picked up her purse, pushed back from the table. "Mr. Collingwood, the estate attorney, is making time for us tomorrow. He's sure we'll be able to get a judge to see things our way." She slipped a card from her pocket and set it on the table. "Five-fifteen."

She took two steps away and then turned. "We're going ahead, with or without you."

* * * * *

Amber woke up alone. The rain had stopped, but puddles dotted the ground outside the office.

She sat up, stretching her shoulders, working to relieve the kink from sleeping on her side. Because of a chill in the air, they'd redressed after making love the second time, so her clothes were rumpled. When she twisted sideways to smooth out her shirt, she spotted a note on the corner of the desk.

Had to run out

back soon

She touched Rick's masculine scrawl.

It might be silly to want a souvenir of her time with Rick, but she did. She folded the note and tucked it into her back pocket.

She rolled up the mat, tossed it into the closet and then went outside. After getting a can of pop from the refrigerator and a paperback from her backpack, she plopped onto the porch steps.

The book sat next to her, unopened. What kind of woman left her children and husband?

If Amber had a beautiful home and a husband and kids to care for and belong to, she'd never leave. Not if, she told herself, when.

Christopher. Dependable, certain Christopher. All she had to do was find a way to love him then she'd have her dream come true. Simple.

If everything was that easy what was she doing on Rick's porch, longing for him to come back with every beat of her heart?

The plan to get Rick out of her system seemed a cruel joke. Each minute she stayed, she became more intertwined with Rick and the mysteries of his past. But the week was quickly passing, soon she would have kept her end of the deal. Wednesday, the same day Christopher would be back from his trip. Wednesday, the day she planned on going home.

The familiar rumble of Rick's truck caught her attention. She stood to greet him but paused when he slammed on the brakes and then jumped out, clutching a paper bag.

"Next time I won't fall asleep on you," she tried to coax the scowl off his face.

"It's not that, Amber."

He pulled a six-pack of longnecks out, tossed the bag onto the ground. Instead of coming to her, he braced himself against the truck, twisted off the cap of one and then took a long swallow.

She'd had enough of his brooding silence. "What is it, Rick? What's happened?"

He licked his lips, looking right at her. "Nothing."

"What's that mean?"

"Don't worry about it, it doesn't concern you."

He'd pulled her into his life. She deserved at least some answers. "Does it have to do with the—engagement?"

His head jerked up. "What makes you ask that?"

"A hunch." When he didn't say more she knew she was right.

She hopped off the porch and marched toward him. "Tell me, Rick. I have a right to know, seeing how I'm in the middle of this."

"You're not supposed to be in the middle, Amber. That's part of the problem."

"Well I am." She stopped in front of him, "And there's nothing we can do about that now."

She waited, watching him drink. Impatient, she pressed him again. "Does it have to do with your father?"

"Some."

Then she knew. "You had a run-in with Henry."

"No. My mother."

Disbelief crawled across Amber's skin as she listened to Rick's news. When he finished, he raked a hand through his hair. "I don't..." He emptied the beer, whipped the bottle to across the yard. "I can't let them get away with it, but I can't..."

"You need to tell your father and Maria."

He winced. "I can't."

"Why?"

"One thing will lead to another," he pushed away from the truck—and her. "There are some things I don't want them to know."

"What?" She went after him, took his arm and guided him back to the truck. "Tell me, Rick," she said, slipping up to sit on the tailgate.

The storm that brewed in his gaze was fierce as she guided him to stand between her legs, where she could touch him easily. After a few coaxing caresses, Rick opened up to her again, told her the darkest details of his past. By the time he finished, his face was drawn, his shoulders slumped.

"That isn't who you are now."

"I sold drugs, Amber."

"To pay off your brother's debts, to keep him alive."

The muscles in Rick's neck twitched. "Henry doesn't care about anybody—just himself."

"You really think he and Anna will go through with it?"

Rick's gaze skipped across the singed roof of his house, his anger renewed, grew thicker and clawed at his heart. "Somebody has to stop them."

"There has to be some way—"

"My grandfather was...old-fashioned. He left a will..." Rick pulled in a deep breath and then blew it out. "If I marry before I turn twenty-five, I get the place."

"You get it?"

"Inherit it. All of it. If I own it, her claim wouldn't be any good."

He saw the confusion on her face. "It has to do with how the will and estate were drawn up. When I marry – it's mine. No strings attached."

The image of Rick living in the beautiful home – with some other woman – flashed through Amber's mind. Jealousy whipped through her, leaving her stomach tight.

"You see, Amber, that's the only way I can keep Henry away from getting what he wants."

A pang of hurt twisted Amber's chest. His past had shocked her some, but he'd done what he had to protect those he loved. But the fact that he'd used her stung. If only he'd told the truth from the beginning. He must not have trusted her, or even cared enough to bother. "Is that why you wanted me to pretend to be engaged to you?"

"At first I wanted to keep an eye on Henry, see what he was up to, maybe..."

"Stop him from doing something?"

Rick affirmed that with a short nod. "Now, with my mother in town..."

Her family had taught her that love made you strong, capable of doing anything. Amber wouldn't walk away from a chance to help Rick, Ricky and Maria.

She came around to stand in front of him. "Let's do it."

He blinked. "But the only way is –"

"To get married. To me."

"Amber, you can't mean that." Rick pushed her hands away. "Have you been listening to what I told you? About what I did?"

"Forget that, you did it because you had to." She stalked after him. "We have to do it, you said yourself, it's the only way to be sure."

"This isn't your problem. Have you forgotten why you agreed to stay? That contract. And you're getting married to..." He couldn't bring himself to say the name.

"Christopher," she supplied for him.

He lifted one shoulder. "Whatever."

She pressed on, still intent on making Rick see the whole picture. "I do plan on marrying him. Christopher."

"That's why this idea will never work. You're leaving in a few days."

"While I was talking with Maria, she said they could be ready in two days."

"What about a license?"

"She says your dad has connections. He can get one right away."

"You and Maria had quite a talk."

Amber ignored his sarcasm. "Not really. I know she's hoping we'll take them up on their offer."

He scoffed. "They think we're really engaged."

"I know. So we'll get married, your dad and Maria will keep their home."

Ridiculous. There had to be another angle, he looked for the weakest link in a very weak plan. "What about after?"

"After?"

"After the wedding, after we become husband and wife." He put emphasis on the second part of the sentence, hoping she'd grasp the idiocy of her suggestion.

Her pretty face twisted in thought. "We let attorneys work it out. Get it annulled...divorce..."

"Amber, you're crazy. That would only make matters worse."

"From what you say, the situation can't get any worse."

Unfortunately, she was right. He had to send Henry and Anna packing, make sure Ricky and Maria always had a place to live. "Do you agree to end it right away?"

She reddened. "Of course."

"Okay, we'll do it."

Rick was about to clean up yet another of Henry's messes. This would be the last one. He didn't have a choice, but Amber did. "You sure about this?"

"You can't let them take your father's place." She shoved her hands in her back pockets. "You'll want it...someday."

No. He'd never cared about owning the house, wanted no part of it now, yet he couldn't let Henry and Anna have it either. "Let's get it over with." He took her hand. "Let's go tell my dad and Maria."

They took the back road to the plantation in silence.

Rick cast a sidelong glance at Amber when he pulled up in front of his father's house. Her lips were tight, her gaze focused straight ahead. That stubborn gaze had reappeared in her eyes. That sweet smile she'd worn earlier, gone.

He'd wanted to set her on edge, push her away, so he should be thankful for the stiffness in her shoulders and the distance in her eyes. Especially now that their ties would be even tighter. Yet satisfaction evaded him. Instead, he faced an emotionless void. He fought against it, looking for a way to get control. "We should tell my dad we want to get it done as soon as possible."

She pushed her hair away from her face, replying quietly, "My flight is Wednesday night."

Going around the other side of the truck, he helped her down. "I know this isn't easy for you, I know —"

"Don't worry about it, Rick." She avoided his touch to hurry up the steps and knock on the door. Her rejection stung, even though his claim to her was only a ruse.

Rick wanted to get it over with. He spoke as soon as his father swung open the door. "We thought it over. We're taking you up on your offer."

A smile crossed his father's face as he pulled them into a tight embrace. Just as quickly he pushed them back, turning to call into the house. "Maria! They said yes!"

The moment he finished yelling, he grabbed Amber, kissing each cheek. "When? Soon?" He winked at Rick. "Very soon?"

Rick nodded. "Right away – as soon as possible."

Maria appeared at the doorway, her eyes misty with happiness. "Richard! You're going to be so happy, I just know it," she said, taking his arms. "Amber is wonderful. And so pretty too."

His father escorted them inside. "Come, we'll make plans."

Amber's happiness seemed forced, but only he knew her well enough to notice.

His father led them into the formal front room, the one he only used to entertain. "Sit down, Maria will get the champagne."

"You don't need to do that," Amber interjected. "You already toasted us once."

"So what!" His father took four champagne glasses out of the floor-to-ceiling cabinet.

Maria had already gone off to get a bottle.

"There's no point in arguing, honey." Rick took Amber's hand. They sat on the white velvet couch.

As he watched Amber and Maria talk about what to serve at the reception, it struck him. He'd learned more about Amber, become closer to her, in the past few days than he had in the months they'd spent together last summer. Still there was more. She'd given herself to him physically, yet she was still holding back a tiny piece of herself.

That last piece of her heart, she must be saving for Christopher.

Rick's jaw clenched.

Maybe it was wrong, but he wanted all of her. No, not wanted. Needed.

* * * * *

Amber grinned wearily over the empty plates. Maria and Ricky had insisted she and Rick stay for dinner. Maria had been busy the whole time, making notes and starting lists.

"Are you sure Wednesday isn't too soon?" Maria asked, looking over her calendar again. "Not that we want to wait a day longer and Wednesday is the soonest we can get the license."

Her flight home was on Wednesday night. "That'll be perfect."

Ricky frowned. "What about a dress?"

Maria patted his hand. "Amber and I will go shopping tomorrow. In Naples."

He beamed with approval. "You'll find something there. It's not like it used to be. There're a lot of nice shops." Ricky said to Rick, "You can spare her for a few hours so she can buy a wedding dress, can't you?"

"Of course," Rick answered his father, shifting toward her. "It'll be worth the wait."

His heavy stare sent shivers down Amber's spine, almost as if for that split second, he did want to marry her. She banished the thought. She didn't belong to him and never would. He'd made that as plain as possible.

A twinge of pain pierced her heart and nestled there. Rick would live in that huge mansion someday, with a woman he wanted. Someone he thought good enough to belong to a wealthy plantation owner.

Not her. She was only his summer fling. In his mind, she wasn't good enough to belong to him. The truth hurt. Yet it would help end the fantasies she'd hidden deep in her heart.

Chapter Nine

"So you're to be my wife." Rick turned his wrist to check his watch, "In about sixty hours."

Amber sidestepped to the water's edge. Gentle waves lapped across her bare feet. Moonlight illuminated her steps and made the tawny sand glow. The setting was perfect for real lovers. For the two of them it was just make believe.

What if she gave up and let herself believe, for the few days she had left? Would it really matter? Would it really change anything?

She'd already lost her heart to Rick. Even though the gift didn't mean much to him she wouldn't have done anything differently. Couldn't have done anything differently.

Now she had the answer to one of the questions that kept her up night after night for almost a year.

She'd never be over Rick. Never.

But she did have a bit more time with him. She'd make the most of that and then take the memories back home.

The evening breeze blew over them, bringing with it the salty smell of the Gulf of Mexico.

"So it's all set for Wednesday." He came up behind her to kiss her softly on the neck. "Do you want to change your mind?"

"No, of course not." She leaned back, resting her head on his chest. "He's your father, Rick."

Amber's gaze wandered across the beach. It was after midnight, the sunbathers and busy families were long gone. The place was empty and mysterious, romantic and magical.

Rick smoothed her hair away from her neck and nuzzled her ear. "I know a secluded place... "I used to go there to look at the girlie magazines my friends and I got at the truck stop on I-Seventy-Five."

His mischievous eyes gleamed under the moon's rays, chasing away her melancholy. "Girlie magazines?"

He reached for her hips and squeezed. "I got some good ideas from those articles."

"Oh yeah?"

"Want me to show you?"

He jogged back to his truck, grabbed the beach blanket he always kept under the seat, threw it over his shoulder and trotted back.

Laughing, she scooted away from him. "Maybe I don't want to go."

"Maybe you don't have a choice."

He caught her easily, scooping her into his arms, tossing her over his shoulder. She kicked lightly against him and then tried to cover his face with the blanket, but he easily carried her through the shadows, leaves and sticks brushing across her, making her arms and legs tingle.

When he set her down, they were on a tiny piece of the beach completely surrounded by thick growth, their own piece of paradise.

After she helped him spread the blanket out, he slipped his shirt off over his head. Amber took her time, gazing at his fine muscled chest and powerful shoulders. She'd seen his body hundreds of times, but it never ceased to have an impact on her. That fascinating combination of taut, smooth skin and strength.

She swallowed hard as he took off his shorts, then his briefs. The raw untamed power of his body, obvious even in the dim moonlight, nearly overwhelmed her. But she had no reason to fear him. It was the churning in her own soul that was a threat.

That she could not control.

But Rick?

Hot, hard and wanting her.

He gazed down, knowing he turned her on, knowing her heart thrummed with need for him. He'd never really be hers, but she could have him for this night and the others before the wedding. And she could make sure she had as many vivid memories as possible to take home with her.

"Close your eyes, Rick."

Completely confident in the naked splendor of his body, he eyed her from above and grinned. "Why should I?"

"I asked you to," she replied, stepping forward. "That's all the reason you need."

After a smirk, he snapped his eyes shut. "Satisfied?"

With another step she reached him. Even though his erect shaft strained for attention, she started at his wrist, skimming her fingertips across his warm, tanned skin, up his forearms.

"You need my eyes closed for this?"

"Be quiet," she said, pausing at the sharp curve of his elbow. "Let me think."

Raising his arm slightly, he flexed his biceps, giving her the chance to spread her fingers wide, soak in the warmth of his skin, the tight slope of his muscles.

When she reached his shoulder, he jutted his hips forward, rubbing the swollen tip of his head across her abdomen. Even through the fabric of her shirt, its hard press made her shiver. Throbbing and thick, it promised to fill her, promised to make her whole.

But once he took control, she wouldn't have this chance.

"Not yet," she said, her voice a ragged whisper.

"No reason to wait," he groaned with his eyes still closed, reaching for her.

She ducked under his arms, swept around behind him, absorbing the fantastic view of his bare ass.

His arms swung wide as he realized she'd swerved away.

He spun, grabbed her, kissed her. His mouth became a weapon of pleasure, one he wielded ruthlessly, reminding her he was the one who set the pace, the one in control. Her breath caught in her throat, he took advantage and glided his tongue across her lips, licking her control away in great, smooth strokes.

“Lie down,” he said, his words a puff of air across her wet lips.

Willingly, she surrendered to the inevitable, dropping to her butt.

He knelt between her legs, unzipped her shorts. She pulled in a quick breath when he laid his mouth on her stomach and sucked gently on her navel. He traced a path down, moving her shorts and panties out of the way as he went.

She lifted her hips, begging him to continue, but he moved too slowly, so she twisted, pulling her clothes out of his way.

“Easy, girl,” he scolded. “We’re doing this my way,” he said, pushing her onto her back and then hooking her legs over his shoulders. “Cross your ankles.”

Drained by the expectation, she whimpered and whispered his name. He caressed her bottom with his rough palms, kneading her skin in circles. She dropped her back, the bright stars from the heavens winking at her.

The heat of his mouth danced across her sensitive flesh, until finally settling at the opening of her core. He sucked at the tiny bud hidden inside, pinpricks of pleasure flashed across her nerve endings, but it wasn’t enough.

After each lick, he lifted his head and paused, drawing out her desire. Making her squirm and buck.

She lifted her hips, begging him to take more. He held her body in place and whispered, “After tonight you’ll know, no matter what—you’ll always belong to me.”

Rick had Amber right where he wanted her, so he took his time with her clit, tasting and sucking it and then thrusting his tongue high up inside her. The sweet rasp of her

pants, the way her ass tightened in his palms, he wanted it all. Satisfaction wouldn't come until his imprint covered every inch of her.

Letting the telltale stilling of her hips guide him, he took her to the brink of climaxing three times before shifting back from her slick, swollen sheath, setting her legs down, one on each side of him and then coming up on all fours, his face inches above hers, the tip of his straining cock sliding nestled between the inflamed lips of her cunt, the slick juice on his mouth.

"Go ahead, Rick," her eyes fluttered open, "love me."

Her body was there for him, to take, to possess. With one strong thrust, he could be inside her.

But not yet.

"Take your shirt off." Running his palms up under her shirt and then rolling back onto his heels, he said, "I want to see you in the moonlight."

She arched up, pulled her shirt over her head and then threw it. Pale light skimmed across the curves of her neck, spilled across her shoulders and illuminated the warm dip between her breasts.

He stared, trying to memorize each curve, knowing that his memories would never come close to satisfying him. After she left he could fuck a hundred women and he'd still want her — only her.

"The way you look at me..." She pinched the front clasp on her bra, unhooking it and then wriggling to get it off. Her breasts fell free, bouncing invitingly as she tossed the scrap of clothing aside. "No one has ever looked at me like that."

"No one else ever will, Amber." He sucked in the salty night air, skimmed his gaze across her soft skin, so creamy and pale except for her hands, which had turned brown from the few days of sun. "Lift your breasts."

Confusion swept across her face, so he said, "Lift them, in your hands."

She cupped her full, round flesh, raised her hands high for him. The fair skin mounded in her palms, the tight nipples just under her thumbs. Dropping down, he closed his mouth over one of the tight peaks. Sweet. Perfect. He pulled the nipple deeper into his mouth, she moaned, her hands moving to clench his shoulders, her nails scratching his skin. He took her other breast in his hand, enjoyed the weight of it in his palm, lightly caressed the soft mound then pinched her tip.

Amber dropped her hands, wrapped her smooth fingers around his rock-hard cock. Shoulders tensing, he sucked in a sharp breath, her breast dropped from his mouth. Its tip, glimmering wet in the moonlight, begging for more attention, was out of his reach.

Her hands worked his shaft, pressure building quickly as she tried to slide him into her hot, dripping center. He tugged her fingers away—she'd be the one begging for release, not him.

"Rick..." She threw her head back, exposing her neck and shoving her delicious round breasts up into his face. Her request came out as a groan. "Now..."

He rocked shortly, with tiny thrusts, ignoring her when she wiggled, trying to force him farther inside.

"You'll always belong to me, Amber."

He halted. "Say it."

She nodded, a dazed, sexy smile softening her face.

"Say it, honey. I want to hear the words come from your mouth."

"I'll always be yours, Rick."

Satisfied, he plunged into her, shoving hard, as deeply as her body allowed. She jerked beneath him, her hands clawing his ass, her tight core welcoming him, bringing forth an explosive, sudden burst. His release happened on the tail end of hers. He squeezed his eyes shut, groaning as the last of his seed poured into her, marking her as his, forever.

* * * * *

Amber winced from guilt as she hung up the payphone. She hadn't lied to her mother, only omitted parts of the whole story. She could hardly tell her the truth about her reason for staying in Florida the extra days.

The Naples sidewalk was busy with both meandering tourists and business-minded locals, but Amber easily made her way toward the small seafood restaurant Maria had chosen.

"It won't be too hot for you, will it?" Maria lifted one hand. "There's a nice breeze."

"Outside is fine," she answered, sliding into a chair.

"Good." Maria nodded in agreement.

The waitress filled their water glasses, took their drink orders and left.

Maria rested her chin on her open palm. "I'm sorry we didn't find a dress this morning. I have a feeling we'll find the perfect one this afternoon."

To avoid Maria's observant gaze, Amber pretended to study the menu. She had a feeling that the older woman would be able to see right through her if she offered even the tiniest glimpse of apprehension.

Showing enthusiasm for buying a wedding dress for Rick to see her in wasn't the problem, but whenever Maria wanted to talk about her future with Rick, she had to switch topics in a hurry, before the sadness in her heart reflected in her eyes.

When she felt she had her true emotions hidden, she replied, "I'm sure too, Maria." She took a sip of water. "Thanks for coming. It's more fun having you along than it would've been alone."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. You've done so much for the family."

"Oh I don't know..." Amber took the lemon out of her water and squeezed some of the juice.

"Love has a way of taking care of things."

She poked the lemon down into the ice. "You love Rick's father, don't you?"

Maria's expression was wistful. "Yes, he's my whole world."

"I can tell he feels the same about you."

"It wasn't always that way. After his wife left, he'd spend his days sitting on the porch waiting for her to come back. He wasn't able to enjoy his boys, wasn't really there for them. The fighting started."

"That must have been horrible."

"It was. Henry's arrest made everything worse. Ricky was devastated, wouldn't say a word, until..."

"Until when?"

"One day, months after he and Richard had that last big argument, I took him a lunch. Every day after that, I sat with him on the porch. At first, he wouldn't talk to me." The corners of her mouth curved up. "But he did eat the food."

"Then one day he talked to me. Not about the boys, but about other things. Like how the fields were going, what prices he expected to get."

"Your love changed him."

"Just as your love has changed Richard."

But Amber's love hadn't really changed Rick...

The waitress came with their Caesar salads and set them on the table. Amber tucked her napkin onto her lap, took her time drizzling dressing across the lettuce and chicken, her mind wandered.

Christopher.

He was a decent man, deserved a woman who'd love him with her whole heart, the way she loved Rick. Christopher had been good to her. It was time to tell him that she couldn't marry him. Not ever. Next chance she had, she'd call him.

Rick.

Never in her life could she ever remember feeling so close to someone but so alone. Where Rick was concerned, her emotions had never made any sense.

"Eat up, honey. We have to get shopping."

Pretending to be caught up in the moment, Amber stuffed a wide bite of salad into her mouth.

“That’s better!”

* * * * *

Amber turned, looking at herself in the three-way mirror. The simple dress stopped just above her knees, tiny spaghetti straps ran across her shoulders. A detachable train hung from her waist.

Over her shoulder she could see Maria’s approval. “It’ll knock Richard senseless.”

The tiny redheaded salesgirl nodded. “Him—and every single man in the room.” She tugged at the hem. “And it fits perfectly. You don’t even need alterations.”

But the price tag—with that much money she could buy textbooks for an entire year. Amber ran her fingertips over the delicate beading trimming the neckline. The dress was, in a single word, perfect. And since there would be no other dress for her... “This is the one.”

“Wonderful,” the redhead agreed, helping Amber step down from the fitting platform. “Let’s get you out of it. We’ll have it hung to take home.”

Thankful to have a few minutes to be by herself, after the salesgirl came to take the gown, Amber took her time getting dressed. When she came out of the dressing room, Maria stood by the exit, holding the white garment bag.

The salesgirl zipped past, the rejected dresses draped across her arm. “Thanks. I know you’ll be happy with it.”

Confused, Amber stepped toward the cashier, but Maria stopped her. “We’re all set. Remember, Ricky said he wanted to take care of everything.”

“I can’t let you do this,” she protested.

Maria turned to the door with a wink. “It’s already done. Let’s go.”

Amber swallowed against the guilt welling in her throat. How would they feel after they discovered the wedding was just a ploy? And the reason Rick didn't tell them the whole truth. Sorry they'd ever met her? But if the ruse helped them keep their home...

"Come on, Amber." Maria slipped through the door.

Amber thanked the salesgirl then followed Maria out onto the busy street.

Chapter Ten

Wednesday morning Amber stared at her plate of eggs, only picking at them to appease Maria. Later that afternoon she was to become Rick's wife.

Her phone call to Christopher hadn't been too bad. He hadn't even seemed surprised when she told him she couldn't marry him. He hadn't begged or even asked why not. He'd merely said thanks for calling, take care, goodbye. And that was the end.

There would never be an end to her feelings for Rick. Whether he wanted her or not, her heart would always be his.

"Too excited to eat?"

Rick's father stood in the doorway. He was so thrilled about the wedding, it just wasn't fair.

"Me," he patted his stomach with both hands, "I could eat all the food Maria has in that kitchen."

"You'd better not. Then there won't be any for the guests."

He rubbed his jaw, pretending to think that over.

Maria appeared with a steaming cup of the dark Cuban coffee. "Leave the girl alone. I'll have your breakfast in a minute."

Amber reassured Ricky that he wasn't bothering her then turned back to her food, trying to keep her hands busy, her mind occupied. Trying not to think that someday Rick would sit at this table, with his wife out in the big kitchen making him breakfast.

She glanced up to find Ricky studying her.

"My son..." He flipped his fork over in his hand and then carefully set it on the table. "He loves you. He just doesn't know how to handle it. It scares him. Take things one day at a time, okay?"

Amber reflected, unable to come up with a response.

He spoke again, lightening his tone. "Maria tells me your dress is beautiful, but I told her any dress on you would be beautiful."

Amber blushed at the compliment, mumbled her thanks, after which she turned back to picking at her food. After a few minutes of shifting the food from one place to another, she bid Ricky good morning and took her plate out to the kitchen.

Three caterers in white coats loomed by the sink, two more marched in to add trays and boxes to the already overflowing countertop.

Amber slipped her plate into the dishwasher and then ducked outside.

The ceremony was to start at noon, two and a half hours away. She'd agreed to meet Maria in one of the guest rooms to dress at ten thirty. That gave her an hour to relax. She headed away from the driveway, to the path that Maria had shown her when she'd taken her on the tour.

The path wound through the thick shrubs. As she admired the plants, she tried to memorize the wide leaves and their fascinating texture. The calls of the birds were already part of her memory because she'd often heard them in her dreams.

Guilt for what she and Rick were doing outweighed any excitement the ceremony offered, yet she couldn't squelch the bittersweet happiness at the prospect of being Rick's bride. How would he react when he saw in her the dress? Would it affect him the way Maria suggested?

Time passed quickly. She retraced her steps. It was a quarter to eleven by the time she'd reached the house.

She dodged the uniformed men carrying chairs through the side yard and hurried up the stairs. Just as she'd expected, Maria was waiting in the guest room, pacing nervously.

Maria tapped a hair brush against her palm. "Where've you been?"

She started to reply, but the older woman hushed her, whisked her into a chair in front of a dressing table and started brushing her hair with long practiced strokes.

"You really know what you're doing."

"I used to do Rick's mother's hair. She loved to dress up and go out."

Anna. "What was she like?"

"Beautiful. Not like any other woman I've ever met. She could've been an actress or a model. She turned heads wherever she went."

Amber tried to detect jealousy in Maria's voice but there was none. "You liked her?"

"We were never friendly. I worked for her, you know. That makes a difference." She stretched back. "Here, put on this robe before I pin it up."

Amber slipped out of her clothes and wrapped herself in the silky pink robe. Maria went back to pinning Amber's hair up. After a few minutes of silence, she spoke softly.

"The missus loved her boys, in her own way. She spoiled, Henry more than Rick. Because he was younger, I suppose."

"Do you know where she is now?"

Maria caught Amber's eye in the mirror. "Actually, she's here."

Were she and Rick acting too late? Did Anna already have a legal hold on the plantation? "She's here for the wedding?"

Maria chuckled. "What other reason could there be?" She lowered her arms. "Maybe there's hope for Anna and the boys to work things out. You've changed all our lives for the better, Amber."

"Have you talked to her — Anna?"

"I was with Ricky. She said she had to come, because she knew Rick was the type of man to only get married once. She didn't want to miss it."

"Has Rick talked to her?"

"Don't you worry about her, honey. I really don't think she's here to cause trouble. Believe me, if that had been why she'd come, she would have already started."

Amber prayed that was the truth.

Maria stepped back. "All finished."

Maria had swept up most of Amber's dark hair, leaving just a few wisps on the sides. The subtle sophistication was perfect.

Amber touched the delicate tendrils. "You're amazing. I don't know what I could've managed on my own."

"I'm just happy you like it. I'll leave you alone to do your face, then I'll be back to help with the dress." She looked at the clock on the bedside table. "I need go check on the appetizers, make sure they know which ones I want out first. See you in twenty minutes."

Amber unzipped her makeup bag and took out her eyeliner, mascara, eye shadow and lipstick. The few days in the sun had colored her face, she only needed a light touch, so she left the blush and other makeup in the bag.

She finished quickly then stood to stretch and wait for Maria.

"Come in." She answered to the light rapping on the door. Expecting Maria, she moved to get the dress from the closet.

"Don't bother dressing for me."

Henry. In a tired-looking suit. Amber pulled the robe tighter and glided back as he strolled into the room, closing the door behind him.

She curved around, crossed to the door and rested her hand on the handle. "I'm waiting for Maria."

"You know why my big brother is marrying you, don't you?"

"Is that your business?"

He laughed, the sound making Amber's throat tighten with disgust. "It seems to me that it is, since his marriage affects me."

He lumbered closer. "Rick's just using you, you know."

She straightened her shoulders, ignored the whiskey scent of his breath.

"How about you turn the tables on him?" he asked. "Back out, I'll see that you're paid for your trouble."

Unafraid, she tucked her hands under her arms and lifted her chin. "I know about that scheme with your mother. I'm not interested and you may as well give up the whole idea."

"Sure. Why should you be, when you can get the whole enchilada? Well, Anna may have given up on the idea, but I haven't." A flash of aimless wrath blazed in his eyes. "Tell your husband, I'm going to stash his wedding present—so he can have the fun of finding it. Tell him I said to have a hot time."

Maria appeared right after Henry left.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine." Even more sure that she was doing the right thing, Amber lifted the white garment bag from the closet. "Let's get me dressed. I have a man to marry."

* * * * *

Rick's father was standing guard over him, seemingly delighting in his discomfort. If he did so much as pull on the stiff shirt collar, Ricky would be all over him.

To avoid his scrutinizing stare, Rick crossed the study to look out the window. The chairs were already set up and the garden was buzzing with people. Children who'd been babies the last time he saw them chased each other around the yard.

"Only about twenty more minutes, son."

"I don't care what time it is," he grumbled in response.

His father scoffed. "You don't have to convince me. I know how anxious you are. From the look on your face I wouldn't be surprised if you kicked everyone out right after the ceremony so you could—"

"That's enough." Rick should have cut him off sooner.

His father only chuckled. "I guess I'll go check on things. Make sure there are enough chairs – or greet the guests – or something."

"You do that."

His father's grating laughter rang in Rick's ears as he left. "Stay gone," he muttered, even though his father wasn't the source of his irritation. Amber was. More specifically, the change in her.

She had definitely gotten over him.

He'd been so busy wanting it, he hadn't stopped to think how he'd feel when it did happen. Like his soul had been torn to shreds.

Thank God the stupid ceremony would be done and over with soon, she'd be pronounced his wife and then she'd leave. Go back home to the man who was going to give her everything she needed, a home, kids, security.

Those things he'd never offered her.

He paced the small room, passing the photographs spread on the walls. There was one of him and Henry fishing, one of him and his dad making ice cream and even one of the three of them together on the front porch. He paused. There were no pictures of his mother.

He scanned the rest of the room. It had always had a full display. He clearly remembered several of his mother.

So his father had moved on with his life, without the woman he had once loved beyond reason. Perhaps Rick too would find a way to move on after Amber left.

Anxious, he started pacing. His third time across the floor, a woman outside caught his eye.

Anna.

Dressed in a light blue pantsuit and chatting peacefully with Maria. No lawyers by her side, no legal documents waving.

Impossible.

"It's time, Rick."

Rick turned to find the in-his-fifties pastor of Maria's church standing in the doorway. The man's deep tan would've looked out of place anywhere besides southern Florida. "You ready?" he asked, smoothing the lapels of his navy jacket.

An enthusiastic reply was expected. Rick wasn't sure he could fake out a man who made a living reading people, but he tried anyway. "Yes, sir." He hesitated after a step. "Sir? Has there been any trouble?"

The pastor's eyebrows curled, "What kind of trouble?"

Rick's gaze darted toward the window, fell on Anna who had been seated in the front row, beside Ricky and Maria. "With any of the guests?"

"Come on then," he said.

Rick followed, slipping into the garden. The rows of white chairs were nearly full, some of the people turned to watch him walk toward the flower-covered arch set up under a cluster of Slash Pine.

As he passed the guests, he started to feel like a fool, about to exchange vows, vows that meant nothing.

He could call the whole thing off.

His father was making his way toward him, to stand with him as his best man. He could tell him now that the wedding was just a sham. He opened his mouth, but the music started, his bride appeared and his world narrowed to include only one other person.

Amber walked toward him, an unearthly vision in smooth white and bare skin. Tiny beads glinted in the rays of sunlight streaming through the windows, and thin straps that were just asking to be shoved aside ran across her shoulders.

The music stopped when she reached his side, she took his hand and he instinctively wrapped his fingers over hers.

The pastor started the ceremony.

Rick spoke the vows, all the while staring at Amber, wondering again why she was going through with the ceremony.

She pitied him?

"You may kiss your bride."

Rick held back. When she looked up at him with her soft green eyes, his emotions took over. He reached for her, kissing her as though they were back on the secluded island, where he'd declared that she would always belong to him.

He forgot the people watching him, until Amber gently pushed him away. His father was first to hug him, kiss Amber and offer congratulations.

For the next hour Rick was forced to accept well wishes from dozens of people.

His mother had come by, offered her congratulations and promised to stop by so they could "catch up". Maybe there was hope for them to have some sort of relationship. But who knew, that was a question for the future.

Janice, the woman who worked at the post office, brought Carolina, the woman who ran the gas station. Steve, from the Everglades City fish camp, spent fifteen minutes going on about the wonders of married life. Friends and relatives alike shook his hand, smacked him on the shoulder and kissed his bride.

He wished they'd all go away.

Finally the crowd thinned and people began to eat. At Amber's insistence Maria had agreed to skip all the traditional wedding events, with the exception of cutting the cake.

Rick waited by the cake, holding the knife. He'd given up the fake happiness, just wanted to cut the cake so they could get out of there. Amber had a plane to catch.

She came over to him, with Ricky on one side and Maria on the other, looking like she was having the time of her life, as if it was a real wedding.

The last picture was taken and to the raucous cheers of those still celebrating, he hustled her out of the door.

* * * * *

Amber lifted the train of her dress as she dashed across the lawn to keep up with Rick.

"What's bothering you?" she asked, after she caught up with him beside his truck. "Did Anna make more threats? She was nothing but polite to me."

He crossed in front of the hood, spoke to her across it. "No. Not at all. She gave us her best wishes."

Hating to see the dress turn into a mass of wrinkles, she dropped the train. "Is it Henry? Did he say something to you about some hidden wedding gift?"

"Henry is full of shit," Rick replied swinging himself into the truck. "He's also my problem." He shoved the passenger door open, "We're done. Let's go."

The etched lines in his face startled her. He looked the same as that first day. How? After everything they'd been through?

She slipped in and sat silently as he drove her back to his place. He slammed on the brakes, tumbled out and jogged up his steps only to return a few seconds later with all her things. Amber stood, her heart splitting in two while he stacked her stuff in the back seat.

After he slammed the rental door, he spun. "Do you have it ready?"

She blinked.

"That paper you want me to sign."

Oh. That.

Amber dropped the bouquet she'd grabbed just before he'd pulled her out the door and went to get her backpack. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she refused to acknowledge them as she dug around to find the paper and a pen.

He signed it quickly, handed it back to her and backed up. "I'll call you, we'll work it out... the legal stuff."

"Fine, Rick. Your way, start to finish." She shoved the paper into her bag next to the papers he'd saved from the fire and tossed the bag into her car.

When she straightened to say goodbye, the only thing greeting her was the slam of Rick's door.

With shaking fingers she untied the train of her dress, rolled it up. Next, she slipped out of the dress, rolled it up as well. She peeled off her hose, slipped off her shoes and put them on top of the dress.

Then she dug out the outfit she'd had on when she arrived, put it on. She picked up the neat pile of white and carried it to his porch, laid it in front of his door and left.

Chapter Eleven

Rick rubbed his eyes and took another drink of the longneck. Three days of drinking hadn't helped him clear his brain. The image of Amber taking off her wedding dress was still viciously clear.

"Henry's been arrested."

Rick had been so self-absorbed, he hadn't even noticed his father standing on his tired porch planks.

"They caught him on the side road with a load in the trunk. Guess he was about to turn on to the property." Ricky spoke again. "Looks like he'll be gone awhile."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"Not surprised, just disappointed." His father swatted at mosquito. "How's the rebuild coming?"

Rick pointed to the stack of lumber that had been delivered two days ago. "Haven't started yet."

"Been busy?"

"Busy being an ass."

His father jumped off the porch and scanned the yard.

"Where's Amber?"

"Gone." He drank the last of the beer then rose to get another. "Want a beer?"

His father paused, studied him. "Okay."

Rick ducked in and returned with two fresh bottles. His father accepted one. Rick set the other down instead of drinking it.

"She's not coming back. I lied to you, Dad. We only got married so I could get your place."

Ricky took a draw of beer, dropping into the folding chair next to the door. "You're not acting like a guy who wants my place."

"I don't."

"Why the bother?"

"Henry and Anna had this deal cooking." Rick changed his mind, picked up the bottle and took a drink. Then he told his father the whole story.

"Why didn't you tell me what you and Amber were up to?"

"You'd have asked too many questions."

"Like what?"

"Like questions that would make you realize I had something to do with what happened before. That I...helped him."

Ricky tipped his head, eyed him carefully. "Why weren't you arrested?"

"Got lucky I guess." Rick saw no need to tell his father every little detail. "I managed to get rid of the stuff he left behind, pay off Henry's debts, without getting caught."

"I blamed myself too, for what happened to Henry, for a long time. Until Maria made me realize he made his own choices."

"You're not angry with me?"

"Not about that." Ricky shook his head in disbelief. "But as soon as you sober up, I'm going to beat the shit out of you for letting that girl go."

"She's going to marry some man up north."

His father shot to his feet. "You're a fool, Rick, if you can't see that she loves you."

"It was just pretend, Dad."

His father set the half empty bottle down. "No. You're the one doing the pretending. Pretending that you don't love her."

* * * * *

Rick checked the address on the slip of paper in his hand and then started up the flower-lined walk. The blue house in front of him, with clean Midwestern lines and plain white trim around the windows, looked like the other two-story houses he'd passed on the way to Amber's town.

He paused at the end of the walk. The two-hour drive from the airport had given him plenty of time to reconsider his decision, but he had to see Amber and apologize for the way he'd treated her. He owed her at least that much.

When he spotted Amber's shoes on the mat in front of the door, he leapt up the steps and rapped on the door. A petite gray-haired woman opened the door. Her clear eyes studied him for a long minute and then she stepped back to hold the door for him.

"Come inside, Rick."

Amber's mother? He opened his mouth to ask if he could speak to her, but she'd turned away to call up the stairs. "Amber, your Florida man is here."

Rick's gaze roamed across the many photos hanging in the entryway, Amber and her parents sailing, Amber and her sister on vacation, Amber graduating from high school. In all of them, she looked happy – well loved. The way she should always look.

"She'll be down, I'm sure." She cast him an appraising glance then left the room, swinging a blue checked dish towel off her small shoulder.

When he turned back to the stairs, Amber was coming down, her hand skimming across the maple banister. The instant his gaze met hers, he accepted the truth. He was madly, hopelessly in love with her.

She stopped at the bottom step, her gaze cautious and guarded. "Is there a legal problem?"

"Legal?"

"With the marriage. Can't it be broken soon enough for you?"

"No, I didn't come about that." He looked around the room. "Can we talk outside?"

She nodded toward the door. He followed her outside and planted himself in front of a potted geranium and between two white rockers.

Once she'd pushed the door shut, he let the words tumble out on the porch. "I'm sorry, Amber."

She folded her arms across her chest and eyed him carefully. "Sorry?"

"Sorry I put you through all that."

She shrugged. "I'm fine, don't worry about it."

"Did you set a date yet?"

Her eyebrows shifted, her expression blank.

"For your wedding," he clarified.

"Oh." She stepped and reached up to pull a dead leaf off a hanging petunia. "I'm not marrying Christopher."

Regret pooled in his stomach. He'd blown apart her plans, her beautiful future. "I'm going to take care of the legal stuff as soon as I get home. It shouldn't be a problem."

She tossed the leaf onto the porch and then kicked it with her foot. "That's not why."

"I'm sorry, Amber. I've ruined that for you."

"No, you didn't," she swung around and looked him straight in the eye. "I did that all by myself."

"I don't... How? How did you ruin it?"

She touched his chest, laid her palm flat across his heart. "By falling in love with you."

Hope flashed through him. "You love me?"

"After that night on the beach, I realized I could never marry Christopher. He deserves someone who loves him for real, not someone who marries him because he can offer security."

“What about because you love someone,” he took her hand and turned it over to kiss her palm. “Is love a good reason to get married?”

She whispered her reply, “That’s the only reason.”

For the first time in a long time, he wasn’t afraid for his future or of what was in his heart. “And if the man offers you security and a house and kids. Is that okay?”

Confusion blurred her eyes.

“I told you, Amber, you belong to me. Weren’t you listening?”

“Belonging has to go both ways.”

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. “I belong to you, Amber. If you want me.”

Her gaze cleared and she rose up to kiss him. The instant her lips touched his, he took a deep breath, his soul filling with Amber, the woman he’d be making love to every day, as often as possible, for the rest of his life. As he tugged her closer and held her tight, he knew, this time, he’d never have to let go. She made him whole and he was the man who’d get to spend his days making all her dreams come true.

About the Author

Thrill-seeking risk takers, heroes with the dark past, sexy locales, untamed women! Isabelle Drake writes stories featuring men and women who aren't afraid to go after what they want. An avid traveler, she'll go just about anywhere—at least on—to meet people and get story ideas.

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