Mlyn Hurn



# Family Secrets Mlyn Hurn

Family Secrets By Mlyn Hurn

While selecting a wedding dress for her upcoming nuptials, Carissa Evans overhears her mother reveal a shocking family secret. Startled to learn the truth, Cari ends up turning to Jake Hall for comfort, an attractive, older man she barely knows...

### Chapter 1

"Carissa! Stop fidgeting! Just look at the wrinkles you're making with your hands." Marina Evans lightly swatted at her daughter's knotted fingers. "That dress looks just fine, but you don't have to take the first one. I'm sure Eugenia has at least one other in your size. Now, I'm going out to talk to Eugenia, and to check on veils."

As the heavy curtains fell back into place, Cari turned to look at her reflection. Her hands were still tensely knotted up in the material of the satin white bridal gown. "Damn!" she muttered to herself.

Cari was not sure what she had been expecting when she saw herself for the first time in the bridal gown. Maybe she had thought it would magically transform her into a tall, slim, beautiful woman instead of the short, slightly overweight woman that she really was. If only she had a nickel for every time she'd heard what a "pretty face" she had. And each time Cari saw it in their eyes, the sympathy, pity, the words unspoken but still crystal clear, "if only she'd lose a little weight."

She knew the facts – she was plump and always purchased her clothes in the plus-size section of the store. She hated bathing suits, and had never worn a traditional bikini, or even a more modest two-piece.

Cari stared at the high-waisted gown. Hearing her mother say they needed the "big-girl" section had only reinforced her self-doubts. Seeing her round face, surrounded by acres of dark brown hair and her rounded body, she wondered what Tony saw in her. It was strange, but she had never before considered what a man like Tony was doing getting engaged to her. Not by any stretch of the imagination could she be considered tall, blonde or slender which described his usual date about town.

Suddenly, about six months ago, Tony had shown up at her work, ostensibly to buy a book. Cari should have questioned that motive, but the truth was that the unexpected attention had gone straight to her head. She was literally bowled over by the interest and compliments he paid her while he was browsing the shelves.

"No, Eugenia. Don't send the bill to my house."

Hearing her mother's voice, there was something in the tone, rather than the words that suddenly caught her attention. Cari stepped carefully off the small platform and walked over to the curtains, straining her ears to hear what her mother was saying to the shop owner.

"We want all the bills sent to this address, Eugenia."

Cari could hear the rustling of paper, and leaned further towards the dark red velvet curtains that separated the two areas. She frowned as she heard her mother telling the other woman where to send the bill for the dress, and other sundry items for the wedding. She leaned a bit more, straining to hear, as the voices seemed to be moving away.

"That will not be a problem, Mrs. Evans."

Through a small parting of the curtains, Cari watched. Marina Evans was shaking her head, her perfectly coiffed blonde hair not moving a millimeter. Her mother didn't look anywhere near her 45 years of age. Cari was once again surprised at the differences between them. All of her life, Marina had been slender, blonde and was always dressed impeccably, and expensively.

Cari used to ask her mother how they could afford all the lovely things she wore, and often bought for Cari. Her father was always dressed in threadbare clothes, and she didn't understand why there was money for her mother and herself, and not for her father. The times she brought the subject up, her mother would answer her shortly.

"You know your father, dear. He is eccentric and he likes the absent-minded professor style."

Cari would watch as her mother would turn up her nose and quickly change

the topic. She learned over time to just not bring the subject up.

Cari strained even harder to hear when her mother answered the shopkeeper.

"The bills all go to Mr. Andretti," Marina answered. "I've written the address and phone number on that paper."

Cari listened in stunned disbelief. Salvatore Andretti was a constant figure around the house while she was growing up. Her mother had frequently taken Cari to play at "Uncle Sal's" pool while Marina spent time talking with him. Cari enjoyed the many long afternoons and weekends spent at Uncle Sal's place. In fact, she had always called him her uncle. There had always been lots of toys for her to play with when she was small, and then as she grew older there was a new bike, followed by video games, and then a grand piano for her to practice her lessons on.

His house was very large, and he employed quite a few people. So there was always an adult nearby, watching out for the young girl. Her uncle had never married, so he didn't have any children of his own for her to play with. However, his housekeeper, Maria, had three boys, all around Cari's age, and they had enjoyed playing with the little girl when she came over.

Eugenia, who was the wedding coordinator as well as shop owner, answered her mother, drawing Cari's thoughts back to the present. "What about the bills I will be encountering as I begin arranging for the music and catering?"

Cari heard her mother speak again, still keeping her voice soft. "Yes, all the bills go to Mr. Andretti, and nothing to our home address. I want to make sure there are no slip-ups either."

Cari didn't hear the other woman reply as both women walked over towards the register. Cari turned away from the drapes, wondering why her Uncle Sal was receiving the bills for her wedding. She remembered her father asking her mother what this might all cost. Marina had laughed quite gaily. "Don't fret, Edward. I'm being very careful, so there is nothing to worry about. What I can't do myself, my friends are going to help me with. Everything will be perfect for Carissa's wedding."

Cari frowned, busy with her thoughts. She didn't realize how close she'd gotten to the curtains. The next moment, she was falling backwards. The curtains did nothing to impede her and she fell out of the dressing room. All around her, Cari heard voices.

"Oh no!" Eugenia cried out. "I do hope it isn't torn."

"Good Lord, Cari! I thought you had outgrown this klutzy period!" her mother said in a sharp tone.

A hand appeared to help her up. Cari accepted it, recognizing the shop assistant, Karen, who had helped her into the dress. "Are you all right, Miss Evans?"

Cari nodded, getting to her feet. "Thank you. I think I'm fine."

Eugenia hurried over. "Karen, please help Miss Evans."

As Cari turned away, she heard the wedding coordinator whisper to Karen. "Make certain they are no rips or tears anywhere."

Back inside the dressing room, Cari removed the lovely white satin and lace gown with Karen's help. There wasn't a single smudge or tear, the young woman assured her. Cari refused her offer of getting her another gown to try on, complaining of not feeling well. She stripped down to her underwear, removing the pantyhose and shoes her mother had wanted her to bring for trying on the gowns.

As she pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt, her thoughts were a jumbled mess. Her mother's words now contradicted everything she'd said to Edward. Cari shoved the shoes and pantyhose back into her shopping bag and pulled her sneakers on over her white socks. None of what she'd heard made much sense. Grabbing her purse, Cari walked towards the counter. Her mother stopped talking as soon as she saw her.

"Cari, darling, don't you want to try on some more gowns? Don't tell me you fell in love with the very first one that you tried on? I know I mentioned it looked fine, but I thought you would want to try on at least one more. I'm sure if we look hard enough, with a few alterations, we can find a dress to flatter you."

For the first time, she heard her mother's words as if she were a stranger. The words were not in the least bit loving or motherly. Cari shook her head slowly. "No, Mother. I'm suddenly not feeling too well. I think I need to go home and rest. Maybe we could come back in a day or two."

Cari didn't wait for her mother to agree, which was another first for her. Instead, she thanked Eugenia. Taking advantage of her mother's surprised and wordless state, she quickly hugged her and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cari walked back to her father's small bookstore where she had worked since she'd graduated from college. Her thoughts were jumbled and her emotions chaotic as she greeted her father. She immediately resumed checking off the newest arrivals against their order. Focusing intently on her work, Cari tried to block out what she'd overheard her mother say in the bridal shop.

Her father interrupted her about mid-afternoon. "Cari, can you take care of the store and close tonight?"

Cari looked at her thin, slightly stoop-shouldered, balding, fair-haired father. She loved her father, having always felt more in tune with him than she had with her mother. "Sure Dad. What are you up to tonight?"

Edward smiled at his daughter. "I'm going to the bank, and then I have a meeting with my book club."

Cari grinned at her father. "I think you should take me to one of your book club meetings. You know how I love to read just about anything." Her father paused for a moment and then slowly shook his head. "You will soon be a married woman, and your husband'll want all of your attention."

Cari hugged her father quickly. Even though they didn't look alike, they couldn't have been any closer. Tears filled her eyes as she realized that she'd never felt this same closeness with her mother. The next moment she realized that she didn't feel anywhere near this close with her fiancé either. She met her father's blue eyes as he continued speaking.

"The last thing you need as a newlywed is to be spending time reading dusty old books. And you shouldn't be discussing them with even dustier old men!"

Cari laughed as her father walked to the door. He turned in the open doorway, adding, "Mr. Hall will be coming by to pick up that book he ordered."

Cari nodded, waved good-bye and returned to her work. Through out the afternoon and early evening, her thoughts were a mish-mash of everything she'd overheard that day. Despite all her thinking, conjecturing and wondering, she was no closer to understanding why her mother was being deceitful with her father over the costs of her wedding. The one thing that was clear to her was that she didn't want to see her father hurt. Cari lost track of time and was surprised when she noticed that it was dark and time to close the store.

She started to lock the door. Suddenly the door was shoved towards her and a man appeared out of the darkness. Cari was so startled the keys fell from her limp fingers to the floor. In the next few seconds, Cari thought about the horror stories concerning women working late, and break-ins. The man stepped sideways and closed the door. Without a word, he bent to retrieve the keys for her.

"I'm sorry I startled you. I'm running late and took a chance I could catch Edward before he left." The tall man spoke softly, his voice deep and almost melodic. He was probably the most attractive man Cari had ever seen. Next to Anthony, she amended hastily. Her heart pounding in her chest, she looked him over.

His black hair glistened with a few strands of silver at the sides. His bluegray eyes were intense and surrounded by the thickest and blackest lashes she had ever seen. Tanned skin, a deep golden-brown that seemed to be asking for her touch, and Cari thought it probably came from hours of play under a tropical sun. When he smiled apologetically, Cari felt her heart skip a beat. Blushing brightly, Cari knew she was acting like a gauche schoolgirl.

"I'm sorry, but he had to leave early this afternoon. Can I help you?" Cari offered nervously. Her heart was beating so rapidly that she had trouble catching her breath. What was most startling was that it wasn't because of the fear of a stranger in the empty store. It was the man's intense masculinity that had Cari unnerved.

"I've come to pick up a book I ordered. I'm Jake Hall."

Cari blushed yet again, realizing that this was their wealthiest customer. He had brought a lot of money to her father's store since he had moved into the area. Mr. Hall had quickly learned that her father could obtain many of the antique and rare first editions he wanted to add to his library.

"Of course, Mr. Hall, just a second and I'll get it. I'm sorry I didn't realize..." Cari's words trailed away, realizing how foolish she sounded. She stepped away from him, moving behind the counter. Maybe distance, and the counter as a barrier, would help her become the efficient shop assistant again. Bending down, Cari took the large package from the recessed shelf. The package was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with a simple twine string. She set it on the counter, reaching for the scissors to cut the string.

"No, you don't need to do that," Jake told her hurriedly. His hand briefly covered hers. Immediately her eyes lifted to meet his. Cari was sure the leap in her heart rate was due to the unexpectedness of the gesture, and nothing more.

"You don't want to examine it before you leave the premises? We usually

have the customer do that when it involves an expensive book – "

"I don't need to do that for I trust Edward Evans implicitly."

Cari smiled at the man's obvious affection and respect for her father. "I trust my dad too. He has never tried to cheat anyone. I've often seen him tell someone they are over-paying for an item, and why."

Jake nodded in agreement. "I didn't realize he was your father, Ms. Evans. I didn't recognize you from the photo on your father's desk."

Cari flushed even brighter than before. She felt humiliated as she realized Jake Hall had seen the silly picture taken of her when she 12. It was one of her father's favorite pictures of her, taken one summer at the beach. Typical of girls that age, Cari had braces and was overweight, but still her mother had insisted she wear a ridiculously bright pink bathing suit. Her father had taken the picture on the one and only family vacation they had ever taken. That vacation had been more than 11 years ago, and Cari hoped she had changed some since then.

"I'm glad you didn't recognize me from that picture. I have tried to get him to exchange it with another, but he really likes that one."

Jake smiled at her. "Perhaps he can replace it with one from your upcoming wedding."

Cari blanched at the mention of the wedding. Any thoughts of it made her feel more confused, instead of being reassured at having her future settled. "He told you I was getting married?" A moment later she realized how stupid the question was.

Jake nodded, leaning against the counter. Cari was unable to turn away from his eyes and that devastating smile. "Yes, indeed. He is quite proud of you and all you have done." A smile curved his lips upwards and his eyes held hers. His deep voice was cultured and like the rasp of sandpaper. She shivered each time he spoke. Cari didn't know if it was because she was still startled, or if it was just reaction to the man himself. Cari shook her head. "I haven't done much of anything really. All I've done is graduate college, and come back here to work. It isn't what I planned..." Cari's voice trailed away, not completely sure at the moment of precisely what she had really wanted to do with her life.

She pushed the book across the counter, closer to Jake. "Okay then, here you go. I'll let Dad know you picked the book up this evening. He'll be glad to have it out of here and in your hands." She stopped abruptly, realizing that she was talking so fast it was almost garbled.

"Please remind your father to stop worrying, Ms. Evans. I insure all the books from the minute I purchase them." Jake picked up the book, and turned to leave. Cari was surprised when he stopped and looked back at her. "Are you all right? Is something bothering you?" he asked suddenly.

Cari shook her head quickly, embarrassed that her emotions were so obvious. "No, I'm fine. Probably just a little tired. If you need anything, or find anything wrong with the book, call us."

Jake nodded, turning to leave the shop. Cari, who'd been staring at his retreating back, jumped when he looked back over his shoulder. For a moment their eyes met. It was just a second, a moment, and then he was gone. Cari locked the door and instead of immediately tallying up the sales, she leaned her back against the door and slid down. Pulling her knees to her chest, Cari was intensely aware of the way her heart was fluttering. Trying to focus, she realized that her breath was unsteady and choppy. Closing her eyes, Jake Hall's face appeared in front of her. She'd never felt this way before, especially not with Tony.

Cari lifted her hands and rubbed them over her face. Surprised at the wetness on her forehead, she rubbed her hands on her pants. This was crazy! She was engaged to be married. She had no business lusting...Oh my God! Shock coursed through her body as she acknowledged that she desired Jake Hall. Even more startling was her desire for him to be still here, with her now. Maybe even

on the floor!

Cari finally got to her feet and completed the accounting before she could turn out the lights and leave. She walked the five blocks home, needing the time to think. Cari dragged her feet during the walk. She couldn't make any sense out of her mother's words. She had started to suspect her mother was spending way too much on the wedding, but now the extravagances were taking on a completely new meaning.

As she walked, her thoughts kept turning back to Jake. Nothing he had said or done indicated any interest on his part beyond the book. Was this an attraction to him or just a screwed up reaction following her day of emotional turmoil? More importantly, why was still even thinking about him!

As she neared her home, Cari saw her uncle's car parked in front of her parents' small house. She walked up the slightly crumbling stone steps and through the front door. She was very quiet as she walked from the living room towards the kitchen. After the long and disturbing day, Cari didn't feel at all hungry. Poised at the foot of the stairs, Cari heard her mother's raised voice in the kitchen. It was odd to hear her mother yelling. Cari was used to the house always being quiet. Even as a teen, she had never played her music loud. Even more surprisingly, she realized that her mother was yelling at her uncle.

"I won't have it, Sal! His behavior dishonors you, me and Carissa."

Cari walked quietly back towards the kitchen, surprised because she had never heard a cross word exchanged between the two of them before tonight. She stopped a few feet from the brightly lit kitchen, listening and ignoring the little voice in her head telling her that eavesdropping never benefited anyone.

"Calm down, Marina," she heard Sal tell her mother. "I'll speak to Anthony tomorrow. He will understand his duty, and he will toe the line from now on."

"I won't just calm down, Sal. I can't believe that Anthony has let himself be seen with that tramp all over town. People will start talking..." Cari leaned forward, just enough to see that her mother looked upset. Her stomach knotted and nausea roiled up into her throat as Cari watched Sal pull Marina into his arms. He held her tightly, lightly caressing her back while he kissed her cheek.

"Tony is 28 years old and feeling his oats, my love. He is fully aware that if he wants to advance in my business, and eventually have control, he will have to behave circumspectly after the wedding. I think he is just having a little fun before the gate closes behind him."

Cari slumped against the wall. She couldn't believe what she had just heard and seen. Lost in the mish-mash of thoughts and emotions that seemed to be bombarding her today, Cari straightened slowly, unsure of whether she should continue listening or not. A second later, one foot came down heavily on the only board in the floor that creaked. Turning quickly, Cari ran up the stairs and shut the door to her room. She turned the lock on the door and threw herself dramatically across her bed. It wasn't likely, but she hoped no one had heard her outside the kitchen.

"Damn!" Cari rolled from her stomach to her back. "What the hell else can happen today? Has the world gone crazy?"

Downstairs, Marina pulled out of her lover's arms. "Did you hear anything, Sal? I thought I heard footsteps."

Sal shook his head. "I didn't hear anything. What time is Carissa due home?"

Marina glanced at the wall clock. "Any time now, so you should probably be going. This is Edward's book discussion night, so he won't be home until late tonight."

Sal nodded, walking with Marina towards the front door. "Why don't you leave Carissa a note and join me for dinner? You have been running yourself ragged trying to put the wedding together. It would do you good to get out and forget everything for a while. I can have you back here before Edward gets home."

Marina paused, thinking. She wanted to be with her lover of 24 years, but she also knew that they couldn't afford any scandal. If she and Sal were not Catholic, she would have left her husband long ago. But they were...

"Let me go and see if she is home yet, and I'll make some excuse to run out. Then we can go." She kissed Sal quickly and ran up the stairs. She knocked on her daughter's door. "Carissa darling, are you in there?"

"Yes, Mama, I'm here, but I still feel a little sick. I won't be down for dinner."

Marina tried the door, but it was locked. "All right, darling. I'm going out then, since you aren't feeling well. Your Aunt Charlotte invited me over to play cards. I'll have my cell phone, so call me if you need me."

"All right, Mother."

Inside her bedroom, Cari heard her mother's footsteps running back down the stairs. Moving off the bed, she walked to the window that overlooked the street in front of the house. Carefully, Cari concealed her body behind the halfdrawn curtains. She watched as Sal helped her mother into his large, luxurious car and then drove away.

Slowly the rear lights faded into the night, yet Cari couldn't turn away until they were no longer visible. Too many thoughts were jumbled into her brain and all were demanding immediate attention! Walking back to her bed, she sat on the edge. In the mirror across the room, her reflection was still dimly visible. Nothing made sense, but she knew turning on the lights wouldn't help her see things more clearly.

Her mother and uncle had been hugging intimately in her father's house. She had heard him call her mother "my love" a few minutes earlier. Uncle Sal was paying for her wedding. Her fiancé was seeing some woman behind her back. And to top it all off, she wasn't beautiful or radiant as most brides were in their gowns. No, Cari just looked "nice" in her wedding gown!

Granted her appearance seemed to be the least of her concerns, but the other problems were just too overwhelming right now to deal with. After all, how many betrayals could a person face on the same day? Turning onto her side, Cari pulled her knees up. Lying alone in the dark, Cari tried to focus on just taking deep breaths and relaxing. It took quite some time before she relaxed enough to fall asleep.

# Chapter 2

Cari slept fitfully all night. When her father knocked on her bedroom door the next morning, she told him she was too sick to go in to work. Listening carefully to the sounds of the house, Cari waited until she was sure she heard her parents leave. Jumping out of bed with determination, Cari dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. At the front door she paused for a minute, and then tossed her father's coat over her shoulders.

She walked to the bank where her maid of honor, Lauren, was working. Cari watched as Lauren just stared at her for a moment before she recognized her. There was no resisting Lauren's grip as she dragged Cari behind the bank counter and into the break room.

"What's wrong? You look awful!"

Cari watched her friend's face closely. Lauren looked nervous, and she was swallowing quickly. Cari knew this was her friend's usual behavior when caught telling a lie. "I'm okay, Lauren. I just wanted to know if you knew about Tony fooling around on me."

Lauren shrugged. "I'm more concerned about you Cari. Look at those dark circles under your eyes! Aren't you sleeping?"

Cari shrugged indifferently, knowing she looked bad after her restless night. "I need to borrow your car."

Lauren frowned at Cari. "Why? Is yours not working?"

Cari shook her head. All of her friends knew that she had received a car for her college graduation from her parents. It was a lovely new car, and Cari's mother had told her she'd saved for years, and thanks to Uncle Sal, they had gotten a special discount price on this dealer model. The car was loaded with all the niceties, and her friends told her they were envious.

"I can't use mine because he would recognize it."

Lauren frowned, her frustration obvious to Cari. "Who would recognize it?"

"Tony. I think he has been cheating on me, and I want to follow him and find out," Cari ended smugly.

Lauren shook her head slowly, while her eyes filled with tears. "Sweetie, you don't have to follow him. He has been seeing someone else."

Cari pulled back in her chair. "What do you mean? Did you know about this? How long have you known?"

Lauren shrugged, her reluctance to hurt Cari written on her face. "Carl told me that he had seen Tony out with this one woman..."

Cari looked at her friend of so many years. "Just the one time?"

Lauren met her gaze and then turned away. "No, Cari. When Carl asked him about it, he said there was no reason to stop playing the field until he signed on the dotted line." Lauren paused, taking a deep breath. "And when Carl asked about...well, you know...Tony told him that you wouldn't sleep with him and a man does have needs..."

Cari choked on a sob at the cutting words. "It was his idea to wait until we were married..." Cari's voice trailed away, her brain unable to take in and absorb all these truths at one time.

Lauren reached out and touched her friend's hand. "What are you going to do now, Cari? Are you going to call off the wedding? Whatever you decide, I'll stand by you."

Cari looked up at Lauren, trying to smile. "I don't know what to do. I need to think...I just need to get away..."

"You want to go away for a few days? I could get a few days off here, and we could – "

Cari stood, shaking her head. "No. If I go away, it will have to be alone. I need to think things out..." Cari hugged Lauren as she stood to walk out with

her. "I'll let you know what I decide to do though."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cari went through the next few days in a fog. She went back to the same dress shop and chose her wedding gown as well as a pretty traveling outfit. She went shopping with her bridesmaids, choosing their dresses as well. She gave way to her mother on nearly all the decisions, not arguing or expressing her opinion on anything. It was easier to just give in.

She saw Tony in passing a few times, accepting his peck on her cheek without comment. However, she couldn't help but notice little things that previously she had thought were inconsequential. She noticed how Tony rarely met her eyes directly. And when they were alone, he never initiated physical contact with her. He never made phone calls to her in the middle of the day, and when she called him, he always had an excuse not to talk to her for more than a minute.

Between her confusion over what she had heard about her fiancé, and what she had witnessed between her mother and the man she had regarded as a family friend, Cari was beginning to feel more stressed each day. Doubting that she would be able to handle much more new disclosures of family secrets, she worked constantly to conceal her growing uneasiness from her parents. As the days passed, Cari decided she must have been a good actress for neither one ever asked her if anything was wrong.

About two weeks after she had overheard her mother in the kitchen with Uncle Sal, her father stopped her while they were both working.

"Cari?

Cari looked up from the new books she was stocking onto the shelves. Smiling, she looked up at her father. "What's up, Dad?" "I have my book club meeting tonight, and the book Mr. Hall has been waiting for just came in."

Cari shifted her position on the floor. "I didn't realize he had even ordered another book." Looking back down quickly, Cari could feel her cheeks flushing. Every day, she wondered if he would come back in. And each time she found her thoughts straying in his direction, her heart would begin racing and she'd wonder if the feelings that night had only been a result of the stress she had felt that day, or if it was something more.

"He called the order in, Cari. Um...I think it was just a few days after he stopped in for the last book."

Cari nodded. She started to reply, but had to swallow before she could speak. "You want me to stay late again tonight? Mr. Hall is going to stop by this evening?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind taking the book to his house, Cari. I'm going to close early, and I didn't want to worry about leaving the book here overnight. I'd run it out myself, but we're having dinner before the book club tonight..."

"Its okay, Dad. I'd be happy to run the book out to his place. I've been by there, so I shouldn't have any trouble finding it."

As Cari rushed through shelving the rest of books, she acknowledged to herself that she had deliberately not told her father that the only reason she had been by Jake Hall's mansion was because she'd looked his address up and driven there earlier that week.

Trying not to misfile books as she hurried to finish, Cari shivered and smiled at the thought of seeing Jake again.

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Jake was sitting at his desk in his library, feeling incredibly bored, when he

heard the knock at the front door. As he neared the entrance, he shouted back towards the kitchen. "I've got it, John. You go ahead and take off as planned."

At the front door, Jake paused to take a peak through the peephole he'd had installed for the protection of his housekeeper, Mary. Instantly, he recognized the woman who stood at his door. He had hoped that by ordering the book a week ago, it would arrive on Edward's club night. Knowing he was lying to a friend, he had still told Edward that he wouldn't be able to come in and pick the book up right away. Watching Cari turn her head away, he enjoyed her profile. He'd been anticipating Edward would send her with the book, but he had not wanted to get his hopes up.

Opening the door, Jake nodded, slowly smiling. "Hello, Ms. Evans."

Cari smiled in return. "Hi! Um, my father was busy tonight, but he really wanted to get this book to you."

The way she was dancing from one foot to the other, Jake anticipated that she was probably going to bolt the second he took the book. Instead of accepting it, he reached out and curved his hand around her elbow. Without giving Cari time to consider other options, he led her into his library.

"Please, Cari, sit down. I was just about to enjoy a glass of sherry. I hope you'll join me?"

Jake watched the indecision on the woman's face. He smiled when she nodded slightly, turning away to pour them each a drink. Coming back to the sofa, he handed Cari her glass. Taking the book from her lap, he tossed it onto his desk. Starting back to the sofa, he saw that Cari was perched on the edge, as if her flight was imminent.

Jake came back and sat beside her on the sofa. Smiling gently, he started asking Cari questions about herself, college, and her work at the store. Slowly, Jake noticed Cari relaxing and opening up more with each question he asked. Eventually, he reached the topic that most people would assume was uppermost in her mind. "How are the plans for the wedding progressing?"

The sudden change in questions obviously startled her. Cari jerked her hand, spilling her drink down her dress. "Oh, damn!" Cari exclaimed.

Jake ignored the embarrassed flush staining her cheeks, removing the empty glass from her hand. "Hey, don't worry about it. I bet if we act quickly enough, we can catch the stain before it sets in."

Before she really knew what was happening, Cari found herself seated on a tall stool in Jake's kitchen, wearing a burgundy silk robe, belted at her waist. Her dress and underwear were in his washer. Ignoring the voice that told her she didn't really need to take the underwear off, Cari had added them defiantly to the stack. The dark burgundy silk felt cool and soft against her naked skin as it enveloped her completely. Cari shifted on the stool, crossing her legs as she watched Jake begin cooking dinner.

Cari was surprised when her stomach growled and she realized that for the first time in two weeks she was hungry. "Do you cook a lot?"

Jake turned from the stove where he was heating the oil for stir-fry. "Not as much as I'd like. My housekeeper is rather possessive of 'her' kitchen. When she takes time off, I usually jump at the chance to mess around in here. I use the pretense of expanding my cooking skills."

Cari felt heat rush through her body at his words. She was sure he had not been intending any hidden message. It was just her own starved libido that was making her respond to this attractive and attentive man. But when Jake talked about messing around in the kitchen, her mind had taken a totally different turn. A wild, quite erotic thought filled her mind...Jake was lifting her onto the counter and then moving between her eagerly parting thighs...

"What about you, Cari? Do you cook much?"

Cari jumped as she was startled from her erotic imaginings. Taking a deep breath, she tried to steady her nerves. "I don't like to cook. My mother doesn't like to either. That's probably why she never lets me into the kitchen."

Cari stopped talking abruptly as Jake smiled at her. She realized that she was babbling like a nervous schoolgirl. But as Jake continued to smile at her, she relaxed and smiled back. His smile made her feel warm inside, cared for and interesting, which was something she'd never felt before with a man. Or at least a man that she wasn't related to or had known all her life. "Sorry for just rattling on," she told him a moment later.

Jake shrugged. "You weren't. Cooking is something that can be like a fine art — practiced carefully and with skill, it can please one or many. Or you can just slop things together." His eyes met and held hers as he went on. "Like many things that require a skilled hand, it just takes knowledge and practice."

Cari laughed quickly, suddenly feeling hot, incredibly aroused and very nervous. "I'm afraid the 'slop together' describes me," she told him nervously. "For the times when I'm alone, I've perfected the lazy woman's egg salad sandwich."

Jake turned from the stove and leaned on the counter, facing Cari. A grin curled his lips as he asked, "The lazy woman's egg salad sandwich? Now you have me intrigued." Jake paused and refilled her glass with more of the heady red wine. "Exactly what is that?"

Cari flushed under his intense gaze, but went on. "It's quite easy. One peeled hard-boiled egg. The tricky part is preparing ahead. You lay your bread out, spreading mayo on one piece and mustard on the other. If you like a little zest, you add a little pickle relish on the mustard side. Now, this next part can be dangerous, so for the klutzy, like myself, I recommend using a dull knife."

Jake gave a bark of laughter, covering it quickly with a cough. "Sorry, please go on."

Cari nodded. "You hold the egg in the palm of your left hand, and then with the knife you slice the egg into approximately six slices. You should try for six to get even coverage of your bread. After that it's easy. Spread the egg on the relish side, add the mayo piece, and voila! You now have one super-quick egg salad sandwich!"

Jake laughed, his sparkling eyes meeting Cari's. "That's a first!"

"I didn't tell you the best part. It is actually good for you because you use less mayo. I guess technically you could call it healthy, too, especially if you remember to use whole wheat bread!"

Cari felt like she had been amusing, and for the first time in her life, an attractive man looked like he might lean across the counter and kiss her smiling mouth. Cari's breath caught in surprise. She wanted Jake to kiss her. In fact, Cari wanted Jake to do a lot more than just kiss her!

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake had to mentally shake himself as a reminder that Cari was younger than he was, the daughter of a good friend, and engaged! Leaning over the counter, listening to her cooking explanation, he'd felt an overwhelming need to kiss her smiling lips. The jolt of desire had surprised him. He turned back to the stove and worked on their dinner.

"Do you have any other special recipes?" Jake asked her a few moments later. He deliberately didn't turn around. Watching Cari speak so naturally, laughing at herself and completely forgetting that the silk robe was sliding open a little more with each passing second had gotten him so aroused that he needed to keep his back to her for a few more moments. It was too easy to recall how luscious and full her lips had looked while she talked.

"Not really," Cari replied softly behind him. "Though I was rather devastated when they came out saying how bad eggs were for people. I was panicked into thinking I would have to find something else to cook. Luckily, they said a few times a week were okay, and I heaved a deep sigh of relief." Jake couldn't resist her lure another moment and turned to look at Cari. His laughter was just below the surface. He was stunned, and very entertained by her sense of humor. He would never have suspected this quiet, unassuming woman had such hidden depths. He had found her attractive from the first time he saw her in the bookstore. Almost from the very first moment, Jake had been attracted by her gentle manner, and the deep sense of caring that he sensed was an integral part of her nature.

He served their dinner a few minutes later. His gaze stayed glued on Cari as she practically gobbled every single bite down, sipping the wine as she ate. Jake filled the glass three times, listening to Cari talk about the bookstore, and her father. He noticed that she never once mentioned her fiancé, nor her mother. He could tell something had happened to change the carefree girl her father had spoken of so often, to the sad-faced woman he had met at his front door a short time earlier. He wanted to see her smile again, as she had a short time earlier when she'd been talking about her "lazy woman's sandwich."

After their meal was complete, they wandered back into the library. Jake watched Cari moving about, occasionally stopping to stare at something or to touch it. As she lightly caressed a stone-carved wild cat, Jake imagined his own hand stroking her flesh in the same way. His eyes kept wandering downwards, to where his silky robe draped over Cari's nicely full and rounded ass. When she came over to the couch, she flopped down. Jake could see that she was unaware that the robe was slipping more as the silky tie loosened. In the beginning, his intentions had been quite noble. His goal was to just be friendly and protective towards a friend's daughter.

As the evening wore on, Jake watched her mobile face smiling one moment, looking sad the next. When she was telling him something, her face glowed with intelligence and humor. And then, just as quickly, she would become silent, and Jake could see the sadness fill her eyes once again. When she was occupied with teasing him, Jake felt like he was falling more deeply under some kind of spell.

With each passing moment, he became even more aware of her as a woman. For the first time, Jake was finding humor more arousing than actually being touched by another woman. None of this made any sense to him. He argued in his head that he was about twelve years her senior, but as she talked in front of the roaring fire, he seemed to notice so much more about her than just their age difference. He had almost convinced himself that it was only her wit, intelligence and charm that he was finding attractive. But then, the next sip of brandy she took, her tongue slipped out, licking the errant drop from her lower lip. Jake found his gaze lingering on her mouth, the slope of her chin, the curve of her neck...

He knew right then that his attraction to Cari was a hell of a lot more than just appreciation for her engaging sense of humor. Cari shifted on the sofa, moving her shoulders and changing her legs' position. The robe gaped open but Jake didn't act like the good gentleman his mother had taught him to be. Not a word left his mouth about the enticing view he now had of her breasts. For about half a second, he argued about the correctness of telling Cari about the gap. Instead, he surreptitiously readjusted his pants and continued to watch Cari.

Jake refilled her brandy snifter, ignoring his own conscience that told him she didn't need anything more to drink. He enjoyed talking to her, and just being with her. He wasn't in any hurry to be alone in the house again. When he sat back down on the sofa after refilling their snifters, he was much closer to her. Reaching out casually, he smoothed her hair back behind her ear. Jake let his fingers stroke over her soft, dark hair. Slowly, he wound the strand around his index finger, watching Cari's face. When he tugged on the curl, Cari turned her face towards him.

Cari felt the jolt of intense sexual desire for the first time in her life. She had thought she knew what a man and woman could feel. But the heat and desire coursing through her body didn't remind her of anytime she'd spent with Tony. She was feeling intensely confused and unsure. How could she be this attracted to Jake when she had thought she was attracted to Tony?

Dear Lord! Cari realized with a sharp stab of surprise that she wanted Jake! She felt a yearning deep inside of her, and a softening of her body. Tonight, for the first time, she truly understood what physical desire was! She moved towards him, not giving a damn just then about anyone else beyond the two of them.

When Jake slid his hand to cup the nape of her neck, she felt the tenderness in his touch and she let her eyelids drift shut. So lightly, his lips kissed Cari's, the barest caress of skin. Cari sighed softly as a second brushing of mouths came, followed by the lightest caress of Jake's tongue along Cari's lower lip.

Cari opened her eyes as she felt Jake pull back for a moment, removing the glass from her limp hand. She watched as Jake reached out to her and she didn't resist as he pulled her into his arms. His mouth captured hers, kissing her hotly. Their tongues caressed, exploring each other's taste and texture. When Jake shifted Cari to lie across his lap, she moved eagerly. As his hand began caressing her shoulder, arm and down to her waist, she shifted to make her body more available to him.

Cari moaned as she savored the kisses Jake was giving her. She had never felt anything like this. "Oh, God!" she whispered softly on a sigh of desire. She felt Jake's fingers tug at the silken tie holding the robe in place. When his fingers moved the edges of the robe apart, she stiffened for a moment. She had never been naked in front of man before.

Almost as if Jake could read her mind, he looked up to hold her gaze for a moment. "Don't be embarrassed, Cari. I want to see your body." Seeing the look in her eyes, he could tell something wasn't right. His senses were operating at 110%, intensely aware of the unspoken need to go slow with this sensitive and

gentle woman.

Jake moved his hand up over her rounded tummy until he cupped her soft, plump breast. His eyes still held her gaze prisoner as his hand caressed her flesh. He watched her face change as his hand moved so seductively, yet lightly, across her soft skin. The gentle shiver shaking her body spoke loudly about her level of experience. When he fully cupped her breast, her eyes shot wide-open, pupils dilated.

Jake spoke softly, reassuring her. "Just relax, Cari. There is no rush. Take a deep breath and let your body take control for awhile."

Her lips had parted in a soft gasp, and a flush stained her cheeks. For a long moment, he simply held her firm breast. Jake felt her nipple budding and poking his palm. He couldn't resist the urge to rotate his palm over the tight bud.

"Oh, God!" Cari cried out.

Jake moved his attention to her other breast, worshipping the beautiful, full bounty presented to him. While Jake was guessing that Cari might be inexperienced, he was not. He easily saw how aroused Cari was becoming. Proof came a moment later as her caressing hands dropped from his shoulders and neck, to the buttons down the front of his shirt. Shaking his head slightly, Jake removed her clumsy fingers and quickly opened his shirt. As her soft hands touched him he was struck with the realization that he was just as eager to have her caress him as he was to touch her.

Cari pushed the shirt edges apart and her hands stroked over his muscular chest. She moved her fingertips to his taut nipples, plucking and rubbing over them eagerly. Jake groaned at her touch, recognizing her eagerness tempered by inexperience. He moved one hand down over her gently rounded belly, finally parting the robe completely, and onto her womanly mound. He stopped when he didn't find the thick, curly patch of hair that he had expected to find. With her dark hair, he had thought that Cari's pubic hair would be furry and thick, concealing her womanhood. Instead, she was completely and totally smooth!

Jake moved his fingers over her soft, fleshy mound. His arousal factor just about tripled as he caressed the smooth flesh another moment before sliding down to her womanly lips. Lifting his head, he met Cari's eyes. The doubt and fear of rejection she was feeling seemed obvious to him as their gazes met. Rejection of Cari was the last thing on his mind. Between her parted thighs, he stroked her fleshy lips. Without prompting, Cari shifted her legs further apart.

Jake watched her pupils flare as his fingers moved between her lips and sought out the precious morsel of her passion. When he lightly touched her clit, he saw surprise dart across her face. Jake paused, letting his fingers rest intimately against and between those tender, sweet lips.

"It is okay, Cari. Just relax honey, let the feelings flow."

He quickly started a determined rhythm with his finger to captivate and seduce her clit fully. All the while, he watched the passion rising through her body and mirrored on her mobile face. As her body jerked and thrashed more with each passing moment, he waited eagerly for her to climax. As her wetness oozed forth, he slid one finger more deeply into her molten heat. He caressed her innermost flesh delicately, but determinedly. He knew what he was looking for...

Cari's body shook and shivered against Jake's. Something on her face, or in the hesitant way she accepted each new touch—first with reticence and then with heartfelt gusto—told him she was far less experienced then he would have guessed. He could tell her pinnacle was coming.

"Look at me, Cari!" his voice demanded her actions to comply.

Cari lifted her eyelids and focused on Jake. He saw that her breathing was shallow, and as she spoke, he heard the raspy tone in her voice. "Jake! I feel so..."

Jake leaned down and kissed her mouth lightly, but sped up the motion of

his fingers. He had found his goal. His fingers, deep inside of her, were eagerly stroking, pressing and coaxing. The next second, Jake felt the tiny spasms and shivers from her deep muscles begin. Looking into Cari's eyes, he saw her surprise, followed by acknowledgement, and then complete loss of time, place and everything except her body and its orgasm.

Jake lowered his head and captured one nipple in his mouth. Lightly he stroked the taut nipple with his tongue, before sucking on it deeply. A few seconds later, he felt Cari's hands begin caressing the back of his head and neck. Her soft touches, so new and untrained, made him hotter than the most skilled courtesan.

Once her breathing slowed and returned to normal, Jake again began to tease her wet, sensitive flesh. Gently, his fingers danced over her skin, and when he found her clit, it was swollen and even more primed for arousal. Jake watched in amazement as he worked her tender flesh for a few seconds only until she orgasmed again in his arms. Jake stared appreciatively as her lush breasts jiggled and bounced with the jerks of her hips. His passion was rising with each second.

Slowly, fighting back his demanding needs, he patiently brought her body to climax once more before he shifted their bodies on the sofa. Jake moved to lie above her. He had released his rock hard cock, surprised that he had lasted as long as he had. But he had seen her inexperience and had wanted to bring her joy first before he sought to slake his own thirst within her womanly body.

Positioned between her thighs, his cock pressed eagerly against her wet lips. Jake paused and called out her name until she opened her eyes, taking a few moments until she focused on his face. He groaned as he felt Cari moving her legs to encircle his hips. He pressed forward, easing his cock into her tight pussy slowly. An inner sense told him he should be careful. He suspected she was inexperienced but he didn't know how much.

Cari moved her legs, and Jake felt them tightly encircling his hips, as she

locked her feet behind him. She pulled him forward, towards her body. Jake was unable to resist the muscles of her legs pulling him closer, and the sweet, erotic muscles within, pulling him deeper into her body.

Jake could wait no longer. He thrust forward and was fully enveloped inside her tight channel. He paused for a moment, savoring the feel of her body enfolding his cock and holding it close. Jake pulled back a little, and Cari relaxed her grip. Slowly, he began long, steady thrusts into her body. There was no stopping his groan as he felt her pussy squeezing tight around the head of his cock as he almost, but not quite, pulled out of her each time.

It didn't make sense, but Jake wanted this to last. Something in his head was telling him to make it go on forever. It had been a long time since he had been with a woman. And the seductive, erotic woman beneath him was sapping what little remaining control he had over his body with each passing moment. His strokes became shorter and faster, and then he jerked sharply, shooting his seed deeply into her body. Over and over, he thrust into her body, each movement forcing his seed deeper into her.

Jake finally shot his last load into her unprotected womb. He dropped down, his weight falling to her body. He tried to move off of Cari, but her legs locked more tightly around him and her arms circled his shoulders. He fell asleep atop her, seconds after he heard Cari's deep steady breathing, assuring him that she had already drifted to sleep.

At some point, Jake shifted them so Cari lay above him, her limp and sated limbs draped over him. Twice more in the night he awoke, hard and horny, and came again inside Cari's body. He brought Cari to an almost unconscious orgasm with a skilled dance upon her clit each time, before coming again deep within her. Completely out of character, Jake never once thought about the consequences of his actions as he finally drifted to sleep. \* \* \* \* \*

Sunlight streaming in between the part in the curtains finally awakened Jake. He shifted on the sofa, realizing instantly that his body didn't like sleeping anywhere but his nice, soft bed. Groaning, Jake rubbed his head. There was definitely a headache to deal with this morning and he quickly covered his eyes with a hand as he sat up on the sofa. For a couple of minutes he was careful to move no more than a millimeter, sure the ache would go away. Eventually Jake opened his eyes, looking around the room. The book was still wrapped in brown paper, resting on his desk.

Jake shot to his feet as his brain started working once again. Damn! He looked around, but there was no sign of Cari, nor of the silk robe he had given her last evening to wear. Jake shouted her name, but stopped abruptly as his headache returned full force. After concentrating and focusing, he remembered talking with Cari, and finally making love with her on the sofa. Something jogged his memory and he looked at his watch.

"Damn!" he shouted when he saw that it was almost nine. The noise reverberated in his head and he quickly shut up. He noticed he was still partially dressed and quickly righted his clothing. He headed upstairs to take some aspirin and a hot shower.

It was close to noon when Jake pulled up in front of Edward's bookshop. He got out of the car gingerly, still feeling stiff from the night on the sofa. He wasn't sure what he should be doing with a situation like this, but he felt that he needed to see Cari. He needed to talk with her...he needed...her.

Stopping outside the bookshop, Jake leaned back against his expensive black sports car. Damn! He needed her! He felt his hormones raging all over again, remembering the feel of her rounded curves against his harder, muscular body. He could close his eyes and easily recall how her full breasts had so sweetly overwhelmed his eager hands. Her nipples had been taut and distended as he suckled them. Making love to her had been headier than any liquor he had consumed last night. With a deep breath Jake stood upright, and without pause, walked straight into the small shop.

Once inside, it took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness within. He looked around, trying to locate Cari without calling attention to himself. But he didn't see her.

"Jake! Good afternoon! This is a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you today?"

Jake turned and looked at the older man that he had come to respect and admire.

Edward Evans was a bland looking man. He was blond, balding, and paleskinned. He always seemed to be wearing his wire-framed glasses either on the end of his nose, or on top of his head. He was tall, slender, and just about always dressed in a vest of some kind or other. Jake watched as Edward came towards him, hand extended in greeting.

"I hope the book met your expectations, Jake. Cari got it out there all right? She said she knew the way since she'd been out past your place."

Jake had to look blank for a moment, until he remembered that Cari *had* delivered a book last evening. He flushed in embarrassment as he realized that he had been so distracted that he hadn't remembered.

"Fine, as always Edward. Um...I was wondering if Cari was around?" Jake tried to act nonchalant.

Edward shook his head. "No. She called me here and said she overslept and wouldn't be in until later. Her mother wanted her to pick out the menu for the wedding reception, and then something about flowers..."

Jake nodded, trying to ignore the feeling that was suspiciously like a kick in the gut, hearing Edward talk about the wedding. He had forgotten Cari was a bride-to-be last night as he made love to her on his leather couch. Of course, he reminded himself, she appeared to have forgotten her engagement as well. Edward's voice drew him back to the present a few seconds later.

"Is there something I can help you with, Jake? I'm still researching the book we were talking about the other day."

Jake shook his head. "No. I was just going to thank Cari. I'll get going and leave you to your books."

Edward nodded. "I'll let Cari know you stopped by."

Jake paused at the front door to the shop. He fought against asking Edward to tell his daughter that her lover had stopped in. He nodded, thanked Edward again, and then left.

## Chapter 3

Over the next few weeks, Cari felt more confused than ever. She felt like she needed to talk to Jake about that evening, but didn't know how to approach him. She wanted to call off the wedding, but something kept stopping her from spitting out the words. She needed to talk to someone, but other than Lauren, she hadn't confided in anyone.

Several weeks after her night of passion with Jake, she received a phone call at work from her fiancé. Trying to bury her doubts, she attempted to be perky and care free as they spoke.

"Hello, Tony! I'm glad you called. I was thinking we could see the new DeNiro movie that just opened."

Cari knew that she was feeling overly sensitive since learning about another woman in Tony's life. Yet she also knew that the pause before Tony answered her was a lot longer than normal.

"I'm sorry, babe. I just found out that I have to work late tonight, and there is no way I can get out of it. I wish I didn't have to finish this, but we'll have to cancel our plans."

Cari listened to him silently. It was difficult, but she had held her tongue in cheek as she mildly accepted his words. After telling her father she wasn't feeling well, and just smiling as he jested about wedding jitters, Cari left work early and rented a car. At home, she dressed in a hat of her mother's, sunglasses and a big loose fitting jacket of her father's. Forgetting common sense, Cari knew that she must have answers before she could discover her true feelings. Ignoring that she looked silly and felt like a spy in her incognito disguise, she drove over to Tony's apartment and waited.

She followed Tony as he drove his flashy red convertible away from his apartment. When he pulled up to another apartment complex, he honked the

horn loudly, which he never did at her house. Cari knew her mother would have had a fit and spoken to her Uncle Sal. Horn honking did not fit with her mother's idea of the correct way to call for a woman.

A few moments later, a blonde, who was very slender and poured into a skintight red dress, came teetering out to the car on three-inch high heels. Since the convertible's top was down, it was quite easy for Cari to observe the passionate kiss the two of them exchanged.

Cari did pause and wonder why she wasn't feeling pain, heartache, or worse. She was angry. No, she was pissed at being taken for a fool. Before she could call herself other names, Tony pulled out into the street with an unnecessary squeal of tires. Cari followed them to a couple of bars and then on to a very expensive restaurant. It was past two in the morning when they finally drove back to the woman's apartment.

Cari sat silently in her dark car. She should have been surprised, but she wasn't, when she saw Tony put the top up on the car and lock it. He pulled his date close and kissed her eagerly, while his hands roamed wildly over her body. Cari was amazed at the passionate way the two kissed, and even gasped when she saw Tony reach down and grab the blonde woman's ass. She did note to herself sarcastically that it was nice of them to have parked near a street lamp so she could see them so easily.

Cari felt her face flush in embarrassment when Tony pulled the woman's dress up her thighs, and pushed his hand between her legs. And just when Cari thought they had gone about as far as they could in public, she saw Tony jerk the dress down and cup her breast. After kissing hotly for another minute, they walked together to the woman's apartment, stopping and kissing every few feet.

Cari waited for an hour after the door closed behind them. She finally restarted the car and drove home. She told herself that she should be feeling anger, jealousy, and betrayal...something other than the emptiness she was now experiencing. Cari was surprised that even the anger she had felt earlier had faded away. At some point during the long hours she sat in the car alone, watching, waiting and wondering, she had come to accept that if she had truly loved Tony, then she would feel those emotions.

After parking the car a short distance down the street from her home, she made her way silently upstairs. Undressing slowly, Cari finally acknowledged that if she had loved Tony, even knowing he didn't love her, she never would have slept with Jake either. She crawled into her bed that night, not sure what to do. Her life was falling apart around her. Nothing she had believed to be true really was anymore.

How had she gone from being a plump but happy soon to be bride, to an overweight, crazy woman who was skulking about in disguises and sleeping with men other than her fiancé? Of course, Cari felt compelled to add to the disaster by reminding herself that she was a woman who had been betrayed by her mother, her uncle, and her fiancé. It appeared the only people who weren't lying to her were her father, and Jake.

Cari slept in late the next morning. When she was in the kitchen pouring a glass of juice, she happened to glance at the calendar on the wall. There was about three weeks to go until the wedding and it had been... Her glass slid from her numb fingers and crashed to the floor as the dates finally made sense. She felt hot, flushed, still staring in total disbelief at the calendar.

It was six weeks. She shook her head in bemusement and dread. This couldn't be happening to her, she told herself. Not now when she had all this other stuff going on. Surely God wouldn't be this cruel? Maybe it was just the stress screwing up her body? After all, Cari tried to mollify herself, she had been under a lot of emotional turmoil lately...

"Carissa! What happened?" Marina rushed into the kitchen, seeing the broken glass on the floor and the large wet area of juice. What surprised her was that Cari wasn't doing anything to clean up the mess. She stepped around her daughter, grabbing paper towels and throwing them down to absorb the juice.

She picked up some pieces of broken glass, and still Cari hadn't moved. She stood back up and shook Cari, finally getting her attention.

"Cari! If you aren't going to help clean up this mess, at least step out of the way so I can do it!" Marina shook her head. Cari never made messes like this and then to not clean them up? It had to be the excitement of the upcoming wedding!

Cari looked down, surprised to see the paper towels and her mother. She had not seen her mother come into the kitchen, nor had she heard her say anything. She went to step back but didn't see the glass on the floor. She sliced her bare foot open, and blood poured out to mingle with the remaining juice.

From a distance, she heard her mother screaming for her father. Cari didn't resist when her mother pushed her backwards into a chair. Her mother wrapped one of her matching kitchen towels around the bleeding foot. Cari thought how pissed her mother would be later when she realized that Cari had ruined one of her matching towel sets. Her mother had always had a "thing" about matching towels and keeping a complete set.

Edward came running into the kitchen. "What the devil is all this yelling about, Marina?"

Cari looked up at her father, watching as his eyes widened upon seeing the blood. Edward reached for the phone and dialed 911. Cari didn't really notice the passing of time. Only when the ambulance arrived, and they made her lie down on the litter, did she come out of her stupor. She heard her parents say they would follow as soon as they were dressed.

In the emergency room, the doctor began asking her questions. "Hello, Miss Evans." He slowly unwrapped her foot, but quickly took the extra gauze the nurse had been holding and pressed it against the cut. As the nurse took over applying the pressure, the doctor continued. "I'm afraid you definitely need

stitches to close this. It looks like there may still be a little glass inside." He stopped talking as Cari reached for the basin, her insides feeling jumbled and unsteady.

"What does all this mean?" Cari asked a few seconds later after the false alarm.

"It looks to me like it would be best if I called in a surgeon. They will put you to sleep for a little while." He paused and glanced over the notes on Cari's chart.

Cari watched him flip through the few pages, wondering what else he was considering. His next words shouldn't have surprised her as much as they did.

"Are you pregnant, Miss Evans?"

Cari cleared her throat, which seemed to startle the young emergency room doctor, since she had answered all the other questions without pause. He raised one eyebrow questioningly. Finally, Cari answered. "Yes, I think I might be. I haven't tested or anything..."

The young doctor nodded, writing on the clipboard. "All right, well that might change things. I'll have them change the pressure dressing, and we'll get a pregnancy test while we contact a surgeon. He can probably do it under local."

Cari watched as the doctor walked away. Slowly, she became aware of what it might mean if she were really pregnant. She couldn't calm her breathing as it sped up. Soon her thoughts were racing as fast as her heart, so it wasn't the least bit surprising that right after the laboratory technician drew her blood, Cari tossed her cookies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cari was sitting alone on the terrace, watching the waves wash in across the sand. She hadn't wanted to go to Salvatore's home at the ocean to recover, but her mother had insisted. She was getting quite good at hiding her emotions, she realized as she sat there, immersed in her thoughts. Listening to the steady crash of the waves, she acknowledged that she was tired of ignoring all the gestures of intimacy that passed between them. Being with the two of them the last few days, it amazed her that for so many years she had missed the level of intimacy that existed between them. Calling herself all kinds of a fool that she had not seen the signs, no matter how subtle, which told the true relationship between the two people she had loved and believed in all of her life. Marina was often seen straightening Sal's shirt collar, or pressing flat a stubborn cowlick of hair. Nearly every time Sal would hold Marina's chair, Cari would catch sight of his fingers caressing her mother's back, neck or hair.

Stretching out on the long lounge chair, Cari was glad to have the house to herself this afternoon. Her mother and Sal had gone shopping for something and she was so grateful for the peace and quiet, she had encouraged them to go. After nearly two weeks of this threesome, Cari didn't think she'd be able to keep her mouth shut one more day.

Just last night, she couldn't sleep and had come downstairs for something to eat. Hearing something, she'd gone to look outside. Surprise didn't begin to cover her feelings as she'd seen her mother and uncle in the hot tub. It took a few seconds before she'd realized they were both naked. Feeling sick to her stomach, Cari had hobbled back upstairs. Fighting back nausea and her tortured thoughts, Cari struggled to fall asleep.

It had to be the rhythmic crashing of the waves that helped her make the decision. Tomorrow was her appointment to have the stitches removed. At breakfast tomorrow, she'd ask Sal if she could take the car and go by herself. The time away from all the lies would do her good.

## \* \* \* \* \*

"I thought I would drive into the hospital alone."

Marina voiced her opinion immediately. "Carissa it is too far for you to drive

there. It is too soon. Sal and I will take you."

"I can understand if you don't trust me with your Caddy, Uncle Sal, but I think it would be good for me to do this. It's been two weeks." She added, hoping that would sway things her way. She watched as her mother whispered to Salvatore, and he finally agreed. From the look on his face though, Cari guessed that he was more concerned for his car than for her ability to drive. Cari didn't blame him for not trusting her with his fancy Cadillac.

"I promise if I'm too tired I'll take a nap at home or call one of my friends and spend the night. Don't worry, Mother. Everything will be fine."

"All right, darling. You have our cell phone numbers if you need to reach us."

Cari watched as her mother patted Sal's knees, supposedly under the cover of the tablecloth. Her nerves were shot from all the tension she was feeling. It was tearing her apart, living in this web of lies. Up until the accident, it had been easy to stick her head in the sand, pretending nothing had changed. Now she knew that she couldn't live a life of deception, as the others had and continued to do every day. There was no more living in denial because she was going to be a mother herself in a little over seven months. She owed it to herself and her child to face facts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cari drove without incident to the hospital and had the stitches removed. She heard the doctor's instructions, nodding her head, but not really listening to his words. After she left the hospital, she sat in the car for some time. She had told her mother she would be back in time for a late lunch.

She finally switched on the ignition, intending to start for Sal's house, but instead drove around aimlessly for a while. Cari should have been surprised, but deep down she wasn't at all shocked to find the car stopped in Jake's circular driveway a short time later. She limped to the front door and rang the bell. She was taken aback when an older man, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie, answered the door.

After a few moments, Cari got past her surprise, and embarrassment that it wasn't Jake, and she was able to ask if Mr. Hall was home. She wasn't sure whether to breathe a sigh of relief, or to take off running, when the man told her that Mr. Hall was in the library. She let herself be escorted there. It was very hard not to let her gaze go to the leather sofa upon entering the room.

Jake looked up as his butler announced a visitor. He stood when he saw Cari hovering nervously beside the other man.

"Cari," Jake called out, surprised that he was almost shouting. He moved towards her swiftly, stopping when he saw her bandaged foot. "John, could you have Mary fix us some light lunch and tea?"

"Of course, sir," John murmured, and then closed the heavy double doors behind himself.

Cari immediately started to protest but Jake stopped her. "You look hungry, and I am hungry. Let me take care of you, honey." The pet name slipped out before Jake realized that he had even been thinking of Cari as his "honey" for quite some time. Jake wrapped his arm around her waist and shepherded her over to the sofa.

Cari sat down gingerly. Jake was aware of her watching him as he sat also, but kept several feet distance between them. The glance at him was for only a moment or two.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping in on you, unannounced and all..." She folded her hands in her lap.

"No, not at all. I'm glad you came by. I...uhm, did your father tell you I stopped by one day, a while back?" Jake turned sideways on the sofa, resting his arm along the top.

Cari shook her head. "No, he didn't say a word." She rubbed her fingers against one temple. "You came to order another book? I am sorry that I missed you then."

Jake nodded, but deliberately added a few words to set her straight. "I came into the shop on the pretense of researching another book. Let me put it this way, Cari." He held her eyes. "I came to the shop to see you, and when you weren't there, that's what I told your father. I did ask him to let you know I had stopped by." Pointing to her foot, he continued. "What happened?"

Cari flushed brightly. "I dropped a glass and then stepped on the broken pieces. You would think I had dropped my brain and not just a glass."

Jake leaned forward and his hand, which had been resting along the sofa back, moved to lightly touch her shoulder and then her neck. "Are you okay? How badly was it damaged?"

Cari turned and smiled at Jake. He could tell she was nervous by the way her fingers were knotting and fisting in the material of her skirt. "I'm fine, really. I just came from the hospital, where they took the stitches out. I have to be careful for awhile, but otherwise..." She broke off as the butler returned with the elaborate silver tea tray.

Jake nodded. "Thanks, John. You can have the rest of the day off, if you wish. Same for Mary, as well."

John, the perfect butler, nodded once and left the room. Jake smiled a little. Although neither husband nor wife had shown the least sign, Jake believed they both knew that one night there had been a guest in the house. Since that night, or more specifically since his waking up alone, Jake had been like a bear with a sore thumb. He knew that he was often in a foul mood, or distracted. Jake was also sure that John had probably guessed this young lady was the reason. There was no doubt in his mind that John would quite happily high tail it back to the kitchen to tell Mary. Jake poured tea for them both, and then filled a plate to overflowing with small sandwiches, crackers, cut vegetables and fruit. He handed it to Cari, smiling.

Cari took the plate. "I think you have overestimated the size of my stomach. I doubt I'll be able to eat half of the food on this plate."

Jake watched her as she did start eating, sipping her tea in between bites. Jake easily steered the conversation to antique books and collecting. He couldn't help but notice how animated Cari became as they conversed. Beneath the idle chat, Jake wondered what she and her absent fiancé usually talked about.

Cari grinned over at him at one point, quickly drinking some tea to wash down her food. "I'm sorry, but I've probably been talking with my mouth full of food. It is just so rare that I get to talk with anyone, besides my father, about books." She paused for a moment, and Jake watched a sad look pass over her face. She looked embarrassed as she went on. "Anthony and I hardly ever talk about stuff."

Jake could see she was having doubts about her fiancé, which couldn't make him happier. He'd considered pursuing her, regardless of her being engaged. Two things had stopped him. First he had the impression that this "engagement" was weak, at best. If he just waited, he could be there for her when it broke up. Secondly, he respected Edward and the relationship they had developed. He was a very wealthy and successful man. Patience and the knowledge of when to strike were his friends.

Jake knew he probably should not do so, but he ended up adding brandy to each of their next cups of tea. The alcohol and the hot tea brought a flush to Cari's cheeks. It also loosened her tongue. Jake argued with himself, and lost, as he moved closer to her on the sofa, beginning to slowly play with the long tendrils of her hair. He finally was close enough to lower his mouth to lightly kiss the side of her neck. Cari jumped a bit, surprised that Jake had moved closer and she had not been aware of it until he touched her. She knew she should stand up and get out of Jake's house, but her legs had stopped listening to her brain. As Jake's lips kissed their way towards her mouth, she realized the rest of her body had stopped listening also. She kissed him back, her hands moving to encircle his neck, pulling him close. She rubbed her breasts back and forth against his hard masculine chest, letting him feel her hard nipples.

A moment later, Jake moved his hands to cup her breasts, finding her taut nipples, and working them easily into even tighter buds of desire. "Cari, come upstairs with me. I want to love you on my bed. I don't want to rush through it..." His voice faded away as he stared into her eyes. The look in his eyes warmed her in places that she hadn't realized had grown cold over the last few tumultuous weeks.

Cari nodded her head, as if it were the only answer that was humanly possible. She stood with Jake, letting him help her up the stairs and the short distance down the hall into his large bedroom. Cari saw his big bed, which sat up on a platform that you walked up two wooden steps to reach. Jake swung her into his arms, carrying her up those two steps.

"Jake, no! I'm too heavy..." Cari's head whirled in amazement.

Jake shook his head as he lowered her onto the bed. His eyes held her gaze as he began stripping off his clothes. He watched her face, her eyes, as she followed his movements. He stood naked in front of her a few seconds later, and her eyes moved down and lingered on his erect manhood.

Cari rose up on her elbow, facing him. Feeling nervous and unsure of herself, she reached out with her free hand. Ever so lightly, the backs of her fingers stroked over his lower abdomen, down his side to his thigh. She heard Jake's breath catch when her small hand encircled his hard cock, stroking him lightly for a moment or two. Moving her hand to lightly drag her fingers across his pubic hair, she felt gratified hearing Jake groan.

Cari was surprised when a moment later Jake curled a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to meet his. He looked down at her fingers, which were tangling in his curly hair.

"Tell me what you are thinking, my sweet, right now."

Cari blushed, embarrassed to reveal her thoughts. But she swallowed back her nervousness, and told him. "I was wondering what you would look like if you didn't have any hair..." She stopped, realizing he might take her words the wrong way.

"Ahh, you mean shaven, as you are?"

Cari nodded, and relaxed since he understood. She scooted back a bit as Jake started to lie down beside her. His fingers began unbuttoning her shirt, pushing it back off her shoulders. Next, he unsnapped her denim skirt, pushing it over her hips and down her thighs. Cari watched as Jake paused, looking at her partially clad body. He lifted his hand to cup her unfettered breast, massaging the full, round, soft globe.

"I never would have guessed you for the type to go braless, or to have a shaven pussy, my sweet love." He caught her chin as she tried to move away in embarrassment. "I meant nothing bad, Cari. In fact, I found it so incredibly arousing the last time that I almost lost it the minute I touched your bare skin."

Jake paused and lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her deeply. He pressed her back to lie upon the pillows. "So, tell me which you would want. Do you want me to shave myself, or do you want to shave me?"

Cari shivered, unable to stop the frisson of desire that shot through her body. She couldn't hide her reaction either, knowing that her cheeks were a bright pink. "Whichever you feel comfortable with...Uhm, I don't have any experience shaving a man..." Cari stopped abruptly.

Jake slid his hand down her body and inside her panties. He cupped her

smooth mound. "First, I'm glad to hear of your inexperience in this area. Secondly my sweet, I might not make it through your shaving me. Your soft hands, holding my cock, and your fingers moving across my skin, might conclude things quicker than I would want."

Cari chuckled, not really believing that her hands could cause such a thing to happen. "I could just watch you do it, then."

Jake groaned at her naïve comment. He kissed her again, dragging her panties down and off. "I don't think I can wait, Cari." He caressed her nether lips, slipping his fingers between the silky smooth flesh and discovering she was already quite wet. He slid his index finger over her clit, rubbing it lightly. But that was all it took. Cari climaxed almost immediately. Her body jerked and she cried out in surprise.

Jake moved above her, sliding into her hot, wet body. "We'll have to put off the shave for now, my sweet. There is no way I can wait much longer." He groaned as Cari tightened her muscles around him, holding him inside her, when he tried to withdraw. And when she did it again, a few seconds later, Jake came hard and fast inside her. Over and over, he thrust forward, shooting his hot essence into her body. Cari wrapped her legs around him, holding him tight.

Jake finally dropped to the bed, breathing harshly. Cari was lying beside him, her eyes closed, a small smile curving her lips. She couldn't believe how fantastic she felt just then. In the back of her mind, she'd had this niggling doubt that her time with Jake had been a fluke. Deep in her subconscious, she had told herself that nothing could be that...amazing.

A few minutes later, she felt the bed move and Jake kissed her mouth lightly. A smile curved her lips, but she didn't open her eyes. She felt his breath brush across her cheek as he spoke. "Turn on your side, honey, and I'll spoon you."

"What?" Cari asked in surprise, opening her eyes. Jake pointed for her to turn away from him. He pulled her close, spoon-fashion, his manhood nestled between her rounded cheeks. Feeling the warmth from his body, Cari pressed backwards, wiggling her bottom against him.

Jake chuckled, curving his arm over her waist. "Give me ten minutes rest and I'll take you up on that wiggle."

Cari started to giggle, but stopped abruptly as Jake's hand moved upwards and cupped one breast. She held her breath as Jake began teasing her nipple. Shivers coursed through her body. It took her several long moments before she relaxed enough to fall asleep.

# Chapter 4

Cari awoke, dazed and lifted her wrist to see the time. She tried to sit up and felt Jake's arm lying heavily across her body. She went to move, but he held her tight.

"Jake..." she spoke softly. When he didn't stir, she spoke louder. She knew he was awake when his hand shifted and cupped her breast. His fingers lightly tweaked her nipple. "It's almost seven, and I told my mother I would be back..."

"Call her and tell her you are staying overnight, with a friend," Jake suggested softly. Cari rolled over and looked into his eyes. On his face she could see that he was not at all sure what she would do. She didn't answer, or move for a long moment.

"Where is your phone?" she asked him softly after a few moments deliberation.

Jake chuckled softly, and removed his hand from her warm breast. He reached behind him, grabbing the portable phone from the bedside stand. He held it in front of her. Once Cari took it, he returned his hand to her breast immediately. In spite of her light slap to his hand before she started dialing, Jake continued to massage the breast and tease her nipple.

Jake felt the change in her body instantly as someone answered the other end of the phone line. Her tension spoke volumes more than her words. Since she had turned back to her side, he pressed up against her.

"Oh, hi, Uncle Sal," he heard Cari say softly. "I am sorry for not calling earlier, but something came up..." Cari stopped as she felt Jake thrust his hips forward against her soft bottom, showing what he had "coming up." She cleared her throat. "I am staying in town tonight, with a friend." She stopped as Jake began nuzzling the side of her neck. "I'll be there sometime tomorrow, if that is okay. I'm sorry about having your car..." She stopped, and Jake guessed that this "uncle" of hers was giving her a hard time.

Behind her, Jake leaned close to her ear, pushing the phone away with his nose. He whispered to her softly, making a suggestion. "Tell them you will be home tomorrow...maybe."

Cari had to clear her throat again. "No, everything is fine. I will see you tomorrow then." Cari hung up the phone.

From over her shoulder, he saw her fanning herself with her hand. Good, he thought, he wanted her just as hot and bothered and he was. Jake eased even closer, letting her feel his growing manhood, pressing forward, demanding entrance.

"Don't move," he told her softly. "I'll show you what to do." He raised her upper leg just a bit, and his cock slipped between her wet lips. He moved his hand to her belly, and then down to her clit. He began a slow, seductive massage, matching it with his thrusting hips. Cari climaxed first, her thighs clamping down on his cock, holding him tight. Jake groaned and came inside her body.

Jake held her body tight against his own, his cock held inside her. He slowly relaxed his grip as he felt her slip into a heavy sleep. Trying not to disturb her, he moved his hand back up and cupped her uppermost breast. Lying behind Cari, feeling her warmth and softness so completely against his body, he was surprised at how good this really felt. In the back of his mind, but working its way forward, he was beginning to acknowledge that he could be very happy ending every day just like this one. Jake fell asleep enjoying the warm sexiness of her full breast in his hand, and his cock still nestled in her body.

### \* \* \* \* \*

Cari awoke to a soft brush against her shoulder. She turned her head and saw Jake was kissing her naked, upturned shoulder and upper arm, as she lay on

her side in the warm and cozy bed. She smiled slowly, feeling better than she had in weeks. She turned to lie on her back, looking up at Jake. He was grinning down at her, his face showing morning stubble.

"I made you breakfast in bed, my sweet, even though it's the middle of the night. And while I would rather dine on you, I am starving."

Cari laughed at his playfulness. She moved to be seated as he eased back to reach for the silver tray. She propped the pillows behind her, the sheets tucked under her arms. Jake set the tray across her thighs, and then gently but insistently, pulled the sheet down to her waist. Cari's blush went from her upper chest to her cheeks as she felt his gaze intently focused on her full, round breasts. He glanced up and started grinning at her.

"I want to enjoy the scenery while I dine," he told her softly, and then lifted the small glass of juice to her lips. Cari sipped the juice, surprised that when he moved the glass to his mouth, he drank from the same spot as she. She shivered at the sensual feelings she was having, often at some of his simplest acts or gestures. Jake proceeded to feed them both.

Cari took a bite of toast offered, chewing it slowly. She knew it probably didn't make any sense, but the juice was sweeter, and the butter on the toast was more buttery than ever before. They both laughed when Jake began eating the scrambled eggs. Cari remembered telling Jake about her cooking abilities that first evening they spent together. Jake's next words told her that he was recalling that evening as well.

"Perhaps Mary will let us borrow the kitchen later and you could treat me to a lazy woman's egg salad sandwich?"

Cari laughed and shook her head. "With food this good in the house, that would be like committing a crime!"

When they were done eating, Jake set the tray down at the side of the bed, but returned holding the small silver server that held the strawberry jam. Cari looked at him suspiciously. Her suspicions were confirmed when Jake dipped his index finger into the jam, and then lifted it back up for Cari to lick off. She took his whole finger into her mouth, instead of just using her tongue to lick off the sweet jam. She sucked on his finger, seeing the way his pupils flared at the feel of her tongue and lips around his finger.

When she released his finger, he scooped more jam up, but instead of offering it to her this time, he moved his finger to hover over her right nipple. She followed his movement at first, desire and arousal awakening in her body. When he poised just a scant inch from her taut, distended pink bud, Cari looked up into his eyes. She tried to read his thoughts, emotions, anything! Jake didn't say a word, but lowered his gaze back to her breasts, and then proceeded to spread the jam around her distended nipple.

Cari groaned out loud at the coolness of the gooey jam against her super sensitive nipple. He then began to circle the taut pearl, around and around, causing the nipple to become more distended with each pass of his finger. When her nipple was distended, Jake set the jam dish aside and lowered his mouth to her nipple. He licked her nipple from the bottom to top, in one slow, sensual movement.

Cari's head fell backwards and her hands moved to cradle his head as he took her nipple into his mouth. As he suckled the hard, distended bud, she felt his hand slide beneath the sheets, between her thighs. Cari's legs moved farther apart, letting his hand easily caress her upper thighs and womanly flesh. It seemed like she was drowning in a pool of sensuality. More importantly, she didn't give a damn about being rescued!

As his fingers wiggled inside, her wetness, mingled with his seed, seeped out. This eased the way for his fingers to enter her. Jake sucked her nipple harder as he felt the wetness. Just thinking about her leaking his seed had him hotter than he would have thought possible. Maybe some men didn't give a damn, but he cared that there was a chance he could be making a life with Cari. Of course, he still didn't know if she was using any birth control at all. He certainly wasn't, and knew that he was not being a "modern kind of guy," either in his thoughts or actions.

He wanted to take her right then, but he held back. Lifting his head, Jake reached for the jam dish again. Slowly, like an artist, he proceeded to paint her left nipple, and then pausing for a moment, he redid her right. He very slowly and deliberately began licking the jam off her breasts. With each pass of his tongue he could feel Cari's body softening and yet stirring to his touch. Several moments later she was shifting lower in the bed. Her legs made scissor-like movements back and forth, pushing the sheets lower on the bed, until she was completely uncovered.

Jake felt her hands caressing, cupping and then more deliberately trying to pull at his shoulders. He lifted his head finally, looking down at her passion clouded eyes. "Tell me what you want, sweet pet. Tell me if you want me to continue licking your scrumptious breasts, or do you want me to -"

"Take me, Jake! Now, please..."

Jake didn't need any further urging. He moved above her, and Cari's thighs shifted to welcome him. He rubbed his cock, back and forth, over her wet lips, before he began to push forward, slowly. He resisted her hands trying to pull him closer, and held back, easing gradually, leisurely into her hot flesh. Once he was fully inside her, he paused, and gently pushed the tangled hair off her flushed cheeks. He wanted to make this time last, unlike the other times. But it seemed as if just being inside her was too much to bear. Cari seemed to know secrets that a courtesan wouldn't know.

She moved her hips a certain way, or clamped her inner muscles and squeezed his cock deep inside her body, and that was it. Jake could hold back no longer. "God, Cari!" he shouted suddenly.

He began thrusting forward, withdrawing and then right back into her eager flesh. Her legs were locked around him, and each thrust of his cock was rubbing across her clit. He could feel her reactions each time he changed his pattern of movement. Watching her face, Jake could tell that he was getting her in just the right spot.

Cari cried out as her climax overtook her senses. Jake felt her arms hugging him even closer as he felt her body sucking him inside of her deeper and deeper. And just moments later, while the aftershocks and spasms shook her, Jake moaned and began climaxing. As he jerked his hips forward, emptying his life force into her body again, Cari tightened her arms and legs around him, holding him close.

Cari finally relaxed her tight hold on Jake, and he slid to lie beside her. He pulled her into his arms, and nestled her head on his chest. Cari fell asleep with her head upon his chest, and between the warmth of her head, the steadiness of her breathing and the sweet exhaustion seeping through his system, Jake was asleep only a few moments later.

# Chapter 5

Cari felt incredibly guilty as she started to sneak out of the house just past dawn a few hours later. She knew she should stay and awaken Jake, but it was also true that she couldn't really answer any questions, should he decide to ask any. She was really close to making it out of the house, when John, Jake's butler, found her trying to quietly open the back door.

"Good morning, miss."

Cari smiled as she hobbled about. Leaning against a counter, she returned his greeting, all the while cursing her bad luck for not being able to sneak out unobserved. "Good morning."

"Can we get you something to eat for breakfast? Coffee, eggs or toast?" John smiled at Cari.

"Uhm, thank you, but I have to get going."

John nodded and then added, "I hope we'll be seeing you again, ma'am."

Cari felt her throat tighten as she realized that she desperately wanted to tell John that she hoped for the same thing. Since she had already been served the most delicious of breakfasts in the middle of the night, she certainly wasn't hungry. She would have liked to stay and spend some time with the people who lived here and worked for Jake. A sharp pang struck her as she realized how much she would enjoy coming downstairs with Jake, and savoring a leisurely meal with John and his wife. It was difficult to acknowledge but what she really wanted was to learn more about Jake, and she sensed that John and his wife knew Jake better than most employer and employee relationships.

Taking a risk, Cari spoke from her heart. "I hope so too. Goodbye."

Once she was in the car, the tears let loose and she drove straight to her uncle's house. The sun was halfway up the sky by the time she pulled the car into the garage. She went into Sal's house very quietly, not wanting to awaken anyone or face any questions. Less than halfway across the living room, she realized that her mother and Uncle Sal were already awake, and in the kitchen. She turned to continue on to her bedroom, when she heard her mother's quiet sobbing. She hated to move closer, remembering the last time she had eavesdropped.

Still, she also seemed unable to stop herself. Leaning just a bit around the doorway, she could see them seated at the table and hear their conversation.

"Marina, darling, please don't cry." Sal consoled Cari's mother, patting her hand gently. "You must know that nothing in this world would make me happier than to be the one to walk our daughter down the aisle for her wedding, but it is impossible. You know the scandal we would face. And it isn't just you and me, but there is Carissa and Anthony to consider, and their children also, from now on."

Cari felt her stomach churn violently at her uncle's words. Dear God! The realization of what he had just revealed shook her soul. Sal was not her uncle at all. He was her father! Not thinking beyond the need to escape this terrible revelation, Cari turned too sharply and came down the wrong way on her foot.

"Ow!" she cried out in pain, and quickly muttered "damn!" She was sure that if they had not heard her cry of pain, they definitely heard her the second time. She hobbled a few feet back towards the door, but ended up collapsing onto the floor. Tears were running down her cheeks now, both from pain in her foot, and in her soul. A few moments later her mother and Sal ran into the room.

"Oh my goodness! Carissa, darling, are you all right? Have you hurt your foot?"

Sal stood to the side as Marina bent down on one knee at Cari's side. "I didn't hear you come in, Carissa."

Cari brushed her mothers sympathetic hands aside, not wanting to be near either of them at that moment. Yet she didn't want to reveal what she had overheard moments earlier. She couldn't deal with anything else! She sniffled loudly, and rubbed her foot.

"I just got in a minute ago. I parked the car in the garage first." She lied convincingly, ignoring the sarcastic inner voice telling her she must come by it naturally. "I came down wrong on my foot, and the pain took me by surprise. It really was fine up until then." She went to get to her feet, but stopped when her mother and Sal both reached out to help her. "I'm fine, but I think I'll just sit here another minute or so. Please, don't let me interrupt your breakfast..." She avoided looking either of them in the eye.

Cari knew she had to be careful and not reveal what she had just learned. She needed time to absorb this new information. There was no denying that one more piece of knowledge like this just might do her in.

"Carissa, darling, please let Sal assist you into the kitchen, and you can join us for breakfast. We really haven't been able to spend much time together." Marina rose to her feet, motioning for Sal to help her up.

Cari shook her head. "No, really, I'm fine. And I already ate a huge breakfast. I couldn't possibly eat another bite until dinner tonight." She scooted back a little, putting a few feet between her parents and herself. She gritted her teeth and stood up. She moved quickly, hobbling towards her room. "I'm going to take a nap. We were up most of the night talking, and I need to catch up on my sleep I think. You go on with whatever plans you had for the day. And I'm sorry for leaving you stranded without a car."

Marina frowned, but Sal nodded his head. "Well, if you are sure, Carissa. We were going to drive down the beach and have lunch at the small café we like. Your mother had some shopping she wanted to do. We'll be back in plenty of time for dinner this evening."

Carissa nodded, feeling her face might crack from the fake smile she was putting on. "That sounds like a great idea. Don't hurry back on my account, please. If I get hungry, I'll have an early dinner. Bye you two, and see you later." Hoping her voice sounded cheerful and normal, she turned as quickly as she could and went to her room. She closed the door behind her, and was grateful there was a key in the door, turning it as softly as possible. Crossing the room, she went over and lay down on the bed. Not moving, almost fearing something else might happen, Cari listened carefully for the sound that would assure her they had driven away.

It seemed like forever, but it was really only thirty minutes or so when she checked the clock beside the bed. As soon as she heard the car pull out of the drive, she went back out to the living room. She walked straight to the phone, and pulled a slip of paper from her pocket. She had written the number down before leaving that morning. Something inside of her had insisted on being able to call Jake. Cari dialed the number slowly, her fingers were shaking so badly. She was never as glad as when she heard Jake's voice a moment later.

"Jake?" Cari had told herself she wouldn't cry, but she did. The moment she heard his voice, the dam broke.

"Cari! Honey, what is wrong? Where are you?"

"Could you please come and get me?" she asked him, and then realized what an imposition this was. "I'm sorry to ask you, but there isn't anyone – "

"I'll leave now. Just give me the directions." He remained quiet as she told him. "I can be there in about 45 minutes. Here is my cellular number, and call me in the car if you need anything at all before I get there."

Cari wrote the number on her palm, and then said goodbye. She used the wall to lean against and to steady her as she hopped back to her room. Without further delay, Cari began grabbing her clothes from the closet and drawers. She crammed them into the suitcase, ignoring the pieces that were poking out from every side. It took some effort and planning, but she managed to drag the bag to the front door. She was almost out the door when she realized that she should

leave a note.

Painfully she moved back to the desk and found some paper and a pencil. She decided to lie, since it seemed to be the "in" thing to do of late. Carefully choosing her words, Cari wrote that she'd called a friend, and they had begged her to join them for a drive up the coast. She added that she would call later, when her mother was home.

Ignoring her conscience telling her it was a lousy note, she taped it to the front door. Moving with her suitcase outside, she carried the case down the long drive, and sat on the grassy roadside to await Jake.

### \* \* \* \* \*

Jake's sports car roared up the deserted road a short time later. He had broken all the speed limits, but luckily he had not been spotted. He was still a bit angry with her for walking out on him again. But hearing her cry over the phone had pushed the anger to the back of his mind. As he pulled to a stop, the sight of Cari, seated atop a suitcase with clothes hanging out every which way, made him angry as hell. She looked like some kind of stray animal. He was angry and bristling to start a fight with whoever had made her so upset that she couldn't even wait for him up at the house.

Cari was standing and dragging her suitcase before he even had the car stopped. He came around the car hurriedly, taking the heavy case from her and slinging it into the trunk. The need to hug her was great, but she had already climbed into the passenger seat and was staring straight ahead. He came back around the car and got in next to her. After a quick glance in her direction, he turned the car back around for the city. She didn't volunteer a word all the way back, other than saying thank you when he first sat down. For a split second he considered asking her where she wanted to go, but just as quickly he decided she was coming back to his place.

He pulled up to the front door of his house and honked the horn several

times. John came out a moment later as Jake was opening Cari's door.

"John, would you please grab Cari's bag and bring it up to my room?"

John nodded and moved towards the car. "Do you need help with the young lady?"

Jake shook his head, wrapping his arm around Cari's waist. "I think we can make it upstairs. Thank you, John."

It took several minutes for them to get upstairs to Jake's bedroom. Once upstairs, he helped her to sit down on the freshly made bed. He turned as John came into the room with her suitcase.

"Shall I unpack for the young lady, sir?" John offered.

Jake shook his head. "Thanks, John. That can wait for now. Please ask Mary to throw together something for us to eat, and then bring it up in say, thirty minutes." John nodded and turned to leave when Jake added, "Add some brandy to the tray, please."

John nodded and closed the door behind him. Jake turned to Cari, who was looking pale and lost. Jake leaned over and kissed her cheek tenderly. "Stay put, sweetheart, I'll be right back." Quickly Jake went into the bathroom and turned on the faucets for the tub. When he came back, he began removing her clothes. She tried to bat his hands away a few times, and then gave up. She appeared as if everything was just too much of an effort.

Completely naked, he helped her into the large bathroom and then into the swirling water. Once she was immersed almost to her neck, Jake turned off the taps and sat down beside her on the rim of the tub. The look on her face told him the water must be warm and relaxing. He watched her quietly for several moments, wanting to ask her what had happened to cause her such obvious pain.

Jake heard the outer door open about fifteen minutes later.

"Sir?" John called to him from the bedroom door.

"I'll be right back, Cari." Jake hopped to his feet to meet John.

Cari lowered her head to rest against the edge of the tub. She closed her eyes, letting the warmth wash through her. It only took a moment or two, and the tears began to run down her cheeks. She had thought the pain of learning about Anthony's betrayal had hurt. Then she had discovered her mother was having an affair with the man she had considered a friend of her parents.

In the midst of feeling betrayed, she went off, had sex with probably the most attractive man she had ever met and gotten pregnant. A smile curved her lips upwards as she thought about Jake. He truly was attractive, but he was also so incredibly nice. She had begun to think her life couldn't possibly be anymore screwed up...

"Drink this, honey."

Cari opened her eyes and saw that Jake was next to the tub, holding out a cup of tea for her. She took a sip and coughed a little, realizing he had added some brandy. She went to hand it back to him, but he shook his head and lifted the cup back to her lips. She frowned at him, but drank a few more sips.

"Are you trying to get me drunk, sir?" she asked him, trying to make light of the situation. Her power of reason was returning slowly, and she was beginning to feel embarrassed at having him see her in such a vulnerable state.

Jake shook his head as he lowered himself to sit on the edge again. "If I thought it would help you, Cari, I would. But I think you just need to relax a little, eat something, and then sleep. You can tell me, if you want, what has happened to upset you. Or if you prefer, don't tell me."

Cari took a few more sips before she looked up and met his eyes. Jake reached out and tenderly rubbed at the tears on her cheeks. It was silly, but she hadn't been aware of the tears. "How about you join me in here?" Jake smiled a little. "Cari, you could tempt a saint. But right now, that is the last thing you need. Now, I think the bath has relaxed you enough for the brandy to work." He stood and held out a large towel. Cari grimaced at him, enjoying the bubbling water, but set her cup down and dutifully stepped out of the tub.

She did feel compelled to tell Jake something. Looking up, Cari batted her eyelashes flirtatiously and told him softly, "Don't think that I'll always be this amenable."

Immediately after the words left her mouth, she realized how bad they sounded. It was like she was assuming that they would have an "always" together. Not that she'd ever thought it was possible, and she was still engaged, but she'd heard that nothing made a man run away faster than talk of forever!

Jake enfolded her in the towel, rubbing her skin briskly. Without a word, he then dressed her in what was obviously his own terrycloth robe, and pointed her back towards the bedroom.

"Go lay down. I'm just going to let the water out of the tub."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cari had obviously found the heavily laden tray with food because she was eating a grape when Jake came up behind her and told her to crawl into bed. He brought the tray over, setting it on the bedside stand. He filled a plate with small sandwiches, some fruit, and a few pieces of cut raw vegetables. Cari took the plate and started to eat.

Jake watched as she started gobbling up the food voraciously. "Hungry, huh?"

Cari looked up suddenly, and he could see that she was surprised at how hungry she was feeling. She continued eating, not waiting for Jake to fill a plate for himself. He pulled a chair up next to the bed, and ate from there.

They didn't talk while they ate, but when Cari's eyelids started drooping and

staying closed for longer and longer, he knew she'd had enough. Jake took her plate from her hands and slid her under the covers. He paused to make sure her foot was still all right and was glad to see the wound was pink and healing and that it didn't need to be recovered with gauze.

"Now you go to sleep, Cari. You have nothing to worry about here." He couldn't resist leaning over to press a kiss to her forehead before he left her alone and took the tray back downstairs to the kitchen.

John was seated at the kitchen table and Mary was at the stove, stirring something as Jake walked in. Being the perfect butler, John started to stand.

"Sit down, John. I've got it just fine." After setting the tray down, he turned to look at Mary. "If you wouldn't mind, Mary, I would appreciate it if you could go upstairs and sit with Miss Evans. I know this doesn't fall under your job description, but I don't want her left alone right now."

Mary smiled, shaking her head. "Don't you fret, Jake. Of course I'll go up and sit with her." Pausing to untie her apron, she turned to look at her husband. "John, I'll let you finish stirring this. Once it comes to a boil, just turn it off, and set it on this trivet to cool."

John nodded, moving to obey his wife, when Jake reached his hand out. Pressing on the older man's shoulder, he spoke. "Don't either of you worry about dinner. We can order in and use paper plates."

Mary gasped, looking affronted. "Paper plates instead of using the lovely china and silver that you have?"

John chuckled, shaking his head. "Don't you listen to her, Jake! Of course we have paper plates. That's what she makes me eat off of every night."

Mary batted lightly towards her husband's head. "Shush, John. It isn't every night, just when my feet are tired."

Jake grinned widely, looking from one to the other. "Well, for now, I consider Miss Evans our number one priority. I'll be in the library, if you'll let me

know when she starts to wake up." As he turned to leave for his office, he saw out of the corner of his eye the knowing, yet concerned look his caretakers exchanged.

## Chapter 6

Cari awoke and it was dark in the bedroom. She moved to her back, trying to figure out where she was. She felt so wonderfully warm and cozy that she really didn't want to wake up. She then felt a heat next to her, and she remembered. It all came flooding back to her, in a rush of mixed up thoughts and jumbled emotions. She turned her head and saw that Jake was asleep next to her in his large bed. Rolling onto her side, she faced him. She realized she was naked. At some point she, or perhaps Jake, had taken off the heavy robe.

For some time, Cari just lay there quietly, watching Jake sleep. She acknowledged that she owed him an explanation. She didn't know what she would have done if he hadn't come for her. She couldn't have called her father... She stopped as she recalled everything she had heard earlier. It seemed like it had been a week since that morning. It all still hurt, and most of all, she was angry for her father's sake. She could never think of Uncle...

Cari stopped herself. Sal was her biological father, but she didn't think she could ever see him as her father. To her, Edward Evans would always be her father. He was the one who had raised her, cared for her skinned up knees and bruises. He was the one who had read her long, wonderful fairy tales each night before bed. From him she had learned the value of books filled with knowledge, and come to appreciate rare and antique leather bound tomes.

Cari reached out with her hand and lightly traced the tip of her index finger over Jake's eyebrows, and then down his aquiline nose. Her finger stroked gently, lovingly, across his lower lip. Her breath caught as she realized she had fallen in love with him. She barely knew him, but somehow she felt like she was a part of him.

It hurt. Truthfully it was embarrassing to admit that she most likely knew Jake better than she had ever known Anthony. There was no doubt in her heart or mind that she never could have called Anthony to come and get her today. He would have had to ask why or why now, or why couldn't she call one of her girlfriends to help her instead of him.

Cari's eyes moved from Jake's face to her hand, and then to the ring that still graced her left ring finger. It was a big diamond. She remembered how her friends had all "oohed" and "aahed" over it. Now she realized that it probably had not been Anthony's money that had purchased the ring. It had probably been her...

Cari stopped, her mind tripping over calling her birth father "Uncle Sal" any longer. She didn't think she would ever call him father, either. She took a deep breath and acknowledged that Sal's money had bought both the ring, and Anthony, for her. God only knew how much the wealthy Salvatore Andretti had given her mother over the years.

It made her sick to her stomach to think that she had been used like that. She was a pawn in some kind of business maneuver. It was hard to realize the truth. It was true that Sal had no sons to inherit. In his mind, perhaps it made sense to have his daughter marry his choice to run his business one day. She closed her eyes as pain shot through her again and she took a deep, shuddering breath.

She should have seen through Anthony. He was too good looking to glance at a girl like her. She'd never had any illusions about her looks. She knew she wasn't a toad. Being a little overweight, she also knew that size was a factor to a lot of men. She pushed her hand through her hair. The ring caught on the long strands, just as it always did. Once she had freed the ring, she gazed at it again.

"Somehow, I don't think a penny is enough."

Cari glanced up at Jake, surprised that he was awake. "What?" she asked him softly.

"I think I will need at least a five dollar gold piece to buy your thoughts."

Cari smiled. "Maybe they aren't for sale."

Jake smiled slowly. "Hmm. What about for all the gold in Fort Knox?"

Cari shook her head. "Maybe money isn't what I want," she told him saucily, but quietly acknowledged how close this playful banter was to the truth.

"Would you share them with me if I offered you all the tea in China?" Jake offered softly, lifting his hand to stroke the backs of his fingers down the side of her face.

"Hmm, now I like tea. Perhaps I'll do a deal if you agree to make it for me, and bring it to me in bed every day." She stopped abruptly when she realized what she had just suggested to him. But Jake just smiled at her. He moved the few inches separating them, sliding his arm around her.

"That sounds like a workable solution to me. Just one thing though..." He leaned forward, and kissed her lips softly.

Cari felt her inner soul warm with his gentleness, and playfulness. "What?"

"I will have to buy a one story house. I don't like climbing those damn stairs carrying a tray." He kissed her again, this time his tongue sliding inside to seek hers. His knee eased between her thighs, sliding up to press against her womanly heat. At Cari's soft sigh, he rolled her onto her back, and began to caress her breasts.

Jake slid his mouth down her chin, neck, pausing to lick, kiss and suck his way down to her breasts. Her nipples were already taut and more than ready by the time he reached them. As his mouth began a slow, wet worship service at her breasts, his hand moved down to caress her belly, and then between her thighs.

Jake groaned, and Cari knew he could feel the wetness on her shaven lips. He slid one finger inside her, while his thumb began an erotic, seductive dance with her sensitive clit. Cari felt like his cherished violin as he worked her body like a master violinist, stroking and caressing her until she cried out from his mastery.

Her climax took her by surprise, and her second one came so fast behind the first, that she lay gasping on the bed. Jake moved over her, and shifted her thighs

to accommodate his hips. Cari watched and felt him poised at her entrance, rubbing her wetness all over his cock. Cari was dimly aware as Jake pressed forward, and her soft, womanly flesh yielded to him happily.

Jake groaned as her heat enclosed him so eagerly, as if she were welcoming him into her body. He looked down into her half-closed eyes, wishing he could hold off... But Cari's flesh was moving, caressing, and squeezing his cock as tiny little aftershocks of her orgasm still rocked her body. Her breathing was almost in tune with her body's movements, as it pulled him deeper. He cried out her name, and thrust into her again, coming into her body in a heated rush. Cari lifted her arms and held him tight to her body as he shot his cum into her.

Jake collapsed towards the bed, but rolled them over so Cari now lay atop him. Her surprise was obvious, especially when he flexed his hips revealing how closely joined they still were. The tables turned though as she smiled at him, and then he felt her body purposely squeezing down on him. Jake groaned, and stroked his hands over her back. Slowly his hands cupped her buttocks.

"Do that again, and we may never leave this bed," he threatened her idly.

"Maybe I don't want to leave the bed, ever," she said decisively. A moment later, she shrugged nonchalantly. "Food?"

Jake shook his head. "That is one of the advantages of having someone working for you. I'll just call downstairs and order whatever you might wish." He moved his hands upward to stroke her hair. Cari lay her head down on his chest, and actually purred like a kitten as he stroked and caressed her hair.

"By the way, are you hungry? I let Mary and John take the evening off. We can fix something ourselves, order in, or dine out."

Cari lifted her head. "What time is it?"

Jake lifted his wrist and flicked a tiny switch on the side. He read the illuminated dial. "It is just seven now."

"Would you mind taking me into town? I know this is a terrible imposition,

but I'd really like to catch my father before his book club meeting."

Jake wanted to demand an explanation of what was going on in her life to have her so upset, but he decided to bide his time just a little bit longer. He nodded his head. "But we will have to hurry. I believe that usually starts at eight, doesn't it?" He shifted Cari off his body reluctantly.

Cari nodded and moved out of the bed. Jake saw her glancing around the room, and he guessed she was wondering where her suitcase had been placed.

"Look in the closet, honey. Mary put your stuff away while you were still asleep. What she couldn't hang, she stashed in the top drawer in the dresser, on the left."

Cari walked over to the closet, the room partially lit by the bathroom light. She pulled out a lightweight cotton dress, and slipped it on over her head. Seeing her sandals, she slipped her feet into them also. Jake dressed quickly, watching her silently. She moved over to the dresser and picked up Jake's comb and started to restore some order to her long hair.

It was only a minute or so later when he came to stand behind her. Jake took the comb from her hand and combed his own hair. In the mirror, he saw Cari smiling back at him. He knew there was no explaining their relationship so far, but he couldn't deny the warm feeling that surged through his body at such a simple gesture of sharing.

Almost as if she read his mind, she told him softly, "We don't have time right now, but later..."

Jake grinned widely as she took his hand and walked with him out to his car.

### \* \* \* \* \*

Cari sat in the car next to Jake, waiting quietly for her father to appear for his book club meeting. She knew he never missed a session, and often stayed quite late discussing the books with friends from the club over coffee. One of the times she had suggested she go with him, but he had told her no, she would be way too bored. She had accepted what he said because he was her father.

Cari decided she would call out to him when she saw him although she had no clear idea of what she wanted to say to him. But she felt the need to see him, and to have him hold her, even if it was only for a moment or two. Maybe she could find that safe place again, once her father hugged her close. She clenched her hands into fists, where they rested on her thighs.

She hadn't said a word to Jake, other than giving him directions. She wanted to say something to him, but all of her thoughts and emotions were so cluttered inside of her, that she couldn't seem to form any words. She felt such chaos, and loss of control, inside of her, that she wasn't even sure what was real anymore.

Jake had been watching Cari ever since he had stopped the car. She had been clenching and unclenching her fists constantly. At every noise, she would jump and turn to look in the direction of the sound. Finally, he could stand it no more. He reached out and covered her hand with his. He didn't move when she jumped in surprise at his gentle touch. And when she turned to look at him, he held her eyes, even though at first her gaze was so obviously unfocused. He gently squeezed her hand until he could see her returning from her million mile away journey of thoughts.

Cari flushed as Jake watched her, touching her hand. She mumbled an apology.

Jake worked her hand slowly, rubbing it gently, easing her fingers to relax, until her hand finally lay flat on her thigh. He leaned closer to her. "You need to relax honey. You are so nervous and jumpy. I keep thinking you are going to hop right through the roof of the car each time there is any kind of loud noise."

Cari's lips curved in a semblance of a smile. "Jake?"

"What, honey?"

Cari took a deep breath. "I know that I owe you an explanation..."

Jake pressed his fingers to her soft mouth, stopping her words. "Cari, I don't want you to feel like you owe me anything. I want you to tell me freely, through your own rational choice, whatever, or however much you want me to know. But there is no way that you 'owe' me anything, sweetheart."

Cari flushed brightly. "I didn't mean it like that, Jake..." She paused, obviously having trouble expressing herself. "I want to tell you. In fact, you are probably the only person I know who will understand. Somehow I know that you will listen, and not judge me or my family."

Jake hated to interrupt her, but he didn't want her to miss this chance to speak with her father. "Isn't that your dad, Cari?"

Cari turned her head and nodded. Edward Evans was across the street and walking towards the entrance. She threw open the car door and stood up. She raised her arm to wave, opening her mouth to shout.

Suddenly someone else was calling out. As they watched, a tall, slender blonde woman walked quickly to Cari's father and straight into his embrace. Cari gasped, and even though they were across the street, there was no missing the passionate kiss the two people exchanged.

Jake was standing on the other side of his car, watching the passionate embrace. He turned to glance at Cari just in time to see the color draining from her face. Jake moved quickly, leaving his own door open, and sprinted around the car. He reached Cari's side just as her legs gave out. He gripped her arms, holding her upright. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Edward had released the lovely blonde woman. The two turned and were walking towards Edward's car.

"Cari, sit down," Jake told her gently, but she didn't move. She didn't appear to really hear him. Finally, Jake pushed her backwards into the car. He squatted next to her, and pressed her head down between her legs for a few minutes.

When he saw that some color had returned, he had her sit back up. He

locked and closed the door after fastening her seat belt. Moving back around the car, he saw that Edward had already driven away. Jake restarted his car, heading back to his house.

A short time later, Jake stopped the car at his front door on the circle drive. He told Cari to stay put and he would come around and get her. She wasn't waiting and was already getting out of the car. She limped up the steps and through the front door, which was being held open by John. John greeted her politely, and Cari mumbled something in return. John then turned and watched as his employer came loping up the front steps and into the foyer.

Jake glanced around but couldn't see Cari. Turning to look at John, his butler discreetly pointed towards the den. Jake nodded and walked through the large living room and on into the den, which served as his office and housed his exclusive, costly library. He stopped when he saw that Cari was pouring herself a drink. He grimaced as he watched her carelessly toss back the ridiculously expensive, aged brandy like it was cheap gin. He shook his head and walked towards her.

Cari turned at the footfall sound approaching her, having just poured herself a second drink. She lifted the glass, once again drinking the brandy down as if it were water. This time she swallowed hard and ended up coughing and choking a bit. Before Jake could reach out to pat her back, she recovered, moving away.

She soon came back and poured herself still another drink. She flounced angrily over to the leather sofa and flopped down upon it. She didn't want to admit that the liquor was going to her head so quickly and she was already feeling woozy and light-headed.

Jake came and sat down quite close beside her. He reached out to take the glass from her, but Cari wasn't impaired that much and jerked her hand away. She took another drink from the heavy cut glass, but this time sipped it.

"Cari, honey, why don't you give me the glass?"

Cari hopped up off the sofa as it were on fire, her head spun a bit, but she recovered quickly. "I'll pour you one and then you won't want mine." She moved back to the bar and poured more into her own glass and then walked over to the large windows that looked out over the garden at the back of Jake's home. The curtains had not been closed and she gazed out at the darkness. She could see her own reflection in the glass. She looked quite pale and had dark circles surrounding her eyes.

So this is what a nervous breakdown must feel like, she told herself silently. After several minutes, she spoke quietly, almost as if to herself. "What would you do if one day everything you had thought was true about yourself, your life, was suddenly found to be false?"

Cari turned to look at Jake who was still seated on the sofa, watching her. She glanced at the glass in her hand, wondering how it had gotten there. She rarely drank. She set the glass on the bar as she moved back to the sofa. She didn't sit next to Jake, but rather sat on the arm of the sofa, her now bare feet resting on the seat cushion. Looking into his eyes, she felt reassured, and some of the hopeless desolation she'd been feeling faded away.

"I need to tell you some things about myself, I guess. I just hope you won't think less of me..."

Jake reached over and curled his hand around her ankle, caressing her gently, before sliding his hand upwards, caressing her calf. "Sweetheart just tell me what it is. Nothing you tell me can change what we have between us."

Cari listened, not sure if he meant that their relationship was so shallow and meaningless, that he wouldn't be affected by what she told him. Was he saying that since he didn't really know her, whatever she said wouldn't affect him? Damn! She didn't really know herself anymore either.

"I don't quite know where to start, Jake."

Jake surprised her by reaching out and catching hold of her left hand. His

gaze went from the 2-carat diamond on her finger up to her face. Cari could see the questions in his eyes. Like why was she was wearing an engagement ring, and sleeping with him?

"Why don't you start with this morning?"

Cari looked at the ring on her finger for a long moment. She realized that finding the right words was going to be more difficult than she had thought. It was funny, but the words seemed clear in her head, and yet couldn't make it to her tongue for expression. Jake moved closer to her on the sofa, and released her hand only to begin caressing her naked calves. "I'm afraid it goes back much farther than that..." She moved forward and slid into the narrow space between the arm of the sofa and Jake. Her thighs were pressed to her chest and she slid her arms around her legs in a seemingly protective gesture.

"My fiancé has been cheating on me all along. It appears that everyone knew, even my mother." She paused and slid the ring from her finger. She held it up, letting the light reflect off it for a moment. Without a word of warning, she threw it towards a dark corner of the room. "I followed him and saw him with her..."

"Just dump the bastard, Cari," Jake told her harshly, his anger visible on his face and in his words. "He's a jerk and you deserve much better."

Cari held his gaze as her head moved up and down for a moment. "If only it were that simple, Jake."

"Why isn't it just that simple then, honey?" Jake asked her softly, and Cari felt encouraged to continue.

"I guess you could say because I'm not really Cari Evans." She looked away for a moment and then back into Jake's eyes. "It appears that my mother has been cheating on the man I thought was my father since before I was born. And the man I thought was a friend of the family—I called him uncle—is really my father." She paused as she saw the disbelief on his face. "It gets better, Jake. It turns out that my biological father arranged for Tony to get engaged to me. And as if I thought my life couldn't be any more of a lie, tonight it appears as if my father has been having an affair too."

Cari lowered her head to rest against her upraised thighs. She closed her eyes, not seeing anyway out of this mess. "I don't want to live in that house anymore, Jake. I feel as if my whole life has been a lie." She looked up and saw Jake looking right back. "Dear God! Who the hell am I?"

Jake lifted his hand and caressed her hair. "You're still you, Cari. You are who you are because of your life experiences, not whose genes you have. Sure, genes are the basis, but it is the people who raise you, day in and out that truly determine who you become. So, Edward is just as much your father now as he ever was. And granted, we don't know what is going on, but if your mother has been involved with another man, your father has probably been aware of it. He is a man, honey, and I'm sure he has needs."

Cari blushed, but acknowledged the truth of his words. "I can't go on living a lie, Jake. I don't see how I can face my mother and Uncle Sal...or my father. I guess I just need to leave..."

Jake shook his head. "Let's go to bed. You are exhausted, and probably starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. In the morning, things will seem much clearer." He paused, smiling. "I just hope you don't end up with one hell of a hangover."

Cari frowned and then nodded her head in agreement. Together they went upstairs and within a short time of lying down, she was sound asleep.

# Chapter 7

Twice that night Cari awoke. She eased the covers aside and began caressing Jake into arousal. She saw the surprise and desire on his face as she moved and literally climbed atop him. It took her a little bit to figure things out, but once she did, it was a hot, sexy ride for them both. She was surprised at her blatant needs and sexuality. She wanted to feel more than that she just existed. When Jake was deep inside her, she felt the pulsing of his manhood and seemed to only then be truly alive, vibrant and a part of life!

It was just past dawn when she awoke again and slid silently from the bed. She walked into the bathroom, closing the door and turning on the light. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her long hair fell in disarray over her shoulders and concealed most of her breasts. She moved her hair back behind her shoulders and looked at her full breasts. She had always thought they were too large for her short stature. She turned to the side and looked at her profile. She realized with surprise that she had lost weight over the last couple of weeks. She guessed that stress was good for at least one thing, and laughed to herself softly.

Her eyes moved to her belly. It was still slightly rounded, going flat if she tightened her muscles, giving no indication of the life that was growing inside her. In a few weeks, the day of the wedding, she would probably have a bigger curve to her belly that everyone would put down to her usual ups and downs with weight. She should probably make sure the dress was loose enough...

Cari stopped abruptly as she realized what she was thinking. She moved over and sat down on the closed toilet. She couldn't possibly be considering marrying Tony, after everything that had happened! She let her head drop forward into her hands. Obviously, she was going crazy. That could be the only explanation. She moved back over to the mirror, and turned on the tap of the sink there. She splashed some cold water on her face. As she lifted back up and looked at her reflection, the idea came to her.

Cari shivered as she looked at herself. She couldn't believe she was really considering going ahead with the ceremony. And yet, she smiled slowly, what could be better revenge against her mother, her uncle Sal and her fiancé, than to stand him up at the altar. She smoothed her hair back off her face. She could see it now...

She was walking up the aisle in the expensive white wedding dress, and everywhere you looked were all the fabulously over-priced floral arrangements her mother had wanted. Her mother would be dressed in an outrageously expensive "mother of the bride" outfit. Sal would probably have found a way to be sitting with her mother. And her father would have walked her up the aisle, smiling at her with love. Everyone would be poised and waiting until the priest asked if anyone had a reason why this couple shouldn't be joined...then she would say, "I do."

Of course everyone would be flustered at first. Surely they had misheard? The acoustics in those big churches could affect how words sounded.

The priest would probably lean forward and tell her in a concerned, yet patronizing tone, "Not yet, dear. The 'I do's' come in a few minutes."

Cari would lift her veil and turn to Tony. "I'm not sure that it matters, but I've been having an affair just like everyone else in this crazy family. And the real kicker is that I am pregnant with my lover's baby."

Cari smiled, imagining her mother screaming somewhere behind her, and all the people gasping in surprise. Her mother would be so embarrassed that all of her friends had witnessed this public scandal. Perhaps she would turn and look at her uncle Sal and say loudly, "Thanks for paying for this entire shindig Daddy, just sorry I can't marry your choice. I don't think Tony really wants to raise another man's child as his own. Although you probably wouldn't mind. Just knowing that it was still your grandchild is probably all that counts with you. I almost forgot how 'big' you are on family."

Cari turned suddenly as the bathroom door opened. Jake was standing there, pushing the hair back off his forehead. "Were you talking to yourself, Cari?" Jake asked her softly.

Cari flushed, wondering if he had been able to hear what she had said. "I guess I was." She turned towards the shower. "I was just going to get cleaned up." She reached in and turned on the water, taking a few seconds to adjust it.

Jake nodded. "I'll join you after I use the bathroom." He moved forward, and then paused. "Uh, I guess I should ask if you would prefer..."

Cari blushed, understanding what he was saying. She mumbled that it was okay, and darted into the large shower. She kept her eyes closed and let the water cascade over her head and body. A few moments later, she heard the door open and felt Jake's body heat as he neared her. His hands slid over her hair, tracing its wet silky length down to the middle of her back. From there he slid them forward, around her waist. Cari was pulled back to lie against him and felt his hardness press against her soft ass cheeks. She didn't suppress her need to rub against him.

Jake slid his hands upwards to cup her firm, full breasts. He massaged the large globes while he pressing his hard cock between her cheeks. "I am so hot and horny for you right now, Cari..."

Cari didn't resist him as he moved her.

His voice sounded husky as he requested, "Lean forward, honey. Just cross your arms and rest your head on them."

With her lower body about two feet from the tile, Cari felt her full breasts fall forward. Jake pressed against her, moving her feet further apart. Breathing rapidly, she felt his manhood pressing forward against her soft womanly flesh.

One of Jake's hands moved down her belly and a moment later Cari felt his fingers probing between her pussy lips. The first touch of his finger on her clit and her hips jerked forward. As his finger worked her tender flesh, Cari felt his hard manhood pressing forward. When she felt her wetness seeping out over her lips and across his fingers, Jake groaned loudly.

His fingers sped up the intoxicating seduction of her body. Cari couldn't control her hips jerking forward and back a few moments later as her climax washed through her body and her senses. Without pause, Jake entered her body. As his hard cock moved into her, his hands moved back up to cup and squeeze her hanging breasts.

"Oh my God! Jake!" Cari cried out loudly when he began matching his squeezes to the thrusts of his hips. After a few moments though, he deserted one breast and slid his hand down to her clit.

Cari cried out again as he manipulated her tender flesh so surely and confidently. The water of the shower was drowning out the slurping noises of his cock sliding in and out of her body. Jake moved his other hand back and caressed her hips, buttocks and thigh on that side. Cari quivered under his seductive and arousing touches. She could feel him nearing his climax, as his thrusts were growing faster and shorter.

Suddenly Jake moved his fingers more intently on her clit and stimulated her quickly to another climactic completion. As her body was caught in another orgasm, her inner muscle clenching with rhythmic spasms, he came deep inside her, shooting his cum high into her belly. For a long time it seemed, his body stayed buried within her, but finally they parted.

Jake turned off the water and wrapped her in a big towel. He briskly dried himself as Cari toweled herself off. They walked back into the bedroom, and lay silently beside each other on his large mussed bed. Cari started to roll onto her side, away from him, when Jake reached out and pulled her backwards to rest against his body, spoon fashion.

She was glad to feel his arm snaking around to hold her in place. He pressed

against her, letting her soft, round buttocks cushion his own harder hips and now softened manly rod. When Jake slid his hand down and pressed against her belly, Cari's breath caught in her chest. Their bodies couldn't have been any closer, except when they were joined. Soon she felt the relaxing of Jake's body and knew he was asleep.

Cari lay quietly against his warm body for a long time, listening to his soft snores, and feeling the rise and fall of his chest with his breathing. When she was quiet and warm like this, she felt so incredibly safe and protected with Jake. She knew that he had no way of knowing that his hand was resting over the tiny body of his baby.

The thought of telling him made her shiver in reaction. She had no idea how in the world to even begin to tell him such a thing. She didn't think she could go to the library and find anything of help under 'Miss Manners,' or something similar. And she couldn't go to her mother for help. Eventually, Cari relaxed and drifted off to sleep, completely forgetting her troubles as she dreamt of a lovely field where Jake was setting out a picnic lunch for them.

### Chapter 8

Jake awoke slowly from a warm, pleasant dream in which he was making love to Cari. He rolled over, his arm reaching out towards her side of the bed. His arm fell onto the empty sheets and the next moment his eyes jerked open in surprise. He sat up abruptly, looking around the room, but there was no sign of her. Jake told himself that she wouldn't have left without telling like the last time, if for no other reason than the fact that she didn't have a car.

He swung his legs out of the bed, grabbing his silk robe as he started jogging out of the bedroom. He barreled down the main stairs, calling out for John and Mary as he rounded the corner towards the kitchen. All the way, Jake was struck by the sick feeling he'd gotten when he thought Cari might have left him again. He shoved open the kitchen door and slid to an abrupt halt.

Mary and John were turned towards the door expectantly, as if they had known he would be coming through it any second. He assumed it must have been the racket he made running down the stairs moments earlier. Before he could ask why they had not replied, he saw that Cari was standing at the stove, obviously cooking something. She was wearing one of his robes, and had the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. He also noticed that Mary and John had been eating breakfast when he barged in. He flushed when they both greeted him with smiles.

Jake signaled for them both to stay seated when they moved to rise. Before he could say anything, Cari turned from the stove and flashed him a huge smile. In that moment, wearing his clothes, her hair still mussed, Jake knew that this was something he would happily face each morning for the rest of his life.

"Good morning, Jake! Have a seat, and pour yourself some coffee. I'm working on some more eggs here, and they will be done in just a few minutes." She paused to share a conspiratorial wink with Mary. "I've been instructed in how you like your eggs, so hopefully you won't be disappointed." Jake moved to the kitchen table, sitting down. As he accepted the coffee Mary poured for him, he realized that other than the other morning, he had never before sat at his own kitchen table. The night with Cari they had used the counter to eat the meal he made. Mary always served him in the dining room, or in the smaller breakfast room, which overlooked the garden. He thanked Mary for the coffee, his eyes never leaving Cari. It was funny, sort of, but he was doing a lot of simple things with Cari. Surprising was how much he enjoyed sitting at the table like this, the four of them in the warm, sunny kitchen. Looking at Cari, they felt like a family, and Jake admitted how good this felt to him.

"I was beginning to think you were going to sleep all day!"

Jake shook his head, realizing that Cari was speaking to him. He hurriedly glanced at his watch, surprised to see that it was after nine already. He was usually an early riser, even when he had a late night. He felt a flush steal over his cheeks, recalling the number of times that Cari had interrupted his sleep to make love to him.

Cari turned just then and Jake was sure she saw the flush on his cheeks. She grinned at him, and Jake sensed that she liked seeing him a bit discomposed for a change. She filled a plate for him with eggs, toast and some little sausage links. After returning the pan to the stove, she returned to the table and sat down opposite him, sipping her tea. Jake was aware of her watching him devour the breakfast she had cooked.

Jake remembered what Cari had revealed to him that night when he had cooked for her. Her cooking skills would have been close to nil, up until these morning cooking lessons with Mary. He looked up suddenly, and in between bites asked why she wasn't eating.

Cari smiled. "I've already eaten, thank you. I've been up for awhile actually. If you hadn't come down, I was going to bang the dinner gong to get you down here!" John and Mary chuckled. Jake grinned widely at the thought of being awakened in such a rude manner. The household always ran so quietly and smoothly. Jake laughed a moment later, unable to resist the happy look on Cari's face. He had been quite worried about her last evening. Yet he couldn't help but wonder about the sudden change in her demeanor and outlook.

Cari spoke, surprising the other three. "All we need is a deck of cards."

John and Mary looked surprised for a moment, turning to look at Jake. From the looks on their faces, Jake guessed that they were wondering what he was going to do. He frowned for a moment, wondering what she meant. Cari grinned, and Jake realized that she seemed to be relishing seeing him confused and at a loss in his own home.

"How often do you get four people together?" Cari explained her odd statement a moment later. "We could play Euchre, or if you all are bridge fanatics, I'd be willing to learn."

Jake laughed, seeing that things were going to be very different here with Cari around. Before he could reply, John and Mary excused themselves, saying they needed to get busy. A moment later, Cari and Jake were alone in the kitchen. Jake pushed his empty plate away, and took a sip of coffee. He took a deep breath before he told her what he had been contemplating for longer than he had really been aware of it.

"I want you to move in here, with me, Cari."

Cari coughed and sputtered as her tea went down the wrong way. Stunned, she looked at Jake. If she had tried to guess what he might want to say to her, after last night, this would not have been on her list.

"Jake, I'm not sure..."

He reached across the table, covering her hand with his. "Hear me out, Cari. We get along really well, and I think we would be incredibly good together. And while this isn't the main reason for me bringing this up now, I think you need some time away from your family. I don't understand all of what is going on, but it is obvious you're stressed out by what is happening. And I don't like seeing you unhappy."

Cari had been staring at his hand, holding hers on the table while he spoke. He was giving her an out, she realized with a start. She had been thinking that time away from her family, and the issues, would be the perfect solution! She didn't know if it would be fair to either of them to take it. Her life was so complicated right now, and she didn't want to use Jake that way.

Even more important was that she didn't want Jake thinking that was the only reason she was with him. Before speaking, she pushed the niggling thought that she was pregnant with Jake's baby to the back of her "to deal with list." She looked up to meet his eyes as he finished, opening her mouth to tell him it would not be fair to him. Jake stopped her by pressing a finger against her lips.

"You don't have to make a decision right now, honey. Give it some time. Stay here for a bit and consider it a vacation."

Cari smiled at his insistence. It was so very tempting. "I've never stayed in a hotel this nice before. I might not know how to act, not to mention that too much time spent with me could end up backfiring on you."

Jake shook his head. "No way, Cari. Sometimes I take a long time to decide something, and other times, I make a snap decision. This decision feels right, as few things ever have before in my life. So let's just relax and let things happen, okay?"

Cari savored the wonderfully warm feelings inside of her as she looked into his eyes. It was almost overwhelming, the caring and security she felt here, with Jake. In fact, not since she'd overheard her mother while she was trying on her wedding dress, had she felt so safe. All of that was before she knew that the people she trusted lied and hurt one another.

There was no denying her naivety, despite her age. Thank God she

discovered the truth before the wedding! Slowly, she nodded her head. There would still be some questioning of her motives, but she did know that her feelings for Jake were real and deep. And maybe, with time and luck, everything just might work out all right.

Jake grinned, sipping his coffee. "This could be the start of a lot of new trends."

Cari frowned, not sure what he meant. Her heart hesitated to hope for too much. If she thought Anthony had been out of her league, it was nothing compared to Jake! She couldn't say for sure, but she could guess that Jake was wealthier than her Uncle Sal. He also came from a higher class of people, although he didn't act like it. Yet it was subtly obvious in the way he talked, and especially in the manner he treated other people.

That had been one of the things that bothered her about Tony. He was always treating waitresses, waiters and almost anyone who worked in a service industry as if they were below him in some way. After all, they were just like himself and Cari, no matter how they were making a living. In fact, Cari realized, Tony was a snob and he had no business being one!

Swallowing hard, she questioned him. "You've lost me, Jake."

"Next thing you know you'll be making me a 'lazy woman's egg salad sandwich!' After that, the sky's the limit I should imagine."

Cari shook her head. It was impossible to resist the wonderful warm and caring feelings growing inside of her. With Jake, everything seemed like it really could work out. "I wouldn't joke if I were you."

"I'm not joking, honey. I look forward to sampling your egg salad."

"Yeah! I'll remember that the night you come home to find that I've cooked all the dinner, and you have no Mary to save your poor stomach."

Jake took the last sip of his coffee. "I'll eat whatever you cook for me."

Cari felt compelled to add, "We'll see."

Jake grinned back at her, lifting one eyebrow devilishly. "I look forward to seeing anything and everything you have to show me."

# **Chapter 9**

Cari was sitting on the sofa cross-legged, while Jake was working at his desk. She was holding the phone, not wanting to make the phone call, but also knowing she couldn't put it off any longer. She knew Jake was glancing her way every now and then. She finally dialed the number and listened to it ringing. It was incredibly hard to not hang up when she heard her mother's voice on the other end. She took a deep breath.

"Hello, Mother. It's Cari."

"Cari, darling! You left so suddenly. I've been worried about you. I even called Lauren to see if she knew where you were. Where are you, dear?"

Cari swallowed hard to get past the lump in her throat. She was having trouble seeing her mother as an adulteress for all of her married life. She cleared her throat. "I'm staying with a friend, Mother."

"All right, Cari, but who is she? I really need to have her phone number so I can reach you. We still have a lot of decisions to be made about the wedding, you know."

Cari felt the knots forming in her stomach. She took a deep breath. Just before she started to reply, she glanced towards Jake's desk. She was surprised to find that he had had stopped working and was watching her silently. "Uhm, Mother, about the wedding..."

Her voice trailed away as the butterflies in her stomach went crazy. The ridiculous fantasy she'd indulged in earlier while in the bathroom had been more than silly. She just wasn't that type of person, and she probably wouldn't have been able to get the right words out when the time came. With her luck, she would have found herself married!

"What do you want changed, dear? It might still be doable, just so long as it isn't something like the dress, or the church, or the reception hall." Cari listened as her mother laughed at her own joke. She wished she could have just written a letter. She realized that she preferred skipping confrontations, and the inevitable dramatics that followed.

"What do I want changed about the wedding? Nothing that important, Mom." Cari paused, suddenly seeing the humor in the situation. The next moment, the words just spilled out. "Just the groom is all."

Cari heard her mother gasp in her ear at the same time she heard Jake cracking up over at his desk. She looked up and saw he was leaning back in his chair, laughing. He told her in a loud whisper, "I might be available. What was the date?"

Cari glared at him, throwing a pillow from the sofa towards him. It fell short of the desk as her mother raised her voice. "Cari, dear, that isn't funny. Maybe you need to come back here and stay with me. I think it would be best..."

Cari listened as her mother obviously covered the receiver to speak to someone. She assumed it was her uncle Sal. It was just a moment later that she heard her "uncle's" voice over the phone.

"Where are you, Cari? Your mother really thinks she and I should come and get you. You have had a lot of stress lately, and I think you would be best staying here, with your mother."

Cari gritted her teeth, feeling a surge of anger rush through her. "I'm fine, Uncle Sal."

"But what is this nonsense about changing the groom? We think it would be best for you to come back here. Obviously, something is upsetting you. You need family around you at a time like this. I'll call Tony and have him come up for a few days too. You two haven't had much time alone lately, and I know how difficult that can be on young people."

Cari rose to her feet. It was getting very difficult to control her emotions and her words the longer this conversation continued. "I appreciate your concern, really. But I need time alone." She took another deep breath, trying to keep her turbulent feelings inside and not let them spill out in angry, hurtful words. She could hear voices as Sal and her mother were obviously talking while only partially covering the mouthpiece of the phone.

Expecting to hear Sal's voice, Cari was surprised when Marina spoke to her once again. "Cari, dear, I don't know what is bothering you, but come back home. I can understand because every bride gets jitters. It's perfectly natural."

Cari closed her eyes, praying for control over her emotions. She was very near tears, with anger coming a close second. The last thing she wanted to happen was to break down and start crying on the phone. It would give the impression, she thought, that she was irresolute in her decision. And nothing could be further from the truth, but she didn't want to start yelling accusations through the phone either.

"Mother, this is not pre-wedding jitters. I don't want to marry Tony." She looked up as she listened to her mother, and her gaze settled on Jake. Their eyes met and held. "Look, Mother, can't you just accept that I don't want to marry him? That I have just changed my mind?"

Marina's voice increased several octaves, and it was obvious that Jake could hear some of what her mother was saying now. "No, damn it, you can't just have changed your mind. We have spent entirely too much money on this wedding. I insist you come here to stay with Sal and I."

Cari listened in disbelief to her mother. Surely her mother must have thought at one time or another that it was possible her daughter would find out about her cheating fiancé. Then she realized that she was hoping her mother would just connect the dots so she wouldn't have to explain her change of mind. She started to reply when her mother went on.

"Cari, I think you need to face reality. You are very lucky to have a man like Tony." Cari gasped at her mother's words and was even more astonished at the words that were unsaid. It was painfully obvious her mother was telling her that a girl such as she – overweight, plain – was lucky to have such an attractive man like Tony interested in her enough to marry her. Cari felt sick to her stomach to hear her mother talking this way. A mother was supposed to support you and be the one person who thought you were wonderful, no matter what anyone else might say or do.

The words hurt. She had never had any false illusions about who she was or how she looked. Having her mother throw it in her face, and telling her to be grateful she was getting Tony, was almost beyond her tolerance. She realized in surprise that she had tears rolling down her cheeks.

Cari cursed herself silently. The last thing she had wanted to do was to cry! She had to take a deep breath before she could answer her mother. She thought she heard whispering through the phone, but went on anyway. "Lucky, Mother? You mean I am so homely and fat that I should be grateful to Tony for even looking in my direction? That no matter what he does, I should just accept it as my lot in life?"

Sal's voice came back on the line a moment later. "I'm putting my foot down, Cari. You are upsetting your mother. So, let's put a stop to all this nonsense. Once you are back here with your mother and me, things will be clear to you once again. What you are experiencing is just pre-wedding jitters. Tony may have been acting a little foolish of late, but you need have no fear that he will be a good husband to you and father to your children. Tell me where you are and I'll be there to get you as quickly as possible."

Jake had stood from behind the desk, sensing the rising emotions in Cari. They had talked a long time about her making this call, and he knew she was near the edge of breaking emotionally. He moved over towards her, almost reaching her when she snapped. "No! If I need someone to put their foot down in my life, *Uncle Sal*, I will look to my *father*!"

Cari slammed the phone down angrily. She looked up from the phone and saw that Jake was standing right in front of her. She paused as she realized that she had indeed lost her temper, and what she had said sank in. She met Jake's eyes.

"Uh-oh," she said softly.

Jake smiled and pulled her into his arms, hugging her closely. "I'd say that about covers it, honey." His soft laugh rumbled in his chest as Cari curled her arms around his waist.

"I guess I wasn't as cool, calm and collected as I had planned, huh?"

Jake shook his head. "Cari, my sweet, so long as you broke off the engagement with Tony, I didn't care how you did it." He pulled back a little and lifted her face. As their eyes met, he spoke again. "I don't want to see you destroy the relationship you have with your family though. Too many times people say things in anger, and it can take years to heal the breach."

He lifted one hand, and gently wiped the tears from her cheeks with his fingertips. Cari caught his hand and brought it to her mouth. She kissed his fingers tenderly. "You want to wait before you call your dad?" he asked her.

Cari shook her head, stiffening her spine. "No, but I'm calling Tony next, while I'm still mad." She stepped away from Jake, and quickly dialed the number for Tony's apartment. She wasn't surprised when a woman answered, nor when she heard Tony in the background yelling at the woman for picking the phone up. A moment later she heard Tony's voice.

#### "Hello!"

She felt a distinct chill come over her emotions, and knew she wouldn't let her anger and other emotions get all tangled up this time. She also knew that she wasn't lucky to have a man like Tony. She was the luckiest woman in the world though, to have met Jake. She imagined that she probably looked a mess, undoubtedly with mascara smeared on her cheeks. But she still looked up at Jake and smiled. As Jake smiled back at her, Cari knew instinctively that everything was going to be all right. She saw something in his eyes that warmed her inner being and made her feel good about herself.

Jake liked her! Of that she was sure. And he was obviously attracted to her, desired her, if their times together were any kind of example. She didn't know what he felt for her yet, but what he had given her so far was much more than Tony ever had, or more likely, even could give her. She accepted that she was falling in love with Jake.

Amazement left her speechless for a moment. She was in love with Jake! And it didn't feel anything like what she had felt for Tony. Even though she didn't know for sure the depth of Jake's feelings for her, she knew he cared more for her than Tony ever had. The bottom line was that Cari felt better than she had in weeks, months!

"Why, hello there, Tony." Cari waited for the realization to sink in as to who was calling him. She could just see Tony scrambling to come up with an explanation as to why a woman answered the phone when his fiancée called his apartment, where he supposedly lived alone.

"Hi, Cari." Tony paused.

Cari guessed that he was covering the phone for a second. He was probably having a real fun conversation with his mistress, girlfriend or whatever the popular term was these days. She laughed softly, imagining what Tony and the woman must be talking about.

Cari looked up at Jake again, smiling slowly, and pressed her finger to her lips, signaling for Jake to be silent. Without a word, Cari pressed the speakerphone button. Jake whispered, leaning towards her ear, "I would be pissed as hell if I found out my fiancée was breaking the engagement while another man was listening." He grinned, adding in a whisper, "But since I'm not on the receiving end, I won't complain."

Cari grinned and couldn't resist whispering back, "No woman in her right mind would ever break up with you!" She saw the surprise on Jake's face. Holding her finger to her lips, she pointed at the phone.

"I'm a little surprised to find you home in the middle of the afternoon, Tony. Are you not feeling well?" Cari was feeling a need for revenge, and being here, with Jake, she was feeling stronger and more confident by the second.

"No, babe, I'm okay. I'm here because I have a new cleaning lady starting today. That was her that answered the phone."

Cari and Jake could both hear the woman in the background yelling angrily. Jake raised his own hand to cover his laugh. Cari smiled, crossing her arms at her waist, her eyes meeting Jake's. "How nice for you, Tony. Do you think she might want to clean my mother's house? She has been feeling a little overwhelmed lately..."

Cari stopped as she could hear Tony having to cover the receiver again. She ignored Jake shaking his head indicating that maybe she had gone far enough. She held her finger up, indicating she had one more dig to get in. Jake nodded.

"Why don't you let me talk to your cleaning lady, Tony, so I can see if she is interested? Maybe she needs the money."

Jake barely stopped a choked laugh once again. Cari smiled at him, knowing she had gone far enough. "Well, I really called for another reason, Tony. Have you talked with Sal lately? No? Well, he will probably call you in a bit. I'm calling off the wedding. If your cleaning lady is interested, she could have my wedding dress at half-price. That is providing that you are willing to marry your mistress. Of course, Sal might not approve of her, but I wouldn't let that stand in the way of your true happiness. Bye Tony."

Cari disconnected the phone, replacing the receiver. She looked over at Jake

and saw that he was grinning at her, but shaking his head at the same time. She shrugged her shoulders, but sensed that he wasn't too pleased with it all. "You didn't like the way I did that?"

Jake moved close to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Sweetheart, it isn't my place to approve or disapprove. I realized that you probably needed to seek some revenge in order to salve the wounds you have received at the callous hands of this man. And if doing it this way aided in your healing process, then honey, I support you one hundred percent."

Jake shifted hands to encircle her shoulders, pulling her close. "Now I feel compelled to add that you have a tongue that can cut like a knife."

Cari looked up at him from under her lashes. She slid her tongue out and slowly licked it over her lower lip. "You want to try it?" She flicked the tip of her tongue a few times against her front teeth. "I don't think it will cut you. But if you want to go upstairs, I could try it out on some extra delicate places, just to be sure."

Jake kissed her quickly, sealing her mouth with his. His tongue moved across hers.. When he pulled back, the look on Cari's face caused his brow to furrow cursively.

Cari smiled and then ran her tongue across her lower lip. "Were you testing me for any sharp edges?" She looked up at him, a dazed look on her face. "Satisfied, sir?"

Jake surprised her by grabbing her tight and swinging them around in a circle. He kissed her passionately and then grabbed her hand. Without a second's pause, he strode with her out of the room, and up the stairs. He practically ran them up the two steps of the platform bed, pressing her onto the bed. Grinning from ear to ear, Jake came down beside her. "Not yet, but I'm willing to let you try..."

Cari gasped as Jake slowly undressed her. And as he revealed each new

body part, he paused to kiss it reverently. "Such lovely shoulders, my sweet."

Cari smiled. "I swam some in high school. It's supposed to be good for your shoulders and posture."

Jake tossed her t-shirt to the floor. Her breasts were unbound. "I love it when you don't wear a bra. All the while downstairs, I found myself unable to concentrate on my work. My eyes kept returning to your lovely breasts, which kept jiggling beneath your t-shirt. And when your nipples got hard, so did I." Jake's mouth fastened onto one nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth, while his hands were busily pushing her shorts down over her hips.

Cari moaned as Jake kissed and sucked her nipples. Both hands had come back up to cup the full globes. She could tell that her breasts were already becoming more sensitive. It also got her hot hearing Jake talk dirty to her. Maybe later she'd wonder about that...

Jake was moving over her, and he thrust into her wet passage as Cari's legs lifted to surround his hips. "Yes!" she cried out as he began thrusting in and out of her body, each movement stimulating her clit by rubbing against it. She opened her eyes to watch Jake as he filled her body with his seed.

Jake smiled down at her. He slowed his thrusts, watching her breasts shake wildly with each move. His voice was hoarse as he spoke. "God! Cari! It is so sexy watching your pretty titties bouncing all over the place. You are perfect for me! Look at yourself, Cari! You are so beautiful!"

Even coupled so intimately, Cari couldn't keep one insecure thought away. "You don't think they are too big? Tony once said – "

"Hush! Don't say that bastard's name in our bedroom, darling! You are beautiful, both inside and out. Your body is perfect for me. I love your big boobs! I like nice soft pillows to sleep on, especially when they have such lovely thick, long nipples for me to suck on as well." Jake grinned at Cari, while his hands showed his non-verbal appreciation. "My fantasy is to fall asleep sucking on your tit, and have it slowly slip from my mouth. And then I wake up hours later, and start sucking all over again."

Cari couldn't stop the erotic thrill his words sent coursing through her body. Her orgasm followed and her hips jerked wildly, even as her body began to suck and squeeze and pull on Jake's cock. Her body sucked him even more deeply inside of her. She felt so full, but it also felt so good. With her arms and legs wrapped around him, and her cunt pulling and holding his cock inside of her, Jake came in a heated rush a few moments later. Over and over, he thrust forward, filling her body with his seed.

Cari's arms and legs fell from their tight grip on his body. Breathing hard, and still feeling tiny aftershocks quivering through her muscles, she felt Jake's soft cock begin to slide from her body. She tightened her muscles deliberately, watching as Jake's eyes flew to meet her smiling gaze.

"Woman! Are you trying to be the death of me?"

Her smiled turned into a grin. "No. I just like having you inside me."

Jake groaned. "Unfortunately, I am not as young as I used to be, and gravity isn't really our friend at this particular time."

Cari could feel him slipping away slowly, until only the head of his cock was still within her heat. She knew that he would soon slide from her completely. She felt like the something that had been missing from her, was complete when they were joined.

Jake spoke to her softly while lifting one hand to caress her soft brown hair. His voice was husky as he spoke. "Cari, I feel like something has been missing. But when I am inside you, suddenly everything feels right with my world. I feel completed."

Cari's throat tightened as she heard Jake expressing her innermost thoughts out loud. She fought to keep the tears at bay as she spoke softly a moment later. "Jake, it may seem odd, but I feel the same way. In fact, I was just thinking..." Jake kissed her mouth gently. One of them shifted a little, and their bodies finally parted. Cari blushed when the parting was accompanied with a soft, wet sucking sound. Glancing at Jake through her long eyelashes, she wondered if he had heard the sound as well. The answering smile curling his lips upwards was her answer.

"Don't blush, sweetheart. It is a perfectly natural human sound when two people make love. You are still pretty tight," Jake told her quietly, lifting his eyebrows devilishly.

Cari felt her cheeks only get brighter at such intimate talk. Jake had slid to her side, leaning on one forearm. She looked over at him and found him watching her. She couldn't resist the temptation and lifted her hand and traced his profile with one finger. When she reached his lips, she moved her finger more slowly, caressing the outline of his mouth. Completing the circuit, Jake pressed a soft kiss to her finger.

He then reached out and took her hand in his. Shifting in the bed, he lowered his head to rest on her chest. "If I'm too heavy, just shove me off," he whispered to her softly.

Cari shook her head, and then realized that he couldn't see her movement. Instead she lifted her hand and began caressing the crisp yet soft hair on his head. "You're not too heavy."

Several minutes of comfortable silence reigned. Jake lifted his head suddenly, shifting around to look at Cari.

"What's wrong?" she asked him quickly.

"Nothing is wrong. I just felt the need to tell you that even though it isn't politically correct I am...honored, glad—hell, honey I was just tickled pink to have been your *first*!"

Cari blushed brightly. Yet she couldn't deny the rush of warmth through her body and heart at his words. "I didn't think that kind of thing really mattered to anyone anymore. You know, what with the sexual revolution and all?"

"It matters because it was a part of the person you are, Cari."

Cari frowned. "So the fact that I wasn't a sex kitten didn't turn you off?"

Jake laughed softly, leaning down to kiss her mouth. "Oh, I was planning on starting your sex-kitten classes today. I have no doubt that you will be an eager and willing student."

Jake never saw the pillow before it hit him, but they both enjoyed the ensuing pillow fight.

# Chapter 10

Cari was sipping her juice the following morning when she heard the doorbell ring. Jake was in his den, working. She had overslept and had only just come to the kitchen for some breakfast. Mary smiled at her and said she would get the door. In the meantime though, Cari was to think about what sounded good for her breakfast. Cari went to the refrigerator and opened it. She looked inside, wondering what kinds of things Jake kept in his refrigerator. That thought made her laugh at herself, realizing that even though it was his refrigerator technically, it was really Mary who stocked the kitchen.

She saw way in the back of the fridge, the leftover pie. She couldn't resist and brought the plate out. She quickly cut a small piece and picked it up with her fingers. She eagerly took a bite of the cherry dessert just as she heard raised voices. Taking another bite, she made her way back towards the front of the house. She stopped just outside the front hall. In front of her she saw her parents, her uncle and Jake. Her mother was crying, Sal was yelling at both Edward and Jake. She saw Mary standing a few feet from her and walked on in.

Mary noticed her first. Cari grinned, showing her the last bite of the pie. She shrugged and looked a bit guilty. "How about some coffee for everyone in the den, Mary?"

Everyone else turned towards her, hearing her speak. She knew she was a sight that morning. Her hair was still mussed, and she had come down wearing the first thing she had found, which was one of Jake's white dress shirts. It came to mid-thigh, and she was barefoot. Jake reached her side first, reaching over to wipe a bit of cherry filling off her lower lip. He licked it off his finger as he wished her a good morning.

Cari glanced around the hall, seeing the angry look on her mother's face. Cari was refreshed after spending the night sleeping in Jake's arms and more capable of dealing with her problems, and life in general. Most importantly, she felt confident. Jake had spent quite a long time last night, both telling and showing her just how attractive he found her to be. She blushed even now as she recalled some of the ways. She shook her head to clear it and spoke softly, "It doesn't look all that good to me."

Before she could go on, Marina started towards Cari, all the while dabbing delicately at her tears with a pristine white handkerchief. But having seen the look of anger on her mother's face a moment earlier, Cari didn't believe the tears for one second.

"Darling, I've come to take you home."

Cari had done a lot of thinking last night, in between her "classes" and sleep, and again this morning when she had awakened. She had realized that she needed to take control of her life. No, she also *wanted* to assume control of her life and stop being flotsam adrift in the sea. After all, she had more than just herself to worry about. Before she could reply, Jake suggested they all go into his den.

Cari stopped Jake by lightly touching his arm. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I hate leaving you to face this alone, but I definitely need to shower and dress."

Jake grinned back at her. "I like the way you are dressed, but agree that other clothes would be more appropriate since it is your parents in there."

"Okay and I'll hurry," she promised. Turning away she took the first couple of steps, but then turned back. "Oh, damn! I was planning on sending that ring back to Tony with mother next time I saw her."

"Don't worry, honey. Mary found it and I have it in my desk, for safekeeping. While we're waiting for coffee, I'll go over to my desk, and just slip it into my pocket. Then when you get back down, I'll pass it to you."

Cari saluted like a young sailor. "Aye, sir. Just don't expect me to go long for a Hail Mary pass."

She took her time though, once she reached the bedroom. She was tired of having other people dictate her schedule according to their convenience, and not her own. She took a shower, washing her hair, and blow-drying it. She dressed in cut off jeans and put on a T-shirt, which she knotted at her waist. She paused to look at her body in the mirror, seeing it as Jake had told her that he saw her. She would never be model thin. She had rounded hips, and her belly would soon be even more rounded. Her breasts were large and womanly. The way Jake had praised them, made her less self-conscious. Her hair was lustrous and soft, and her lips were never far from a smile.

Cari suddenly smiled at her reflection in the mirror. She might never completely leave behind her old doubts and worries about her body, but she was seeing herself with more self-confidence. With Jake, she felt like a woman who was cared for. Her brain stumbled over the word loved. She was in love with Jake, but she didn't know if he felt the same.

She had never felt like this with Tony. She had always felt like she was not good enough for him and that she should acknowledge how lucky she was just to be with him. She stopped abruptly, realizing it was an echo of what her mother had said last evening. Obviously, it must have been a universal thought and therefore, she should have accepted it as such. And she certainly had accepted it, she realized angrily, and probably would have gone blindly to her wedding none the wiser.

It all would have gone so neatly, if only she had not eavesdropped on a couple of conversations. Hell, she probably would have had Tony's kid, and still been none the wiser that he had been cheating on her all along!

Cari met her own gaze in the mirror. She wasn't the same person who had come to Jake's house what seemed like years ago, instead of just months. She was much wiser, and perhaps a little sadder. She had lost her childhood dreams, but she had a woman's hopes in their place. She was going to be a mother herself, and she swore she would never be the kind of mother hers had been. She wanted a life with Jake, but if that was not in the cards, then she would deal with it and go on.

Suddenly, Cari took a deep breath. She felt like she had been tried by fire, and walked through it not just as a survivor, but also as a woman who was ready to thrive! Flashing a smile at her reflection, she flipped her hair over her shoulder and went downstairs with a distinct skip in her step.

When she rejoined Jake a few moments later, everyone was seated and sipping some of Mary's delicious coffee. She saw there were only four cups though, but a glass of milk was still on the tray. Cari picked it up and took a sip. She did wonder that perhaps Mary knew more than she was letting on.

Sal, who was seated next to Marina, set his cup down. "I think enough of this nonsense has gone on. Cari, you are upsetting your mother. It's time you came home."

Cari looked from Sal to her father. Sal was acting as if she had not called them yesterday and called off the wedding. She guessed they were here now because her mother had gone crying to her father, since Cari had always been closer to her father than her mother. But how they had all ended up *here* was something of a mystery.

Cari gazed at her father and thought he looked uncomfortable. She realized that her father had probably known all along about Marina and Sal. He had most likely pretended that all was well just to give his child a stable home. She had intended to call her father yesterday, but she and Jake had never made it back downstairs, or out of bed. And it hadn't seemed appropriate to call Edward from their bed.

Lying on Jake's big, downy soft mattress that morning, her thoughts had been about sex, or rather how powerful these feelings could be. Now she had first hand experience with what sexual attraction was and how mind-blowing sex could really be. It was hard to admit, but she wasn't sure what she would do faced with a similar situation as her mother had been. Pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind, she had gotten up slowly, hoping her stomach wouldn't betray her. Sitting on the edge of the bed for a moment to thank God for keeping her stomach in place, Cari had started to get up, but she paused and thanked him again for letting her bring that book to Jake's that first night.

Cari shook her head and came back to the present. Reluctantly she saw that she was in a room with her biological parents, Edward, whom she knew as her father, and Jake, the man she loved. What a crazy situation! Shaking her head at the whole thing, Cari walked over to the sofa where Edward and Jake were seated. Feeling contrary, she perched on the sofa arm next to Jake.

Edward looked at his daughter. As their eyes met, Cari could see the love her father had for her in his face. "Are you all right, Cari?"

Before she could reply, Marina interrupted. "Of course she is all right, Edward. Now we need to deal with this insanity. Cari, I demand that you come with us right now, before Tony gets wind of this nonsense." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand, and Cari assumed that Jake was the nonsense.

She couldn't resist, and turned to Jake, holding her hand out as if to shake his. "Hello, nonsense. I must be nonsensical for being here."

Jake tried not to grin at Cari's impudent gesture and words, but next to him he heard Edward laughing in a loud bark, quickly suppressed. He did turn the next moment to look at his friend. "Is she like this often?"

Edward looked quizzical, chewed on his lip, looking as if he was really considering his answer. "You get used to it...after the first twenty years or so."

Jake laughed and turned to look at Cari. He reached out and laid his hand on her thigh. "Just twenty years? I'm a patient man."

Cari had to close her eyes as emotion swamped at Jake's seemingly simple words. She didn't know whether to say anything, or just...

Marina interrupted Cari's thoughts. "This has nothing to do with the

problem! Now Carissa, go put something decent on and we'll go back to Sal's beach house. Tony will come and you can have some real quality time with him."

"Carissa, listen to your mother. Tony never needs to know about this... indiscretion of yours." Sal added his opinion.

Cari felt her anger boiling up inside of her. This was crazy! Why didn't they believe her? She remembered Jake's words once again about not saying anything she would end up regretting. Her father spoke up first though.

"Stop badgering her! Both of you!"

Sal glared across the room at Edward. "Marina is Cari's mother and she has every right to expect Carissa to listen to her, and obey."

That was it! The straw that broke the camel's back. Or in this case, it cracked the dam holding Cari's emotions and words in check. "Damn it! Everybody just shut up!" She ignored her mother's gasp. "I am sick and tired of listening to you. Can't you hear me? Don't you understand? The wedding is over. I called Tony last night and broke off the engagement with him."

Cari stopped as she felt Jake's hand on her thigh again. Looking down, she saw the ring in his hand. She took the ring and walked across the room. Without waiting to see if either of them would hold out their hand, she tossed the ring into her mother's lap. "Here is the ring back. I have no desire to ever see Tony again, so please return this to him."

On the way back towards Jake, she paused. She met Jake's eyes, and she knew he could sense that she was about to go too far. He gave her a shrug of his shoulders, followed by a smile. She turned partway, so she could see both sofas and their occupants. "If you are worried about the money you've spent, I offered Tony the wedding dress. That way he can marry his mistress at this wedding you have planned."

She heard her mother's gasp of surprise, but she noticed that Sal didn't look surprised. "I'm tired of living a lie." Cari turned and saw that Jake was smiling at her for some unknown reason, and nodding his head. His silent support and encouragement strengthened her. She took a deep breath, and then looked at her father, Edward. She saw that he looked relieved at her words. In that moment, Cari decided she might as well throw all the family secrets into the bright light of day.

"And you all..." Cari paused and gestured with her hand towards her mother, Sal and Edward, "May feel that this is your secret and not mine to share, but I don't give a damn anymore. Dad, Mother has been cheating on you with Uncle Sal since before you two were married. And the worst day of my life was when I learned that he was my biological father and not you."

All around her, Cari heard her mother's voice screeching in distress. She heard Sal, trying to calm Marina, and trying to break into her conversation with Edward. But she only looked at her father, Edward. "We are all adults. So, Daddy, I think you should divorce mother and go find happiness with the friend I saw you with the other night." She paused and smiled at her father's surprised look. When she heard her mother's gasp she could not help it, her smile grew.

"I'm sorry, but I needed to talk to you the other night. Jake and I went looking for you at the book club meeting. I started to call out to you, when you met a woman. I didn't mean to spy on you, Dad, it just happened. And Uncle... sorry...Sal...maybe you should marry Marina instead of just fooling around with her behind your best friend's back."

Marina burst into fresh tears all over again. Around her tears, she managed to chastise Cari. "You have no right to speak to your uncle that way, Cari. I didn't bring you up to be so rude and uncaring." She dabbed at her eyes, while Sal wrapped his arm around her shoulders, glaring at Edward.

Cari felt exhausted, and came back to perch on the sofa arm beside Jake. A moment later, Jake squeezed Cari's thigh as he whispered to her softly, "I'm making a mental note, darling, that 'subtle' isn't something you do well."

Cari looked into his eyes, and saw he was grinning at her. She was still reeling from the stunned and hurt look on her father's face. Hearing Jake call her "darling" only made her world tip even further onto its side. But she then looked past Jake, to her father's stricken face.

Edward looked a little overwhelmed by all the revelations he'd just heard. Cari had been watching her father closely. She acted instinctively and slid off the arm of the sofa and came over to her father. She knelt down in front of Edward and rested her head on his knees. After a moment, she looked up at him. "You are my true father, and so long as you will let me, I want to call you dad, and sometimes daddy when I need to be your little girl once in awhile. I love you Daddy. If you knew about them, I'll try and understand why you didn't divorce mother."

Tears filled Edward's eyes. "I couldn't lose you, Cari. You see so many divorced men who never see their children, or they see them so rarely that the relationship falls apart. You were my life. Having you come and spend time with me at the store, helping you study for school, all made my life worth living. Nothing would make me happier Cari than to have you think of me as your dad."

Cari glanced over and saw Jake smiling at her. For a moment, she considered that this wasn't the best way to tell Jake that he was going to be a father. Shoot, maybe he didn't even want kids! Deciding it was better to get all the truths out on the table at once, especially since she had the courage right now, she held Jake's gaze as she went on speaking to her father. "And nothing would make me happier Daddy, than to have my baby call you grandpa."

# Chapter 11

Silence followed her words. At least for Jake, it was silent in the room. Like a sledgehammer, Jake felt like he'd been hit in the stomach, or the head. His day had started out quiet enough, with Cari still asleep beside him in his bed. He had not been in his study long when the phone had rung, and it was Edward. Jake had listened to his friend telling him that Cari was missing. He had not been able to keep quiet, hearing the distress in his friend's voice. He had told him Cari was at his house. So, when Edward, Marina and Sal had shown up at his front door an hour later, he hadn't been surprised.

But now, he was surprised. Hell! He was flabbergasted! Jake ignored the angry shouts coming from the other sofa and stood slowly. He reached down to Cari, pulling her to stand in front of him. Finally, he smiled down at her.

"How about you and I use that wedding that is all planned out, instead of Tony?" Jake asked her softly. He wasn't sure he was making any sense. In the last few months, since he'd met Cari, one thing had become crystal clear to him. He needed Cari in his life. Even though a baby had not been a part of his consideration, in his heart, he suddenly knew that it was meant to be just this way.

Cari felt like her heart was about to burst open. She felt compelled to offer him a way out though, considering how she had surprised him. "You don't have to marry me, Jake. I know meeting me and taking on all these headaches," she gestured with one hand towards the other occupants in the room, "was not in your grand scheme. And if you just want to live together, like you had suggested, that is okay also."

Jake shook his head. "Cari, I didn't get this much money by being wasteful. But if you want to get married in a different way, we will. If you want to elope, we will. But I plan on marrying you honey, one way or another."

Cari didn't see her father move but she felt someone push against her back

and then she was in Jake's arms. Jake laughed and met Edward's eyes. His good friend was smiling at him.

"I imagine I should be correct and proper about this. Edward, may I please have the hand of your lovely daughter in marriage?"

Edward smiled and nodded his head. "Nothing would make me happier than to see Cari married to my friend, and a man I trust implicitly."

Jake turned his gaze back to Cari. "Well?"

As Cari nodded her head in agreement, she realized how much she liked the way his left eyebrow lifted quizzically. "I can't turn down such a frugal man, now can I?" She lifted her mouth to his and accepted his kiss and the unspoken promise of love and life together. As Cari stepped back from Jake, she heard her mother saying her name to get her attention. Cari turned to look at her mother. She still had trouble with knowing all the family secrets and the emotions that were making her feel as if her life was a roller coaster.

"Mother, please, I'm not going to argue with you about this. If I hadn't found out I was pregnant, I was planning on going through with the wedding." She felt Jake tense beside her. She paused, knowing that her next words might end up alienating him. Yet she knew that the truth was the only way, from now on.

"I had it all worked out, as the perfect revenge. I was going to wait until poor Father Tom asked if anyone objected. I was going to say 'I object.' Then I would tell Tony he should marry his whore, and walk out." Cari paused, looking directly at her mother. "I was going to stop on my way back up the aisle where you were seated. I planned to use the stunned silence to let everyone there know about my adulterous mother."

Marina looked at her daughter. "Darling, how could you even think of doing this to me?"

Cari thought her mother was looking at her like someone had replaced her daughter with something very unpleasant. Before she could reply, she heard her

father snort next to her. She turned and found him shaking his head. "Damn it, Marina! This isn't about you. Good lord woman, you think the whole damned world revolves around you."

Marina gasped at her husband's words. It was obvious she was shocked that Edward would speak to her so harshly. She sniffed loudly, and Sal quickly wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Edward, I don't believe there is any need for you to be so cruel. Marina is just worried about her daughter and the wedding she has spent so much time and effort planning."

Edward glared at Sal. "Don't tell me how to talk to my soon-to-be ex-wife. Why don't you just mind your own business?"

Cari saw the astonished looks on her mother's and Sal's faces. She wondered how many years it had been since anyone had talked back to her uncle. She shook her head, realizing that it would be a very long time before she stopped thinking of him as her uncle. Before she could even think of interrupting, her mother snapped back at Edward.

"How dare you speak to Sal that way? He is your best friend!"

Edward looked from his wife to Sal. The look on his face spoke volumes to Cari. She could only guess at the depth of betrayal he must be feeling. His anger spewed out with his words. "You must be joking. Friend? He's been screwing my wife behind my back for God knows how many years! If that's friendship, count me out. And you, Marina!"

Cari was surprised at the tone of disgust in her father's voice. But then how much could a man take before it was too much? She didn't feel that much sympathy for her mother. The woman had been living a lie for Cari's entire life. Now it was time to face the music, and her mother was still saying "poor me."

Marina was sputtering and Sal was getting red in the face. Edward obviously didn't care as he continued to castigate them. "I think the only thing you care

about is yourself, and how all this will affect you. Hell, you probably even knew Cari's fiancé had been cheating on her, but didn't want to disrupt the wedding!"

Marina flushed immediately at her husband's angry words.

Cari watched the interplay between the adults she had loved and idolized all of her life. It was strange to see them acting out like this, after so long a time. She felt Jake take her hand in his, and squeeze it. Turning, she smiled at him. She knew that with Jake by her side, she could face anything, even angry, screaming parents. She cleared her throat twice, getting louder each time, to get everyone's attention, which then surprised her that it was just so easy.

"I think you all should just go home. You're only going to end up saying something you will regret later on. And nothing any of you say will change my mind. Now the wedding was scheduled for two weeks from Saturday. It's probably too late to get your money back, Sal, so if it's all right with Jake, we'll get married then. I'm sure Tony will tell his friends, so they won't show up, and we'll invite Jake's friends and family by phone."

Cari paused and looked at Jake. He smiled and nodded his agreement. She smiled in return, and then continued. "If you want to come, you are more than welcome." She turned to Edward. "I'm hoping you'll still walk me down the aisle, Daddy."

Edward nodded his head. He blinked quickly as tears welled up in his eyes. "Of course I will walk down the aisle with you, Cari. I would be honored."

Cari smiled. "Bring your friend also, Daddy. I would like to get to know her, please." She ignored her mother's gasp. "Now, even though this is Jake's home, I'm kicking you all out of here. I'm tired of listening to you fight. I've heard emotional upset is bad for the baby." She pressed her hand to her barely swollen belly.

Edward nodded his head. "You're right, of course, Cari. I'll be in touch this week." He kissed his daughter's cheek, offered his hand to Jake, and then turned

to stare pointedly at his wife and friend. "Let's all go. If you two still feel like arguing, you can continue this while Marina picks up her things back at the house."

Cari gasped this time, realizing her father was kicking her mother out of his house. She turned to see what her mother would do. Marina lifted her chin.

"Very well, Edward. Come Sal, we'll go get my things." She stopped as she went to pass Edward. "You know Edward that you are only precipitating things a few weeks earlier than I had planned. Once Cari had married, I was planning on leaving you anyway." She flounced past him and out of the house.

Sal looked at Edward, and then at his daughter. Cari met his eyes. She was sure that she saw doubt, yet she didn't have the strength to forgive him. Perhaps someday she would. Almost as if Sal read her thoughts he nodded. Without a word he turned and followed Marina from the house.

Edward shrugged and followed the other two.

Cari flopped down onto the leather sofa, feeling suddenly deflated of energy. She looked up at Jake. "I'm sorry for that scene, Jake."

Jake grinned and came down beside her. "Don't apologize, sweetheart. We'll just chalk it up to in-law troubles. I do think Sal wishes to be in your life. Something I saw in his eyes, honey."

"I sensed it too, Jake. But right now, I don't know if I can get past all of the lies, for so many years. To be honest though, I'm not sure who I am the maddest at right now."

"Granted, and I'm not taking anyone's side in this." Jake put his arm around her shoulders.

"I know. I didn't think you were." She turned her face towards his, meeting his gaze. At that moment, the love she felt for Jake rushed through her. She moved closer into his arms, kissing Jake's lips lightly and then resting her head on his chest. "Care to listen to one more suggestion?" Jake asked quietly, his arm holding her close to his chest.

"Of course, Jake."

"When everything settles down in your life, and it may take a while," he paused to pat her tummy. "Just promise me to take a look at everything your mother and Sal did with an adult eye, not a child's anger and hurt." He paused to wipe a tear from her cheek. "There will come a time when each of us will do something we may later regret, or not know how to undo."

"You mean like my first night here, with you? I have no regrets, Jake. Not a single one."

"I am glad to hear that because I have no regrets either."

Cari had to clear her throat to speak. "You're sure you want to still marry me? I seem to be coming to you with a lot of baggage."

"I have no doubts whatsoever, Cari." He put his hand beneath her chin, and turned her face towards his. "I should have told you this sooner. I love you, Carissa Evans. And nothing will make me happier than spending my life with you." He slid one hand down to cover her stomach. "And our child, or children. Now, if you love me back, how about we go get some breakfast?"

Cari laughed and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "I love you so much, it hurts sometimes! Thank God I had to deliver that book to you!" She paused and looked into his eyes. "Uhm, I never did look to see the name on the book. What was it that brought us together?"

Jake grinned. "A truly lovely old and rare book called 'The Art of Love.' I believe I'll put it into a glass case with a plaque that states 'this book started it all.' If nothing else, it will make people ask questions, and it will make a nice ending to the story of how we met."

Cari looked into Jake's eyes. She was so incredibly lucky to have met him that she had to hug him once again and kiss him firmly on the mouth. When she pulled back, she laughed at the surprised look on his face. Standing quickly, she reached for his hand. "Now, let's eat before this baby comes along and starts ordering a cheeseburger!"

## Chapter 12

Cari shook her head nervously as one of her bridesmaids offered her a sip of water. She was too nervous. On her, make that *their* first visit to a doctor, she'd gotten medicine that would hopefully keep her out of the bathroom long enough to get married. Cari flushed now, remembering how embarrassing parts of the visit had been.

Right from the moment she told Jake she had made the appointment, he started planning. There was a list of questions, a list for books to see which ones the doctor recommended, and a blank list labeled "do's and don'ts" to be filled in at the appointment. At the office, Jake stayed right by her side. At least until the doctor asked if he wanted to see. The kindly doctor quickly explained that a lot of expectant fathers wanted to be involved in every part of the pregnancy.

Cari had nodded, but did feel compelled to add a comment. "Any of them offer to carry and deliver the baby?" Jake squeezed her hand and chuckled along with the doctor, but he still went to have a look.

The last two weeks had passed quickly. Cari had gone for final fittings on her dress and veil, and learned that Jake already owned a tuxedo. They had scaled the wedding down, only adding people that Jake called personally to invite. They had done away with grooms' men, only having her three bridesmaids. Her father was walking her down the aisle, and then stepping off to serve as Jake's best man. Cari had not missed the fact that her father seemed to be constantly smiling since her mother had moved in with Sal.

Cari and Jake had gone out to dinner with her father and his lady friend last week. Cari had been nervous, but had relaxed soon after she met Linda Scott. Up close, Cari saw that Linda was much closer to her father's age than she had first thought. Linda was a widow, but had no children. She also shared Edward's love of books, which was how they had met. When dinner ended, it had been Linda and Cari doing all the talking, while Edward and Jake sat quietly, just nodding their heads when needed.

Since they had been to see the doctor that morning before their dinner together, Jake brought the subject of the visit up. Her father was all for Jake's involvement with the baby as much as possible. Edward added that he regretted not having the chance for early bonding available to fathers these days. Cari knew then that there would no disagreeing with the two of them!

Marina had not stepped forward to take over the final details of the wedding, so Cari had found herself trying to make sense of it all. But once she met Linda, the two women took over the preparations together. Cari found herself sharing things she had never shared with her own mother, and found she was a little guilty at the feelings of closeness she was having. Late one night, she had confided to Jake her feelings of guilt.

Jake had pulled her close and reassured her that it seemed perfectly natural to turn to Linda, since her own mother wasn't interested in sharing this time with her. Of course, Jake's rationale helped some, but she still felt some guilt. Although it faded with each time she was actually with Linda. And being a good Catholic girl, guilt was her part time job some days.

Cari shook her head bringing her thoughts back to the wedding and her bridesmaids all chattering a mile a minute around her. For a moment, she considered asking one of her friends to pinch her so she could be sure she was awake and it truly was Jake's and her wedding day!

\* \* \* \* \*

Linda came into the church's side room and shut the door softly. She smiled at Cari, marveling at how close she was feeling to the younger woman. She had dreaded meeting Cari, fearing she might be like Marina, whom she had come to know through some shared committees. But within a few minutes, she had realized that Cari was like Edward. And even though she now knew that Edward was not Cari's natural father, Linda had seen the love between the two of them. Edward was now, and would always be, Cari's father in all the ways that truly mattered.

"Everything is ready." Linda smiled at Cari as she came up to her. "Jake is a stunner in his tux, and your father has cleaned up quite nicely as well." She reached over and patted Cari's tummy lightly. "Is everything staying where it should?" Linda added with a conspiratorial smile.

Cari laughed, as Linda had hoped. Cari took a deep breath and looked around at her friends. "I'm fine, and ready if you are."

The other women all laughed and nodded. It had become obvious as the two weeks passed, that Cari was head over heels in love with her new fiancé. The "oohing" and "aahing" over her new engagement was sincere, especially since one of the girls' families owned a small jewelry store. She had easily assessed the value of the new ring that now adorned Cari's finger.

Above all else, her friends were all ecstatic that Cari had found someone to love her the way she deserved to be loved. At the bridal shower a few days earlier, they had all shared with Linda that Tony was a schmuck, and they were very happy Cari had found out about him before it was too late.

Slowly, after a number of unnecessary twitches to her veil and dress, they exited the small room. Linda turned to leave, but Cari's hand stopped her. Without a word, Cari hugged the other woman. When they moved apart, both had tears in their eyes. Cari wanted to tell Linda how she appreciated the friendship the older woman had extended to her since their first meeting. Her throat clogged with tears, and she could see that Linda understood from the look in her eyes. Sharing so much more than words, they started for the main part of the church.

It was only a short walk to the back of the church, where they found her father nervously waiting. Edward was running a finger around his collar when he met his daughter's eyes. Cari smiled at her father, and she saw his eyes look down. Cari couldn't read his mind as he noticed that she was holding Linda's hand. But in that moment, Cari believed she was seeing sheer and unbridled joy on his face.

Cari knew that Linda and she were getting along better than Edward had probably thought possible. The times the four of them, her father, Linda, Jake and herself, had spent together the last two weeks had been some of the most pleasant she'd ever had!

Linda smiled at Edward as she passed Cari's hand to her father. She kissed Cari's cheek through the filmy veil, and then lightly kissed Edward's lips. Cari watched as Linda held Edward's eyes for a moment. She could see and feel the love shared by them. No one could doubt their love and happiness in that brief glance.

As Linda looked away from Edward, the eyes of the two women met and Cari smiled. Cari knew tears were welling up in her eyes, and soon would be flowing down her cheeks. She didn't care at all. Looking from Linda to her father, she told them softly, "I love you, Dad. And I think Linda is a wonderful woman, who will make you very happy."

Linda quickly lifted the handkerchief she had tucked away. "No tears, either of you!" She dabbed quickly at Edward's and hastily worked her hand up under Cari's veil. "Now before your nephew takes me to my seat, I want to tell you both how happy I am right now! Cari, I love your father. I would have stayed in the background of his life until whenever! Your acceptance of me, and the friendship you've shown me is more than I dreamed of, and..."

Linda's voice broke and Edward hugged her quickly. She shook her head though and straightened her spine. "Let's get this wedding going and down the aisle!"

As Linda walked up the aisle with Edward's eldest nephew, she saw that

Marina and Sal had shown up as promised, and were seated in the aisle reserved for the bride's parents. There was no missing Marina's perfect dress, perfect hair and perfectly made up face. It was probably childish, but she couldn't help the thought that no tears would be ruining Marina's perfect makeup.

Linda was a different kind of woman, and she'd rather have raccoon eyes from tears of happiness, than a perfect emotionless face. She was glad she was sitting on the groom's side, with Jake's aunt and uncle. They had arrived two days earlier, and had spent most of the time with Jake, Cari, Edward and herself. Instead of a bachelor party, the six of them had gone out for dinner and had a really great time. Linda smiled as she took the seat beside Jake's Aunt Paula and Uncle Joe.

After squeezing Paula's hand, Linda caught Jake's eyes and saw the love brimming over as he waited for Cari. The next moment the music started and everyone was standing to watch the bridal procession. She smiled and turned to watch the bride's maids come down the aisle first, all looking lovely in their soft shades of green dresses.

Soon the music changed and the actual bridal procession started. Cari's fingers dug into her father's arm nervously as everyone stood to turn and watch. Cari knew that all eyes were probably on her father and herself as they began the long walk up the white-carpeted aisle.

Cari held her father's arm tightly, consciously relaxing the death grip she had as she took the first step. Edward looked down and asked softly if she was all right. Cari nodded and tried to smile, but it was wobbly. Edward grinned.

"Don't worry, Cari. Just lift that pretty chin of yours and the hard part will be over in a few minutes."

Cari straightened her back and followed her father's directions. The walk down the aisle did seem a little strange. As she walked along, she looked from one side of the aisle to the other. She was pretty sure her mother would be having a fit. Many times her mother had lectured her to keep her head straight and eyes lifted. She couldn't help but remember some of their conversations.

"Now, don't forget Cari. Look straight ahead, towards the front of the church. Only when you reach the first aisle can you turn to look at me, and of course Sal. Next you regally turn to the other side and look at your groom."

"Why?" Cari was compelled to argue with her mother. "I want to look around to see who came to watch me get married."

"No! This is not some 'howdy-do party' Cari! Now, there will be no argument on this. The bridal magazines and books all stress to achieve the ethereal effect the bride must look straight ahead, as if she is above such things."

Cari looked at her father, letting the memories of her mother's lecture dissolve. She didn't think his smile could get any bigger. For a moment she followed the direction of his eyes, which appeared to be directly on Linda. Cari squeezed her father's arm. When he turned to look at her, she smiled. "I think Linda looks beautiful, Dad."

Edward nodded in agreement.

Cari knew she wasn't supposed to be chattering either, but she asked her dad one more question. "Are you going to marry her, Daddy?"

Edward's smile faded as he turned towards Cari. "Yes, sweetie, I am. I felt that it would be best to keep it secret until after your wedding."

Squeezing her father's arm, she shook her head side to side. "No more secrets, okay?" When he nodded his head, Cari continued. "Then sit with her today. We'll make a place for her at the table, or if you prefer you join her with Jake's aunt and uncle. Proclaim your love for her on the rooftops! I don't care what people say, Dad. Your relationship is something pretty darn special and I really like her."

"All right, sweetheart. To hell with what your mother might think!"

Cari grinned and then winked at Edward. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Cari. Now let's pick the pace up a little or Jake will be meeting us part way!"

They continued down the aisle, and people she or her father knew were smiling as they passed. While a lot of the people were friends of her mother or Sal, the ones she did know were not too embarrassed to grin or even chance a slight wave. When she met Jake's eyes a few moments later, she didn't really see anyone else. She felt her father pass her hand to Jake, and she knew she made the right responses, because Jake just kept smiling at her. Suddenly, he was lifting the veil to kiss her, and Cari realized she was now a married woman!

Jake grinned at her. "I love you, Cari. Is it too late to elope?"

Later at the reception, many of the guests questioned why she laughed after the groom kissed her. She wasn't surprised that the only one who really understood the humor was her father...

\* \* \* \* \*

"What was that, Cari? I can't hear you over the razor." Jake was in the bathroom, shaving for a second time on his wedding day.

"I was just wondering if you really wanted to go somewhere right now. I know you got all these travel brochures for me to decide, but to tell you the truth, I'd be just as happy staying here and visiting with your family, and getting to know Linda better."

Jake came out of the bathroom and stood for a moment. He'd finished his shave a few moments earlier, and had just applied some aftershave lotion. He was taken aback for a moment as he saw Cari on the bed, dressed in the sexy white lingerie, and her soft, dark hair spilling over her shoulders. He had to pause and thank God once again for letting Cari come into his life.

Cari was seated on the bed, wearing a present from one of her friends. It was

a sexy white teddy in lace and silk, with loose lace at the hips, and very low cut in the front. It had a robe, but it was mostly filmy silk material and see-through lace. She was sitting cross-legged, and looking at some papers on the bed in front of her.

He crossed the distance between the bathroom and the bed, and lay down across the foot of it. He saw Cari's eyes lift and go over his half-naked body. He was only wearing a pair of silk boxer shorts, adorned with little cupids, arrows and hearts, which she had given him as a present earlier. He saw the flare of her nostrils and the narrowing of her eyes as she looked at him. He always had the same reaction when he saw her. Jake reached out and lightly stroked his fingers down her thigh, and over her knee.

"If that is what you want to do for a honeymoon, sweetheart, then that is what we will do."

Cari nodded and smiled. "Of course, I will want a rain check. Maybe in a month or two, before the baby comes, we could go somewhere for a few days."

Jake gathered the leaflets together, as if he was looking at each one, and then he tossed them off the bed. He moved quickly and pressed Cari back into the bed, looming above her. Cari yelped in surprise, but grinned at him just the same.

"How about we get down to the consummation of this marriage then, wife?" Jake asked her in a fake growl.

Cari laughed. She squirmed for a moment or two, and then went limp. "Well, if you insist..."

Jake shook his head at her and lowered his mouth to kiss the side of her neck. His hands moved over her body, exciting her with each touch. He was surprised when he felt Cari's fingers thread through his hair and then pull until he lifted his head. His eyes met hers.

Cari smiled slowly. "Promise you'll 'insist' almost every night?"

Jake laughed and nodded his head. He kissed Cari's smiling lips and knew he was the luckiest man on earth!

## Epilogue

When the last notes of the hymn had faded, the members of the congregation settled themselves back down onto the pews. An air of expectancy hovered over them as Jake and Cari, with Joshua cuddled in father's arms, approached the altar. Smiling, the priest held out his arms toward Joshua to accept the infant. Cari pressed a quick kiss to the baby's forehead before he left Jake's loving hold.

Expertly the priest gently bounced the restless infant while he conferred quietly with Jake and Cari. After a few moments, the priest turned back to the congregation. He presented the baby for all to see. "What name do you give you child?"

"We give him the name Joshua Edward."

Jake reached over and took Cari's hand in his. When she glanced up a moment later, he smiled at her. She looked perfect in her light pink dress. It was belted loosely at her waist, but Jake had lost track of how many times Cari had stated she was determined to be able to wear it by today.

He remembered the day she had come back from shopping with Linda. It had been her first day out without their son, Joshua Edward, and his first day alone with him. Cari had laughed when she saw the looks on her husband's and baby's faces. The younger looked very hungry. Josh had refused water, breast milk in a bottle, formula and finally, breast milk on his finger! Jake knew the look on his face was sheer gratitude to have her home.

Josh had taken bottles from him before, but it was as if the little guy sensed mommy wasn't around the corner, just in case. So, as Cari quickly got down to feeding the angry boss of the family, Jake had looked at the dress that had taken four hours to buy. Of course, he had admired it, and complimented her on getting it on sale. The whole time he was reminding himself that *next time* he would remind Cari that "on sale" was not a priority. Today though, sunlight streaming through the church windows, he saw how the pink of the dress brought out the soft blush on Cari's cheeks. So the four hours, and the money, were well spent after all. Little Josh might not agree, but one day he'd understand. Just like one day he would understand the complicated relationships of his grandparents.

Cari had been almost nine months along when one afternoon, without warning, Sal had appeared, knocking on their front door. Cari had not wanted to see him alone, and so together they had met with him in the large living room.

Immediately, Sal had begun to speak. "Carissa, Cari, I had to see you. You have turned down our invitations to dinner, to lunch, to everything. No," he held up his hand as Cari started to reply. "Please let me finish. Your mother doesn't know that I have come to see you. She is unhappy. I know you probably don't believe me." He paused and Jake saw the tears in the other man's eyes. Jake reached over and took Cari's hand in his, as Sal continued.

"I love your mother, Cari. I have loved her since we were children, playing on the same street. Unfortunately, I wasn't as strong as I should have been. My father demanded I stop seeing Marina. When I broke up with her, she was just barely pregnant with you, and neither of us knew. My father sent me away to college. I came home at Thanksgiving. I so desperately wanted to see Marina. I was willing to defy my father..."

Jake looked from Sal to Cari. When she didn't speak, Jake felt he had to ask. "What happened? Did you see her?"

"My father waited until we were all seated at the Thanksgiving dinner, when he announced that my friend, Edward, had married Marina just a few weeks earlier. My father could be quite a bastard when he chose to be. I saw it in his eyes, watching me as he told his news. God! It was so hard, but I couldn't cry and let him know how deeply I was hurting." Sal paused to look down at his hands, twisted so tightly together now. He looked up and saw that Cari was watching him.

"You have my mother's eyes, Carissa. And your long dark hair is exactly like hers. She was quiet like you. As a little girl, you could always find ways to occupy yourself."

Cari's voice cracked a little, as she spoke. "When did you and my mother...?

Sal grimaced, rubbing his hand over his eyes. "Your mother and I didn't start our affair until several years later. I came home again that Christmas, and it was at Midnight Mass that I saw Edward and Marina come into the church. Her coat couldn't hide her swollen belly. The feelings of loss swamped me, and I ran out of church. My mother followed me, and in the hope of making me feel better, she told me that the gossip around town was that Marina and Edward *had* to get married. I think she actually hoped that I would think Marina was a tramp."

"Did you go to my mother then?"

"No, Cari, I did not. I was hurt, and returned to school. My father happily offered me a summer in Europe and I took it. The next school year went a little easier. I only came home for a few days over Christmas. I was sure that I was over Marina, so I came home for the summer. Do you remember how all the families would have the big parties in the street for the holidays?"

Cari nodded. "I remember that we went most years."

Sal nodded. "Edward was so proud of his baby. You were a little over eighteen months. Marina had dressed you in a cute little red, white and blue outfit for the holiday, and Edward was showing you off. I'll never forget that day, or that moment." He looked into Cari's eyes. "It was so hot, and my folks were sitting out in front of our house, enjoying the festivities. There was some girl there that I'd been flirting with until Edward walked up."

Suddenly, Sal stood as if he couldn't sit another moment. "Edward had this huge grin on his face as he walked up, calling out to my parents, and then to me.

The pride and the love on his face were evident to anyone who saw him. My parents knew the truth the same instant I did. Edward stood there with his pale skin, blond hair and blue eyes with the prettiest Italian baby I'd ever seen. Marina was Italian too, but from Northern Italy, and fair skinned as well. You could argue genes and chromosomes and all, until I heard your birthday. Edward claimed that even though you'd come early, you were a healthy baby."

"What did your parents say then, Sal?" Jake prodded, needing to know for himself.

Sal gave a harsh laugh as he replied. "I got rid of the girl I'd been planning to score with and then I looked my father in the eye. 'That is the only grandchild you'll ever have.' I told him, but I was so caught up in my own pain that I didn't see the hurt in my mother's eyes. I only wanted to hurt my father. I packed my bags and went back to school. I was still too angry with the world to think logically.

"My father didn't believe me, but my mother did. She wrote me lots of letters, begging me to come home. We would work something out, she promised. Just a few weeks after that she and my father were killed in an auto accident."

Cari's gasp stopped Sal's flow of words. He sat back down in the chair across from the loveseat where his daughter and her husband were seated. Taking a deep breath, he went on a few moments later.

"I came home for good, and began running my father's business holdings. I was settling in, content with my life, when one day I went walking in the park. You know the one, Cari, it's just about a block from your father's house. I saw a woman whose blonde hair caught my attention. She was pushing a dark-haired three year old girl on a swing. Your hair was long, done up in ringlets. In that moment, it all came rushing back to me. Everything I had lost, because of my father, and my weakness. If only I had stood up to him..."

Sal looked up and tears were running down his cheeks. "I missed your

growing up, your first words, first steps. Family still means a lot to me, Cari. I'm not like my father. I love Marina, but you are all the closest blood relations that I have left and I would like to be a part of my grandchild's life, from the beginning."

Jake had seen the look on Cari's face and knew she was softening her feelings. He knew she wouldn't forgive over night, and her next words confirmed his assessment.

"What about mother?"

"Cari, your mother isn't perfect, but then very few people are. She has her faults, but I love her. As soon as the divorce goes through, she and I will be getting married. I would like it very much, once the date is set, for you both to come."

Jake went to squeeze Cari's hand, but suddenly she was biting into his hand with her nails very tightly. He had thought she might be a little upset...

"It's the baby! I know my timing sucks, and...oh shit! Now I've ruined the sofa!"

"Honey, calm down. Nothing is wrong with the..."

Sal interrupted Jake. "Holy crap! Her water broke!"

Jake's thoughts returned momentarily to the present as he looked over at Sal, who was standing with Marina, just to the side of the christening fount. Between the two of them, they had taken Cari to the hospital. He had gone with Cari to her room, and left it to Sal to make the necessary phone calls. Things went a lot faster than he had anticipated and the next time he saw any of Cari's family was to tell them she'd had a boy. The waiting room had seemed a little tense with Sal, Marina, Edward and Linda all in there together. But he had not waited any longer than to just deliver the good news.

When Sal and Marina came to visit, Cari held her arms out and hugged them both. Marina cried when she held the baby, and Jake was sure that he saw tears in Sal's eyes. A short time later, Edward and Linda arrived. The baby seemed to relax everyone, and they all wanted to hold Joshua, or Josh, as Edward immediately nicknamed him.

Soon after he took Cari and the baby home, Edward and Linda stopped by every day. Not long after that, Sal and Marina were coming by several times a week. Sal came the first time with a video camera, the kind that showed the picture on the swing out window at the side. As he watched Sal now, he moved to get a better angle for the camera. Shaking his head slightly, he turned and saw that Cari had been watching Sal as well. She turned and they shared a smile.

Joshua cried out. Jake looked over and saw that his son was objecting to the water being poured over his forehead. As soon as the priest was done, Linda cradled him close to her body once again. Together, she and Edward repeated the necessary words as his godparents. Jake imagined his son was also objecting to the lace he was being forced to wear to satisfy tradition. The next moment, he felt Cari thread her arm through his. Looking down, he saw Cari was smiling but she also had tears in her eyes.

"I love you, Jake," she whispered to him softly.

Jake grinned at her. "I love you too, sweetheart. I'm glad we have all your family here."

Cari smiled back. "And yours."

"True, but I'll be really glad when we can get the house back to just us."

"Me too, Jake. Oh, by the way, the doctor gave me the all clear this morning."

"I thought you had last minute shopping."

Cari squeezed his arm, and winked. "Shh. I know, darling. I wanted to surprise you, later."

"You've done a good job surprising me now. But I promise you, my love, I

will surprise you tonight!"

Cari giggled in reply. He knew he was in for it when she winked at him a moment later. "We'll see who surprises who tonight when you see what I bought."

Luckily, Joshua gave another lusty cry demanding his parents' attention. That night though, after Josh had been fed and settled to sleep, both of his parents' were suitably surprised.

## The End