



Sweet as Sin

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CHAPTER ONE

Forty hours and six minutes. Unless something magical happened in that time, Emily Sorenson was going to be a harlot forever.

No way would she let that happen. It was bad enough that she'd just woken up in a stranger's bed for the fifth time in as many days, with absolutely no recollection of how she'd gotten that way, let alone naked.

Oh, she could guess how, though. Maybe not the exact method or details, but the gist of it.

She'd met up with the poor unsuspecting guy in some area club last night, made small talk for a total of approximately twenty-five seconds, and spent the rest of the evening getting to know him better with her hands, mouth and the rest of her barely-clothed body. Judging by the sticky wetness that rolled along her inner thigh as she sat and scooted to the edge of the bed, he'd gotten to know her just as well in return.

Doing her best to keep silent, Emily worked the top blanket off the red-haired man who lay face down in the unfamiliar bed. She stood and wrapped the cover around her body. With a glance to her right, because she wasn't about to spend another second looking at the stranger who'd had his hands and other parts of his body on and in God only knew what parts of her own, she spotted a neon orange scrap of material hanging over the bedside lampshade. She made out that it was a thong, obviously one she'd worn last night and had no choice but to put back on this morning, and reached for it. The sticky wetness she'd noted moments before seeped down her leg and dribbled onto her left foot.

The urge to scream hit her full force, followed quickly by that to lift up her leg and rub the gooey substance off her foot and onto the stranger's back. After all, she'd be giving back what was rightfully his. Instead, she closed her eyes, scrunched up her nose, and bit back a groan of revulsion.

This was wrong. *So* wrong. And *so* not fair!

She didn't even like men that way, for goodness sake. That wasn't to say she liked women that way, either. Fact of the matter was, she was pretty darned asexual, if the few experiences she actually remembered when she was in her right mind were anything to go by.

The problem here wasn't her; it was her alter ego, the woman she'd long since named Tammy Getsaround. The woman who, for all intents and purposes, didn't even exist, but by God, she had ruined Emily's life. Was about to ruin it permanently.

Tension clawed at her belly with the thought, and she opened her eyes to take another look at the alarm clock on the bedside table. Wonderful. Another two and half minutes had passed. She might as well lie down, spread her legs and accept her fate. Another forty hours and three and a half minutes and Emily Sorenson was going to cease to exist while Tammy Getsaround would be here to stay. This was her fate, her future. Her curse.

And it couldn't happen. She liked her life too much. So it wasn't perfect. Her job as a postmistress might be boring and little more than a way to stay current on bills. There just weren't a lot of exciting jobs around; not unless she wanted to drive mile after mile

to work and back each day, that is. And maybe she didn't have many friends her own age. Okay none. But again, in a town the size of Lone Pine that sort of thing was to be expected.

Lone Pine. Her hometown. Where she'd lived her whole life. Where she prayed she wasn't at this moment.

Needing to leave this strange room and strange man behind faster than ever, Emily darted her gaze around. Desperately, she sought out more gaudy scraps of clothing, and found not a single danged one. Well, crud. Maybe she should make a break for it wrapped up in the blanket, only it would be nice to at least know... "Where the heck my bra is!"

"Hey, Tammy baby, where ya goin' so fast?"

So much for staying quiet and sneaking out unnoticed. Her man of the evening had just come to and, judging by his eager tone, he was hoping for a repeat of last night.

Emily fought off a shiver and returned to her clothing hunt. "I have a ... an appointment this morning." With a shrink. Maybe if she could get one to tie her to a chair tightly enough she'd have a hope of spending her last night as a sane woman alone, dressed and with her legs clamped tightly shut.

"Then can I get your number, or see ya again tonight?"

Sure thing. Right after she saw the three dozen other men who'd asked for a second date after enjoying the first one so much. "Uh, actually I..." Hot pink? Was that a flash of hot pink peeking out from beneath that dresser? She went to the chest of drawers and bent down, gave the unquestionably hot pink item a tug, and breathed a sigh of relief. A bra. A see-through bra, but she was getting somewhere. "I, um, got yours last night. Why don't I call you when I'm free next?"

The bed creaked behind her and the stranger asked, "Ya aren't goin' to call me, are ya?"

The note of dejection in his voice brought Emily a moment's guilt. This is what she hated the most about Tammy—even more than the fact she used her body like it was every man's playground—not all the men she slept with were into one night stands, or even typically fast movers. Some of them were pretty darned good people. She had no idea what type this guy was, but he sounded like he'd fit into the latter group. Even if he did, it didn't change things. There was only one way out of this situation and she had to take it.

Holding the cover firmly to her breasts, Emily swiveled back to find the stranger sitting up in bed. His face was just as dour-looking as his voice had sounded. She didn't bother taking in his features—there'd been way too many men to even attempt to remember them all. Besides, Tammy never picked up the ugly ones; that he was attractive was a given.

Forcing a smile and an appreciative purr into her voice, she asked, "Now what kind of question's that? Didn't you have a good time with ol' Tammy last night?"

The dour look faded as promise lit his eyes. He grinned back and shifted in the bed, one long lean leg escaping the covers and touching down on the floor. One long lean naked leg that was quickly leading to many more naked parts. "Do I gotta come over there and remind ya?"

Emily mentally urged her eyes to stay open, to take in his nude body without flinching. To act like she stood in front of tall, good looking, well-endowed ... *holy cow, that thing had actually fit inside her?* ... men everyday of her life.

Wrenching her gaze from his erection, she fell back into routine, biting out a husky laugh. “Just checking, stud. Now no worries, Tammy’ll call you. Just right now I have to run.”

“Well then, have a good one, darlin’. I’ll be thinking of ya.” He stepped toward her, the fact he planned to kiss her goodbye obvious. The fact his big—really, really big—and hard—like knock on wood hard—penis would be pressing up against her belly if she allowed that kiss had Emily deciding in a flash there wasn’t a thing wrong with walking out his front door wearing a blanket and not a darned thing else.

“Yeah. Me, too. See you.” She blew a Tammy signature air kiss in his direction, then darted out of the bedroom and through the unfamiliar home in search of an exit.

Seconds later, Emily had found the front entrance and was standing outside, staring into the early morning sun. Her old green Rabbit was parked at the curb of at fast-moving city street and mountain peaks canvassed the horizon in the near distance. A sigh of relief welled up inside her and tension leaked out of her shoulders in pounding waves. She had no idea where she was, but it wasn’t in Lone Pine and for that she couldn’t be happier. As many men as Tammy had shackled up with the past months, none of them had been from Lone Pine. If one ever was, then Emily’s life—imperfect as it might be—would be over. The area was far too tiny for her reputation to survive even one of Tammy’s nightly escapades, let alone several of them.

On second thought, her life was almost over anyway. Another forty hours and one minute and Emily would be twenty-seven and, thanks to a curse that had been set upon her months before she was even born, ruined beyond redemption.

* * * *

The last place Dade Foundree wanted to spend his first free weekend in damned near six months was in his hometown of Lone Pine, Colorado. Unfortunately, that’s where Grandma Joy needed him to be this weekend. For a man that prided himself on his ability to say no, whenever one of Grandma Joy’s calls came in the word left his vocabulary.

He owed her too much not to be at her beck and call. And if this particular call was one that had him returning to a town he’d long since promised himself he’d never again set foot in, then that’s just the way it would have to be.

Dade braked his truck at the town’s sole stoplight, looking around out of instinct more than anything else. The place was exactly as he remembered it. A market, a gas station, a post office, and a school not much bigger than his house back in Chicago, and that was about it. Not even so much as a damned bar or, for that matter, a place to buy beer, for miles. Thank God, he’d had the foresight to pick up a twelve-pack in the last city he’d passed through.

A city. Which Lone Pine was not and would never be.

A shithole. What Lone Pine was, and the fact its citizens thought differently just went to show how asinine they really were.

The light changed and Dade pulled through, shaking his head. God, he hated this fucking town. The memories associated with it. The way he’d been ridiculed for something that was completely beyond him. His father had been a drunken bastard and

his mother just the half-witted sideshow act to match the old man perfectly. They'd been outcasts and that had made him one of the same simply by relation. He'd been shunned as a kid, treated like shit. Beaten up more times than he could remember by those his own age and his father to boot.

Grandma Joy was damned lucky he loved her as much as he did to be here now, sitting for a house that held more bad memories than any place should have and a cat she talked so much about you'd swear it was her kid.

Hell, who was he kidding? He was the lucky one, blessed beyond measure that Grandma Joy loved him. As much as she'd never gotten along with her daughter—his mother—his grandma had moved to the area and in with them just before his seventeenth birthday. She'd told him the day he'd left Lone Pine that she'd made the move for him, because he'd needed someone to help him see the potential that no one else had even bothered to look for. He knew his worth now, just as he knew his grandma had been the only good thing about Lone Pine fifteen years ago and was still the only good thing about it today.

In the fast-waning light of day, the ranch house he'd been raised in came into view a quarter-mile ahead. It had been a dingy gray then, now it was a pale yellow and matched almost perfectly the house that followed it. Looking at that second house, Dade realized how wrong he'd been. His grandma might've been one of the good things about Lone Pine back then, but she wasn't the only good thing. There'd been one other. One girl. Emily Sorenson.

The thought of the green-eyed, blonde-haired kid he'd last seen waving goodbye as he pulled out of the town all those years ago had an automatic smile claiming his lips. She'd been his neighbor and, despite the fact she was five years younger, in many ways his savior. She'd liked him, listened to him, wanted to spend time with him. For a long time, he'd thought it was because she was young and didn't know any better, but then she'd gotten older. Not much, but some. Enough to know better, to know that he wasn't any good. That associating with him was the fastest way to sell her soul to the devil.

He'd actually said that to her once, and she'd said back in her slow, sweet drawl, "Then to the devil I go, because I like you Dade Foundree and nothing's ever going to change to that."

Sweet. Naïve, but sweet. And, as he recalled, when he'd left town just on the verge of womanhood. She would've turned into a real charmer between those huge green eyes and all that wild blonde hair. Probably married by now with a baby at her hip and another on the way. That's what always happened to the good ones. Not that there were many good ones in Lone Pine. Not that he even wanted to think about the residents of this shitty little town. He just wanted to get settled in his house—make that his grandma's house—serve out his weekend time, and then get the hell out of dodge. That's exactly what he planned to do, too. Another fifty-three hours and he'd be home free.

* * * *

Hiring a shrink might be out of the question, but that didn't mean Emily couldn't take matters into her own hands. She had all that she needed to get the job done. A sturdy chair. Duct tape. And the *pièce de résistance*—sleeping pills. If strapping herself in place wasn't enough to stop Tammy from emerging, then knocking her out with a double dose of Sleep-Aid had to be the answer.

Setting the bottle of pills between her thighs on the chair's hardwood seat, Emily went to work with the tape and securing her ankles and legs. This was definitely one of those times when she was glad her parents had decided to move away from the area and leave their home to her. If they were still living here, or if she were living with a roommate somewhere, they would think she was losing her mind. She wasn't losing her mind. She'd lost it long ago, most of it anyway. The few shreds of sanity that still remained were what she was trying to save now. If she could just get through tonight without Tammy taking over, then she could wake up clear-headed tomorrow and able to think straight for the first time in weeks. Straight enough to arrive at a solution to ending this horrid curse before it was too late? Probably not, but she still had to try, and that meant wrapping the duct tape just as tightly as it would go and not worrying over how she'd get free of it tomorrow.

* * * *

He should have known his grandma wouldn't have cable. The rest of the house had been given an extreme makeover from when he'd lived here and that renovation had given Dade hope he'd be spending the weekend sitting around, drinking beer and watching SportsNet.

No such luck. The beer was flat, the only station coming in offered a late night soap opera, and his grandma's pride and joy—a longhaired cat damned near half his size in weight and girth—had taken up residence on his lap. Yeah, this weekend was getting off to a rip-roaring start. He'd go to bed but it was barely nine, Colorado time, and he never slept more than three or four hours a night.

He pushed at Gigantimo, the nickname he'd given the massive feline in his first fifteen minutes of boredom, in an attempt to get him off his lap. The animal gave a loud hiss, swished its ass in his face and then slowly stepped off him, dropped down on the floor, and started for the kitchen. The cat stole glances at Dade as it went, and he remembered he was supposed to feed him. Not feeling any too friendly toward the animal, yet not about to starve it either, he strode into the kitchen and took out a can of food from the refrigerator.

He was emptying the food into a bowl when light from the house next door caught his attention. Someone was home, and he couldn't help but wonder if that someone was Emily. She probably didn't even live there any longer. If anyone, her parents might. In the grand scheme of things, they hadn't been such bad folks. Not the type he'd typically spend a Friday night with, but then, this wasn't a typical Friday night. And there was one damned long weekend ahead. Besides, his grandma had probably told them he'd be in town, seeing to her place and cat. He might just as well go over. Even small talk about a town he hated would be better than staring at the wall, drinking flat beer and waiting for Gigantimo to return.

Before he could change his mind, Dade made his way through the shadows of night to the neighbor's front door. He took a moment to admire the starlit and Milky Way lightened sky, then lifted his hand to knock. Sounds reached him before he could make contact with the door. Loud, unpleasant sounds. Sounds like someone was dying. Or being murdered.

In Chicago, hearing those sounds might have fazed him slightly, but not unnerved him. In Lone Pine, hearing those sounds had his heart galloping and his body taut with

the need to take action. Not about to pound on the door now and let whoever was inside know he was out here, he jiggled the knob and found it unsurprisingly locked. Hell, he couldn't just crash through the door. Not only would it alert the person inside in a big damned way, but he'd probably kill himself in the process. There had to be another way in, or at least a window where he could catch a glimpse of who or what was making that painful sounding screech.

Dade skirted around the front porch, stepping past shrubs to peer in windows, finding nothing but empty, mostly dark rooms. He'd reached the back of the house and the last window when he finally spotted movement. The angle of the window didn't give nearly enough away. He cranked his neck and pressed his face against the glass in the hopes of seeing more. Just enough to give him something to go on. Just enough to give him some idea who...

Oh, fuck.

The sight before him was far worse than what he ever could've imagined. Emily was inside—time might have passed, but he'd know that wild blonde mane of hair and those dimples anywhere—strapped to a chair with duct tape. By the looks of her clothes and body, she'd been attacked. Oh, Christ, what if she'd been raped? What if she wasn't even alive? Her head wasn't slumped forward, but her eyes weren't open, either.

The thought was too much. This was Emily. Sweet, naïve Emily. And she was in trouble. Bad.

No longer thinking, merely reacting, Dade raced back around to the side of the house. The first window that was big enough to fit through quickly bore the imprint of his fist, followed by spattered drops of blood and jagged edges of glass. Pain edged through him as the lacerations on his hand made themselves known. He shut out that pain and barreled through the window and then the door of the sitting room, en route to the kitchen.

Just inside the kitchen door, he came to a jerking halt, able to do nothing more than stare at the woman before him. Emily was exactly the way he'd always imagined she would be as an adult. Cute as hell. Outside of that, she was exactly the way he'd *never* wanted to see her, deadly calm and motionless.

A low moan caught up with Dade. One not as keen as what he'd heard outside and yet one that had him bursting in to action. She was clearly hurt, but still alive.

He dropped to his knees in front of her and cradled her face in his hands. Her eyes opened slowly to reveal haziness, and past that the subtle traces of recollection. "Emily, honey," he soothed, taken aback by the comforting sound of his voice. He hadn't heard anything even half that gentle come out of his mouth in years. "I'm here," he continued, stroking her cheeks, waiting for further signs of life to bloom. One finger wiggled past the bounds of the tape that held her hand in place, and he breathed a sigh of thanksgiving. "You're safe now, Em. Nothing more is going to happen to you. I promise."

With a final reassuring stroke, Dade let her face go and turned to the task of freeing her from the duct tape. Much of it was already shredded, as were her T-shirt and cotton shorts. Patches of soft, smooth, tanned skin peeked out from everywhere, as well as patches that weren't so soft and smooth and tanned. The material of her shirt and bra had both been torn away from her left breast and her nipple was sticking through clear as day. Under his scrutiny that nipple hardened.

It was a hell of a time to have a physical reaction, least of all to a woman as sweet and naïve as little Emily Sorenson, but Emily wasn't that little any longer. She obviously wasn't hurt as badly as he'd feared, either, if she were showing signs of stimulation. Pushing back his own unexpected arousal and the way it turned his cock hard lightning fast and pumped his blood into a frenzy, he concentrated solely on freeing her from her bonds.

Dade had managed to work a long strip of tape away and free a good deal of her right arm when Emily screeched out, "No!"

He jerked his attention to her face. Her eyes were large now, wide the way he'd remembered them; the sound of her voice when she spoke low and fading. "Please ... don't ... touch..."

Her eyelids slipped shut as her speech died away, her head tipping to the side.

Disgust roiled through Dade's gut. What kind of monster was he? He'd been looking, really looking at her naked breast, and feeling aroused because of it. Worse than that, he'd thought she'd been stimulated, too. She hadn't been stimulated. She'd been scared to death, afraid of him laying his hands on her the way someone before him had done. And if the way her head was bobbing now, the way low, indistinguishable words were falling from her lips, that someone hadn't stopped at laying his hands on her. He'd drugged her, as well.

Dade returned to his efforts of freeing her, this time with new vigor; yet awareness of what a fragile state she was in. Fragile and dependent on him. He didn't know who the Sheriff of this town was any longer or even if they had one, but he did know the closest hospital was almost an hour away. He couldn't rely on an ambulance making it to Lone Pine in time to save Emily. He had to see her to safety himself.

"You're going to be okay, honey," he promised in a hushed voice as he continued to work at her bonds. "Just relax and breathe deep." And pray to God whatever drugs she'd been given hadn't already done more damage than what could be reversed.

CHAPTER TWO

Whoa-wee! Whatever she'd drunk last night had kicked her ass but good.

Tammy couldn't even remember how things had ended between her and Rex. Last thing she'd known she'd had him on his back, his leather belt trapping his wrists in place, and the power of her words trapping the rest of him. Normally, she didn't go for his type. But every once in awhile it was fun to take one of 'em for a ride. See how fast she could get 'em going. How far.

Rex mighta been a shy one at first, but his anatomy more than made up for it. The boy was H-U-G-E huge. When she'd first stripped off his jeans and briefs and found that monster of a cock waiting for her, she'd nearly come on the spot. She'd expected him to come almost that easily, just as soon as she slipped that monstrous member inside her mouth. To the boy's credit, he hadn't. He'd waited until she was on top of him, riding him hard, feeling the length of his rock-hard erection pumping into her and pushing her to the breaking point.

At least, she thought he had...

Damn, she couldn't remember if she'd even broken.

She musta. She never walked away from a hunk of flesh like Rex without finding her pleasure. She for damned sure didn't walk away without making sure he found his. Yeah, he'd come. Probably filled her up and gave it to her again and again.

Settled by those thoughts, Tammy took a first look at her surroundings. She was in a big ol' pick-up truck, but not one she recognized. Come to think of it, the guy driving didn't look any too familiar, either. He was a hot one, though, even if his face was marred by the tight set of his lips. The glow of the dashboard showed over-long dark brown hair and a square jaw bristled with five o'clock shadow.

Mmm... It'd been a mighty long time since she'd had herself a brunette.

She started to reach for his jean-clad thigh when she was jerked backward. She looked down, bewildered to see a blanket covering her. It was too damned hot to be wearing a cover. She never even used the things in winter. No way she'd go and hide her killer bod like that. It was made for looking at, touching, tonguing. Warm wetness seeped into her panties with the thought of doing all that and more with her newfound friend, and Tammy pushed the blanket onto the floor of the truck. She nearly screamed at the sight of a seatbelt crossing her stomach. What the hell? She never wore a seatbelt. Things cut into you, not to mention made it damned hard to reach across and fondle the person sitting next to you.

With a grunt of disgust, she unhooked the belt and scooted closer to the stranger. She reached out her hand and, touching down on his thigh, gave the impressively solid flesh a squeeze. "Hey, big boy," she purred, "where we going so fast?"

The truck swerved to the right and the man looked at her through wide eyes. "Emily?"

Temper sizzled through her, but she brushed it away. He'd almost gotten the name right, so no reason to go getting catty on him. "Name's Tammy, but you're close, honey muffin."

Confusion riddled his features. After a few seconds, he shook his head and turned back to the road. "Fine then, Tammy, just sit back and relax, honey. We're almost there."

Good for them, wherever "there" was. Good for her, they weren't "there" yet. "Well, as long as it's only almost..." She scooted closer still, until her breasts rubbed up against his arm, her nipples beading expectantly, and slid her hand from his thigh to his groin. Curling her fingers, she moved her palm to his upper, inner leg, felt the long, solid press of his cock, and the wetness in her panties turned to a deluge of pleasure. Her clit tingled with excitement and it was all she could do to hold in her delighted squeal.

Lordie, but she'd been getting lucky lately. Last night with Rex, and now ... whoever he was ... the boys around here were just made for riding. "Well, my, my ... you eat your veggies, don't you, honey muffin?"

"Dade," he said through gritted teeth that told her just how anxious he was to get his hands on her. "My name's Dade, and we're almost there. I promise. If you just sit back and..."

"Yeah, we are." Just a few more seconds and he'd be taking a one way flight on the Tammy Express. No need to wait until they got "there" for that.

Tammy reached for his jeans' zipper and gave it a quick tug. She pushed her hand inside the freshly opened vee, buried her head beneath his arm, and readied her lips for action. She cast him a last hungry glance while anticipation settled deep in her sex as a pool of liquid desire. "Ready for your ride, honey muffin?"

Dade's face went so white it all but lit up the truck's cab. "What the fu—get down. Now!"

So he was one of those demanding types, eh? She could handle that. She didn't have a single problem with going down on him right this second, especially since that had been the plan all along. "You got it, honey muffin. One extra special cock suck coming right up."

* * * *

"Son of a bitch!"

The words sank in the same time as Emily's small, capable hand caressed the base of Dade's fast-growing erection. The wheel wrenched from his hands, and the truck veered off the road and into the neighboring field. Emily flew from his lap and across the bench seat to land against the passenger's side door with a squeak.

Pushing away the thoughts that threatened to steal over him, mind and body, of forgetting Emily was ever sweet or naïve and giving into her seductive advances, he switched on the cab light. He'd been worried by that squeak, afraid he'd hurt her even more in his knee-jerk response to her behavior. Only Emily didn't look hurt, not with the way she was licking her lips and eyeing him. Not when she was flashing those killer dimples. He'd used to think of them as cute but now realized they were, in fact, damned sexy, right along with all that wild hair. No, Emily didn't look hurt in the least. What she looked was hungry. For him.

"Looks like we've stopped, honey muffin." She came to her knees on the seat and started toward him. "That's just fine by Tammy. I like my boys to watch when I got 'em in my mouth."

Emily finished her journey across the seat and placed her hands on him, one kneading his thigh while the other made its way back to the opening in his jeans.

Dade's shaft pulsed with the thought she was about to take it out and suck on it. His heartbeat pounded while sweat popped out on every inch of his flesh. Her lips looked so plump, so red in the artificial lighting. They'd feel like heaven and then some, wrapped around his throbbing erection. Divine deliverance of the highest order.

Would it really hurt anyone to give in to her?

The answer to that question struck Dade upside the head hard and brought logic flourishing back to his brain along with some of the blood that had long ago traveled south.

Would it hurt anyone? Hell yeah, it would. It would hurt Emily! Emily, who he'd been in the process of taking to the hospital before he'd lost control and driven the truck off the road. Emily, who he still had to get to the hospital. She'd been attacked, possibly raped. Was even now under the influence of drugs that had her confused, thinking she was someone she wasn't. She didn't really want him. She didn't even remember who he was.

He grabbed her hand as she attempted to work it back into his jeans and encased it in his fist. With his other hand, he captured her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Listen to me, Emily, honey," he said as calmly as possible, which wasn't too calm given the rock-hard state of his body, "this is not you. The real you is..." What? He hadn't seen her in over fifteen years. The truth was he had no idea what she was like these days. "Sweet," he said anyway, then snorted. Yeah, she was sweet all right. Sweet as sin maybe.

"Oh, I'm sweet." She rimmed her lips with her tongue, leaving them glistening and too damned tempting to overlook. "Good and sweet. Now how about we find out what you are."

Ignoring the hand he held, Emily moved her other hand to his open jeans and started to reach inside. Dade let go of her chin to catch that one in his fist, too.

Her attention jerked back to his and her lips formed an alluring pout. "Aww ... c'mon, honey muffin, I know you wanna go for a ride. I can see it in your eyes. You want to reach out and fill up your hands with my breasts. Go right on ahead. They want you to. Just like my nipples do." She glanced to her torn shirt, to the nipple that stood out stiff as a rod, and then back at him. "Just look at 'em, all nice and perky, begging to feel your mouth on them. So, whaddya say? Just one lick? One suck? One quick little peck to see if you might like it."

He'd say he'd like it all right and that just went to show he was out of his damned mind. Not that he was typically a saint. He wasn't by a long shot, but he also wasn't a pervert who took advantage of emotionally confused young women. "I'm not touching you, Emily. I am not going to let you do this. You don't mean it. Not really."

Once more her lips formed that enticing pout, and she tugged her hands from his grip and moved back to the passenger's side. "Fine then," she bit out, jerking at the remnants of duct tape he hadn't taken the time to remove from her body and tossing them aside. "You wanna play hard to get, go right on ahead. Tammy knows a thing or two about seeing to her own needs."

The words filtered to Dade's gut and lay like a leaden balloon. Her own needs. She couldn't mean...? Emily lifted her hips up and her hands went to the waist of her shorts, sliding them down her legs. The air stilled in Dade's lungs, then burst out with a rush of heated words, "What the hell are you doing?"

She finished wriggling out of the shorts, and flashed him an open-mouthed smile that had her sexy-as-hell dimples winking at him. “What’s it look like, honey muffin? I’m making myself comfortable.”

Dade forced himself to look away, ahead, at the blankness of night just past the windshield and the beam of the headlights. He drew long, deep breaths, pushed refreshing air into his lungs. Prayed for the intelligence to do the right thing.

He had to get back on that road and drive. Had to get her to the hospital. Had to ignore her—oh, dear God, there went her panties. He could barely detect her movements from the corner of his eyes, but the slurping sounds that came seconds later didn’t take witnessing to know what they were. Christ, she was fingering herself. The sounds were replaced by ecstatic squeals of delight and his cock nearly split out of its skin.

Struggling to ignore Emily, to ignore the near-blinding desire that swamped him, Dade shifted the truck into reverse, nearly crying his joy when it obeyed instead of being mired in the mud the way he’d feared. He backed onto the road and gunned the truck in the direction of the nearest hospital. The time he’d broken his leg and his old man couldn’t ignore the fact it wouldn’t heal on its own, it seemed like the fifty-minute trip had taken hours. Tonight it felt like goddamned years.

“Oh, honey muffin, you’re missing out,” Emily cooed. “It’s getting good. So good.”

Faster. He had to drive faster. Had to concentrate on the road. If he didn’t, if he followed his baser instincts and turned his attention on his passenger, Emily wouldn’t be the only one coming in the cab of his truck. He’d be climaxing right along with her.

“Oooh ... Dade! This is sooo good. I’m dripping for you. Soaking wet. My pussy’s squeezing my fingers so hard I can’t hold back. It’s coming. It’s com... Yee-haw! Oh, ye-ess, Dade, right there! Keep on going, keep on showing ol’ Tammy how good you can be.”

Dade? She chose to call him Dade now, when she was coming of all times. God, that was just low down. Low down and almost more than he could handle. But he had to. He had to get her help and he had to get it fast, before he did something both of them would live to regret.

* * * *

“Where am I?” Emily looked from the man holding her hand to the starched whiteness of her surroundings. The lack of furnishings outside of that necessary to monitor her vitals made her location clear. A hospital. Somewhere.

“You’re awake.”

The stranger’s voice was deep, severe almost, and yet filled with concern. It was the latter that brought her attention back to his face. He looked familiar in a way she couldn’t place, though she sensed it had something to do with his eyes. They were dark blue, almost black, and filled with every bit of the worry she’d heard in his words.

A smile claimed his lips, bringing tiny lines to the corners of his mouth, and he gave her hand a firm squeeze. He released it to sit back in his chair next to her bed. “Do you feel okay, Em?”

Em? He knew who she was? The real her? How was that possible? Only a handful of her closest friends and family members called her Em. He couldn’t be either of those. He also couldn’t be one of Tammy’s friends using that name, thank goodness.

The man's smile fell away and concern returned to his features, creasing his eyebrows together. She realized that she hadn't answered him. She'd been lying here like a mute, ogling him instead. "Uh, yeah, I think I am. I feel okay."

His tension visibly drained away and he breathed an audible sigh. "Thank God. You had me scared, honey. I was beginning to think you'd never wake up."

And she was beginning to think she'd never figure out who he was. There had to be an answer in his words. She'd obviously slept awhile, long enough to have him fearing the worst. She'd never been that much of a sleeper. Since Tammy had taken possession of her nights, she'd been lucky to get more than a—oh ... Tammy.

The evening before came back to Emily in a rush. She'd been desperate to keep Tammy at bay, to have a single night of freedom spent with her legs crossed. She'd taped herself to one of the kitchen chairs and taken an extra healthy dose of sleeping pills. That was clearly why she'd slept so long. The pills might explain the stranger's concern, but not his presence. Or, for that matter, hers.

What the heck was she doing in a hospital in God only knew what city?

She gave the man one last long look, struggled to put his face with a name, and finally gave up. "Not to sound unappreciative—I mean it's great that you're here and worried about me and all—but do I know you?"

A fresh smile took over his lips. The extent of this one and the way it lit up his face told her how fabricated and for her benefit that first one had been. "You used to, Em. It's been awhile. Years actually."

Years? He was an old friend of hers then. Someone she'd known in school maybe. Someone she'd gotten along with well enough to let him call her..."Oh my gosh, Dade?"

His smile deepened to a grin and he nodded. "In the flesh."

And what flesh it was!

Emily took in his tanned and muscled arms first, then slowly worked her way up. His jaw was much squarer than she remembered and currently covered with a day's growth of beard a shade lighter than that of the dark brown hair of his head. The scar on his left cheek that used to be vivid white was now little more than a hairline mark no one would even notice unless they knew it was there. The worry was gone from his eyes now, and she could see the shadows that before had been partially masked. It was the traces of those shadows that had seemed so familiar to her. They weren't as bad as when he'd left the area a few short days after his eighteenth birthday, but they were still there. And she still felt the pull to somehow make them disappear.

She also felt a pull of another kind. One that started in the vicinity of her loins, made its way through her limbs, and had heat flaming to life in her cheeks. "You look good." Really good. Edible good.

Edible good?

Dear Lord, that sounded like something Tammy would say! The furious beat of Emily's heart and the anticipation that warmed her inner thighs as she gazed at the fullness of his grinning mouth also felt like something Tammy would experience. There was no way in heck she was allowing herself to feel those sensations, not even if they were enjoyable in a way she wasn't about to think over.

She again met his eyes. "So, why exactly are we here?"

Dade's grin vanished. He sat forward in his chair and reclaimed the hand he'd been holding when she'd awakened. He gave another squeeze, one she guessed was meant for

reassurance but only managed to worry her all the more in the way it affected her physically. "I should get your nurse. She'll want to know you're awake."

"No. Not yet. Please tell me first, Dade. Why am I here?"

He glanced at the door; then back at her and frowned. "You don't remember anything about what happened?" She shook her head and he continued in a solemn voice, "You wouldn't admit it last night, but the doctors think you were assaulted."

Emily curbed the unexpected charge of desire that had overtaken her senses the moment he'd put his hand back in hers to gasp, "*They do?*"

"Yes. I found you in your house, bound to a chair with duct tape. You wouldn't let the doctors run many tests on you or call the police, but your clothes were pretty well shredded and your skin has a lot of scratches on it. Whoever's responsible also drugged you."

Bound to a chair. Shredded clothes. Drugs. He'd found her. "Oh, my gracious."

"Tell me the truth, Em, do you know the man who did this to you?"

"A man? Why would you think it's a man?"

He breathed a heavy sigh and released her hand. "Look, I know you don't want to talk about it. But things won't get better until you do. If I get the nurse..."

"What kind of drugs were they?"

His expression changed to one of unease. His tone changed, as well, sounding almost embarrassed as he said, "The doctors think it was just sleeping pills, but..."

Emily's belly knotted at the way he'd said that last word. She didn't want to know what, or rather who, was behind it. She didn't, and yet she feared she already did.

Tammy. "But?"

Dade stood, paced to the window, and parted the drapes to look out. "You weren't acting like it was sleeping pills. You were acting..."

"Like a slut." Only she hadn't been the one acting, and it hadn't been an act at all. It had been Tammy, and knowing good ol' Tammy, she'd thrown herself at Dade.

Not that Emily was much better. He'd barely been back in her life five minutes and already the secret crush she'd had on him as a girl was back. The difference was her feelings weren't those of an almost-teenager any longer. They were those of a woman, and her hormonal fascination with Dade was stronger than anything she'd ever felt for a man.

He turned back to eye her sharply. "What the hell would make you say something like that?"

"What time is it?" It was pointless to ask what day. It had to be Saturday, because if it were Sunday or any day thereafter she wouldn't be Emily right now. She'd be Tammy the harlot. Permanently. The knotting in her belly turned to a biting ache. She bit down on her lower lip to quell the emotions that charged into her throat and pressed at the backs of her eyes.

"A little after ten a.m., and you haven't answered my question."

The biting ache faded slightly, enough for Emily to release her lip and say a silent prayer the sleeping pills hadn't lasted any longer than what they had. "Thank God, there's still time."

Eyes narrowed, Dade returned to the chair. "Time for what?"

"To..." How was she supposed to answer that? As much as she felt an almost explosive attraction to Dade, she also felt comfortable with him, as if no time had passed

since they'd last seen one another. Dare she just say it? Would he laugh in her face? Not if he were the boy—make that man—she remembered. He had to be that same man. He'd brought her to this hospital and stayed by her side until she'd awakened, after all.

She drew a long breath and wet her dry lips before speaking. "You've been gone a long time..." her voice was low, tremulous, but she couldn't seem to do anything about it, "—and I know we used to be pretty close, still you have no reason to believe what I'm about to say. The truth is ... something bad is going to happen to me tonight. Something that can't be reversed."

"And you know this because...?"

Past her anxiety, Emily couldn't help but smile. He looked confused, but he also looked like he wanted to believe her. He was the man she remembered, the one his grandmother occasionally mentioned to her during their weekend visits, and it swelled her heart with hope to think they might be able to regain the friendship they'd once shared.

Her hope fled immediately. They couldn't have that friendship back. Not even if she could get past her attraction to him. They couldn't because she was about to vanish. Maybe not in body, but in soul. In mind.

The emotions returned in an instant. She tried to push them back, to take it all in stride, but still a snuffle escaped and still her voice shook. "I know it because I was told about it long ago, and I've been feeling its effects for the last four months now."

Dade's eyebrow slashed together and he bit out, "Effects? Are you dying, Em? Is that what you're trying to say?" He continued more calmly, "No, you can't be dying. You're healthy. Maybe not right now, after whatever it was you endured last night, but in general you are. You have to be. Grandma would've told me if you were sick. I'm sure of it."

The words took Emily's emotions and twisted them in to an unstoppable flood. Tears leaked from her eyes and her body shook on a hollow sob. She loved his grandmother, had often felt as if she were her own. Only she wasn't, and this weekend proved that. Joy knew about the curse. She was the only one Emily had felt comfortable talking about it with. Dade's grandmother had not only believed her, but had been able to provide her with a bit on the way it worked. She didn't know who'd placed it on Emily or why, but she did know the way it would affect her, the day her life would change irrevocably unless they found a way to cure her first.

Joy was even helping her to find a cure. At least, she had been until yesterday morning. Yesterday morning—the day before Emily was doomed to be a whore forever—Joy had taken off for parts unknown without so much as a goodbye.

She cried harder with the thought, sobs wracking her body. She'd never been a crier, had never seen the use in tears, but now she couldn't stop them, couldn't get her emotions in check for anything. Dade's arms wrapped around her without warning, pulling her up against his chest, and suddenly she was glad she couldn't stop her tears. He felt so good, so right. So comforting.

"N-not ... d-dying," she managed.

"Emily, honey," he whispered near her ear, his voice like the most soothing lullaby, "don't cry. If you aren't dying, then there has to be something we can do. Tell me the truth so that I can help you. I promise that I won't judge you, no matter what."

His kindness after all this time, or maybe it was just the fact there really was no way around her situation, finally had Emily's emotions taking a breather. She felt much stronger now. Strong enough that she didn't need the security of his arms or the slow stroke of his hand at her back. She also felt greedy, and she wasn't giving up that magnificent touch for the world. Just as she wasn't giving up their proximity. If she was only going to be Emily Sorenson till midnight, then she was going to live every second until then like it was her last. And, well, heck, it was.

Moving in his arms just far enough to tip her head back, she eyed Dade's mouth. It was tempting to lean in, to live in the moment and savor a kiss she'd wanted since she was old enough to realize it might just feel good, but she couldn't do it. Not yet. Not until he heard the truth about her and that she wouldn't be around come morning. At least, not her soul.

"There isn't anything to be done for me, Dade," she said softly. "Believe me, I've looked for an answer. Your grandmother and I did together. The time for finding a solution is over. All I can do is accept the truth. And the truth is ... the truth is that tonight at midnight I'm going to turn in to a harlot forever."

CHAPTER THREE

Dade gave his head a shake, certain he'd heard Emily wrong, or if he had heard her right that she was still under the influence of last night's drug-induced daze. The latter idea took the thought he'd been having seconds ago—that of stalling her tears with a far from friendly kiss—and made it seem evil. Almost as evil as the way his body was responding to her closeness.

Pushing back thoughts of touching down on that sweet, soft mouth of hers and images of the way she'd looked last night, the way she'd sounded as she brought herself to climax, he focused on her expression. She looked stone sober, as focused as could be, and deathly afraid. He shouldn't even consider her words. He should put all his efforts into finding out the truth of what had happened to her last night before he'd found her or, more sensibly, on retrieving a nurse. Only he couldn't get himself to move, because deep down he believed her. "You're going to turn in to a harlot? Is it going to magically happen? You'll be laying in bed and all of a sudden, wham, you'll wake up and feel the need to throw your body at the first man in sight?"

"Yes, exactly!" Emily had pulled back to confess her secret to him. Now she threw herself back against his chest and squeezed. "I never expected anyone to understand outside of your grandmother, but you do. You believe me, don't you?"

The words had been muffled against his chest and still Dade could hear her happiness. He could also feel the effect her nearness was having on his slowly fading erection. The covers had fallen away when he'd pulled her into his arms that first time. Now her bare knees stuck out from beneath her gown. Stuck out and brushed against his groin each time she breathed. He was hard as granite, and if there was ever a more inopportune time to be in that condition, it was now.

He struggled to move past the feel of her in his arms, the way her breasts pressed against his chest, the smell of her hair and the way the long, wild strands tickled his neck and arms. Struggled and lost the instant she peeked up at him, her dimples turned on high.

Dade lowered his head and brushed a kiss over her mouth quickly, telling himself it was just a comforting move. Not something sexual. Not something he'd done because if he hadn't kissed her gently right that second, he would've done so much more aggressively a minute from now. Emily's eyes widened a fraction. Her nipples reacted in turn, pressing through the thin fabric of her hospital gown to abrade his chest. She licked her lips and her smile vanished as her gaze fell to his mouth.

Oh, fuck, she wanted another kiss. He couldn't do it again, not that slow, that gentle. He had to concentrate. To get to the bottom of what was happening in her life. He moved back slightly, far enough to remove the caress of her knees against his swollen cock, the bittersweet press of her nipples from his chest, and nodded. "Yes, Em, I believe you. I'm not sure why, but I do. Can you tell me anything more about it? How can you be one hundred percent certain there's nothing you can do? Have you seen a doctor? A psychiatrist?"

Emily's gaze lingered on his lips a few more seconds; then finally lifted and he could see fresh tears shimmering in her big green eyes. "I've done everything short of offering my soul to the devil to end this stupid curse."

Every carnal thought in Dade's head died with her last word. Up until now, he hadn't thought of her condition in terms of a curse. Now that he had, his heart took off at a gallop and his mind raced with memories from his childhood. "A curse? As in a hex someone put on you?"

"Yes, before I was even born. I started hearing rumors around the time I turned fourteen or fifteen. I thought it was just a joke, but now I know it isn't. It's real and it's ruining my life." Her eyes closed and she pulled from his arms, moved to the side of the bed, then crossed to the window and looked out. When she spoke next, her voice was wrought with shame. "You wouldn't believe the things I've done lately. Not that I actually remember most of them, but it's pretty obvious judging by the places I wake up in the mornings, the strange beds, the sticky, disgusting..."

Emily stopped short and swiveled back. The move was completely unexpected and gave him no time to mask his expression, one that said he could believe the things she'd done, because last night he'd experienced them firsthand.

Her gaze narrowed. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"What way?"

"Like you know what I'm talking about, like you feel guilty about something." She closed her eyes and shook her head, reopened her eyes. A plea lit them—one that said to lie to her if that's what it took to give the answer she needed to hear. "Please don't tell me something happened between us last night."

He could do that much. He could say what she wanted, because nothing did happen between them. She'd been a one-woman show. "Nothing happened between us, Em."

"But Tammy tried to get something to happen, didn't she?"

Tammy. There was that name again. The one she'd kept repeating last night.

"Who is she?" Dade snorted at the words the moment they left his mouth. The answer was pretty damned obvious. She was Emily, just in an altered form of mind.

"She's the woman I become around nine o'clock each night. She's the woman I'll turn into forever tonight at midnight unless I can find some way to reverse this curse before then." She looked away to admit, "She's also the reason you found me the way you did last night. I wasn't assaulted, Dade. I did that to myself, taped myself up and took a handful of sleeping pills in the hopes Tammy would spend just one night at home with her legs firmly closed. She must have tried to get out of the tape and shredded my clothes and scratched my skin in the meanwhile."

She'd done that? Bound herself up so tightly and completely it had taken him almost an hour to get her free? Then there was the overdose of sleeping pills. Damn, she had to have been desperate to take those extreme measures. She'd been desperate, and he'd been her worst enemy by barging into her home, summoning her from her hazy state, and waking up Tammy. Only Tammy hadn't been in control when he'd first arrived. Emily had been. It had been Emily who'd begged him not to touch her. Not because she was frightened of him the way he'd assumed, but because she was frightened of herself.

Son of a bitch, if he'd only known.

Emily once more turned beseeching eyes on him. Her words came out a whisper. "I don't know what to do, Dade. I can't stay in Lone Pine. I probably shouldn't even

attempt to go back this morning. It's my home, everything I've ever known, but you know how the people there are. One misstep and that will be it. Tammy ... she's a walking misstep."

Less than a day ago, a statement like that one would have made Dade feel anger over the fools who called Lone Pine home. Now, he couldn't feel anger. At this moment, he couldn't feel much of anything. He could only think about one thing. About Emily's curse. And, more specifically, about a woman he'd once known who claimed she could put a curse on a person. The same woman who'd threatened to curse him numerous times in his youth if he didn't do what he was told. The very same woman who'd one day claimed she couldn't put up with his father's shit any longer and turned the man into a frog while Dade had been at school.

They'd had frog legs that night and she'd laughed like a loon the entire time. He hadn't thought much of it—his mother had always been off kilter—but then his father had never returned and strange things started happening around their house. Around the town in general. Too many odd events to be coincidence, and part of him had started to believe his mother was serious. That she could curse a person. That she was a witch of some kind.

Christ, he'd left that kind of thinking behind, along with everything else, the day he'd left Lone Pine. He'd transcended his upbringing many times over and he'd never wanted to consider it again. He never wanted to consider for so much as an instant that whatever power his mother had held could be in his blood, too. Sitting here now, looking at Emily's forlorn expression, Dade knew he had no choice but to face his past. "Maybe I can help you."

"*What?* But how?"

"Maybe ... I don't know." And he honestly didn't. He only knew that when his mother had died several years ago, two large boxes had been left for him with his grandma. He hadn't wanted to know what was inside them, so he'd asked her to do something with them. She reminded him every few months that she still had them, stored away in his old bedroom for safekeeping. She'd just reminded him about them again Thursday night, the last time he'd spoken with her before she'd left for her trip. She'd said now would be the opportune time to go through them.

Why now? Why the same weekend that Emily's curse would take full effect? Was it coincidence that his grandma had implored him to come take care of her house and cat this weekend, or was there more to it than that? Was the grandma he'd always believed normal a witch herself, one who had passed her powers onto her daughter and now felt responsible for the woman's actions? "You said my grandma knows about this?"

"Yes. She's the one who told me what would happen. How I would turn into a ... slut. How Tammy would take over full-time the day I turned twenty-seven. At midnight tonight."

The hair on Dade's arms stood on end and a shiver raced through him with the certainty of her words. It wasn't just coincidence that he was here. Whether she possessed powers or not, Grandma Joy had brought him to Lone Pine for a reason that had everything to do with Emily's curse. He could only hope that reason was somehow explained through the effects his mother had left behind for him.

Shaking off his trepidation, he forced a reassuring smile. "First off, you're not a slut, Em. Tammy is. Secondly, Tammy doesn't have your body yet. I can't make any

promises, but I can tell you as soon as we get you out of here and are back at Grandma's place, I might be able to get a better idea of what we're up against."

Emily's eyes brimmed with fresh tears and she was in Dade's arms before he'd even realized she'd moved. Her mouth was on his just as fast. Her lips brushed his once, twice, then pushed against his mouth demanding entry. He opened automatically, stunned to have her acting this way and yet wanting her kiss and the softness and warmth of her in his arms, like nothing else he could ever remember wanting. Her palms went to his chest, her fingers kneading his muscles through his T-shirt while her tongue dipped into his mouth.

She rubbed against his tongue, one demure little flick, and then her fingers let up, her lips lifted from his, and she moved from his arms and jumped off the bed. Standing back, she grinned at him, her dimples huge, her cheeks flushed with an enticing shade of pink, and her eyes alive with newfound hope. "Thank you so much, Dade. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't shown up when you did last night."

And he didn't know what he would do now that he had. Emily had him feeling things he never planned to feel for another person, outside of his grandma—things that crossed steadily into the affection terrain. He was now semi-confident he could help her get to the bottom of her curse. He wasn't confident in the least that when she was freed of it and the time came for him to return to Chicago, he'd be able to leave what he was feeling for her behind. Worse, though, one hell of a lot worse, was the reality that he wasn't even sure he wanted to.

* * * *

His mother was to blame.

Dade read the lines of text scribbled in the timeworn journal a third time, letting them sink in and acceptance to roll over him in the process. Not all of the words were legible—some appeared as though they had been whited out—but enough of them were readable to reveal the truth. That Norma Jean Foundree, his mother, hadn't been lying to him. She really was a witch. A witch who'd not only fed him his father for dinner and laughed about it all the while, but one who'd placed a curse out of spite on Emily before she was even born.

His mother had been engaged to Emily's father, John, when her then-best friend, Sara Eddington, moved to town. According to his mother's remarks, Sara had stolen her fiancé away by sneaking into his bed and seducing him. After that, John hadn't wanted Norma any longer. He'd only wanted Sara and married her less than year later. Dade's mother married a week after that. Married the first bum who'd come her way and moved in next door to Sara and John Sorenson, promising she'd make them pay for what they did to her. And she had.

Emily's parents had always been decent to Dade, but they'd pointedly steered clear of his parents. When their paths had crossed, his mother had been cruel, his father the drunken bastard he'd always been, and now he knew why. Just as he knew why Emily was cursed.

"Lemonade?"

Dade jumped at the sound of Emily's voice so close behind him. He closed the journal and turned back. He couldn't tell her what he'd learned. If what his mother had

written was accurate, then there was only one chance of him lifting the curse, and that chance relied on Emily not knowing the reason for his behavior the rest of the night.

Tossing the journal back into the box he'd found it in, he stood and accepted the glass of lemonade she held. "Thanks." He took a long drink; then nodded his approval. "Tastes great."

"I made it yesterday when I was waiting for night to come. I needed to get my mind off of things and decided squeezing lemons was as good a way as any."

Her voice was strained, her attention wavering from the two large boxes on the bedroom floor to Dade's face. It was clear she didn't want to talk about lemonade. "I didn't find anything yet," he lied, giving in to her question before she could ask it. He couldn't tell her the truth and yet he had to give her hope of some kind, even if that too was a lie. "I did call someone," he improvised. "They promised to call back soon. They think they know something."

Emily's blonde eyebrows worked together as frown lines marred her forehead. "Who is it?"

"Just an old friend. Are you hungry? We missed lunch and now it's..." He glanced at the alarm clock, but she answered before he could.

"It's getting late. Considering Tammy will show up around nine, I have about five hours left to my life. I hope your friend was serious about calling back soon."

The sorrow which filled her words and claimed her face was too much. It twisted his gut with hatred he could only aim at one woman. That woman was dead, and it was pointless to waste his time feeling scorn for someone he would never again see. Instead, Dade focused on the positive things his mother's spitefulness had brought him. Most notably, Emily back into his life.

He might not understand the way she made him feel—hell, he wasn't even sure if he wanted to embrace it or run the other way—but he knew he'd missed their friendship. She'd been young when he'd left, but she'd also been one of his only friends. One of the two people who'd actually listened to him as if they'd cared. She was listening to him that way now, looking at him with a face full of defeat and yet the slightest glimmer of hope in her eyes. As negative as she sounded, she still believed in him. That said something.

He wouldn't fail her. Not even if setting her free of the curse meant doing the one thing bound to bring them closer than ever and confuse his feelings for her all the more. He had to sleep with her, just as he had to ensure her now everything would be okay.

"She will come through, Em. I promise. She never lets me down."

Defeat left Emily's features in an instant and she took a step back, gasping. "*She?*"

Oh, fuck. Why had he had made his friend female? Judging by her expression, Emily thought the woman was a current lover. If that gasp was any sign, she also felt guilty about kissing him back in the hospital. She shouldn't feel guilty about it, because he certainly didn't. What he felt like was pulling her to him right now and showing her just how much he'd enjoyed that kiss by repeating it. Only this time he'd make it last ten times as long, not letting up until she was writhing against him, whimpering her need for so much more than his tongue.

Maybe sleeping with Emily wouldn't be such a hardship after all. Okay, so he'd known that from the second he'd read the journal that the only way to lift the curse was by having sex with a blood relative of the person who'd placed it on her. More

specifically, having sex with that person because she genuinely wanted to and not because lifting the curse called for it. Still, he'd had reservations, concerns about how it might affect the way he was feeling about her. He still had those reservations, only now they were shrouded by the ache of his groin and the heated rush of blood cruising through his veins on a due south journey.

Aware this might be the place but not the time to seduce Emily, Dade answered her question with another lie. "Yeah, she. An old acquaintance back in Chicago. Literally old. She's in her eighties and has to wear trifocals just to see your face a foot away. Nicest little old lady you could ever meet, though. Except Grandma, of course. But then I'd better not call Grandma Joy old. She's liable to come home this instant and take me over her knee."

Emily's shock passed and she laughed softly. She stopped then, and pinned him with a serious look. "Dade, why do you think Joy left me? She promised to help me figure out this curse. Then, just when I needed her most, she went away. She knew I was going to die—at least my soul, my mind—and she didn't even say goodbye."

"She couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure." And he wasn't. Not really. He could guess that just as he couldn't tell Emily why he wanted to sleep with her—at least, part of the reason—it was possible his grandma also couldn't tell him the reason she'd lured him here. The bottom line was that she had lured him here, for Emily's sake, and he wouldn't let either his grandma or Emily down. "Grandma had an emergency come up. She called me in a panic and said I had to get here immediately, that she couldn't leave Gigantimo alone by himself for more than a day. So I came. She never told me what that emergency was." Emily nodded, her eyes lighting with understanding, and Dade finished with a smile. "If she'd had a choice, she wouldn't have left you, Em. She loves you like you're her own granddaughter."

"I feel the same way about her."

"Grandma Joy's a hard lady not to care about." A lot like Emily. But he wasn't going to think about that now. He was only going to think about timing and how exactly it was he would convince Emily to want to have sex with a man she knew only from her youth. As lightly as Tammy took the act, something told him Emily would be a whole lot harder to talk out of her clothes and into his arms. Maybe it was the way he still saw her—as sweet, naïve Emily despite that kiss she'd laid on him—or maybe he was wrong. Maybe she was as sweet as sin the way he'd pegged her to be last night. One way or the other, he'd be finding out soon.

Dade offered his hand, needing to leave this bedroom and, more notably, the bed behind before he changed his mind and made use of it now. "What do you say to that food?"

"I might as well. It's not like I'm going to get anything else accomplished today." A frown took over her lips and she looked to her feet. "Then again, maybe I should call my parents first. I have to tell them goodbye."

"Later. You have till at least nine, and hopefully far longer than that." Emily lifted her attention to his and her mouth opened as if to speak. Before she could say anything else to bring both their spirits down, Dade grabbed her hand and nodded toward the door. He looked back at her then, at her big green eyes, her full sweet lips, her sumptuous dimples, and bit back a groan at the automatic way his cock hardened. "Think about

dinner, honey. And, if that isn't enough to get your mind off of the curse, then think about dessert."

* * * *

Emily hadn't been able to think about anything but dessert for the last hour and half. Not since the moment Dade had first told her they'd be having it. She had no idea if he'd been aware of it, but his eyes had been dark as onyx and full of sensual invitation. She wanted to accept that invitation. Wanted to say to heck with it. Her life was over anyway, she deserved to live on the edge for once, to experience the fire she knew they could ignite together. She knew because, as fast and basic as the kiss she'd given him at the hospital had been, it had sent her hormones skyrocketing, her pulse thudding, and her sex aquiver with dewy desire. It had affected Dade just as much. She'd felt his erection before she'd jumped off the bed. Heck, it was the reason she'd jumped off. Because she'd been scared. Just as she was now.

She wasn't Tammy. She wasn't even a little bit clever when it came to sex. She knew she wanted it, or at least something close to it, whenever she got within twenty feet of Dade, but she had no idea how to initiate it. Or how once they started, even to pleasure him. There had been others, yes. But just a couple and years ago, and those times had hardly been mind-blowing. The truth was they hadn't even been orgasm inducing. At least, not for her. As much as Tammy Getsaround lived up to her name, Emily Sorenson had never even climaxed before. She would tonight, though. She would because she wasn't going to die an orgasm virgin.

She pushed her plate back, absently patting her belly. Dade had served her spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. The meal had been incredible, as had the conversation. He'd told her all about his life in Chicago, his work as a high finance loan officer, the things he did for fun when he had free time, which sounded like rarely. He'd told her more in an hour and a half than she'd ever known about the men she'd dated in the past, and they weren't even dating.

They might not be dating, but she'd enjoyed every minute of learning about his life these last years, and had readily supplied information on her own. Maybe that was why, as nervous as she'd been at the hospital, as inexperienced as she might be when it came to sex, she suddenly felt bold. Whatever the reason, she wasn't about to let the mood slide past.

"Dade?"

He scooped his last bite of pasta into his mouth; then looked up and nodded. He looked so boyish with a mouthful of noodles and sauce that the idea of leaning forward and making her intentions clear by kissing him full on didn't even worry her. Only she didn't want to kiss him and assume that he would want what she had to offer. She wanted to give him a chance to say no. Oh, gosh, but she just prayed he didn't.

Emily sucked in a deep breath, and let the words fly. "I need you to do something for me, but I'm not sure how to ask you." Okay, so those hadn't been exactly the words, but it was a start.

He finished chewing, then, "Just say it, Em. We've never had trouble talking in the past."

She laughed nervously. If only what she had to say was kid's stuff. "We were kids back then ... well, I was anyway ... what I need to say isn't the kind of thing kids talk about."

Dade frowned and her thoughts of his looking boyish faded. Now, with his eyes slightly narrowed and tiny lines bracketing the corners of his mouth, he looked one hundred percent man. "You haven't had problems talking to me all day. You even told me about your curse, something you admitted you hadn't talked to anyone else about but my grandma. Whatever it is you need me to do, just say it. I promise to at least try and do it for you."

He could do it for her, too. Of that she had no doubt. One little scrape of his day-old beard on her sensitive feminine flesh and she'd be a puddle of molten lava. Her sex dampened with the thought, her clit tingling with anticipation, and once more she let the words fly, only this time the real ones. "What I need is ... I need ... I need for you to sleep with me, Dade. I mean, have sex. I've had sex as Emily, but never *good* sex like I know you can show me."

She stopped her rambling to gauge his reaction. His mouth was hanging open, his eyes wide. He didn't look pleased. It had to be because of Tammy, because of her reputation. "If you're worried about Tammy, about her reputation and the way it might affect me, don't be. She can't get pregnant or catch any STDs or anything like that. Neither of us can. The curse won't let us."

Still no answer. Still the slack jaw and wide eyes. Oh, heck, what would it take?

"I know I'm not the prettiest girl in the world. I'm sure you have much better offers all the time back in Chicago—I mean, look at you, you're gorgeous—but I do care about you. I've always cared and I think you know that. Still, if that's not enough. If you still can't..."

"Emily," Dade growled her name.

The animalistic sound of his voice reached deep down inside her, stroked her senses, her logic, everything about her that was female and good. She could hope it meant what she thought, but she couldn't be certain until she heard the words from him.

"What?" she asked breathlessly, already inching closer to where he sat on the opposite side of the table.

Dade moved as well, only he didn't inch. He stood and rounded the table, jerked her into his arms with one deft move, and captured her chin in his hand. "You listen to me, Emily Sorenson. You are pretty, far more so than any woman I've ever met or even passed by in Chicago. You're everything I could ever want and more, so quit your foolish rambling and kiss me already."

CHAPTER FOUR

The second Dade's mouth touched Emily's, his arms pulling her flush to his aroused body, he knew his actions were for all the wrong reasons. He wasn't kissing her, savoring the sweetness and warmth of her willing mouth, the shy almost innocent flicks of her tongue against his, because of her request that he have sex with her or even because sleeping with her would lift the curse. He was doing it because he hadn't been able to stop thinking about touching her, holding her, burying himself deep inside her since the moment he'd seen her yesterday.

She'd grown into the beautiful, inviting woman he'd always known she would one day be. At the same time, she'd hung on to the compassion she'd shown him as a youth, had taken him back into her life as if hardly any time had passed between them. Maybe that spoke to the fact she'd hung on to her naïveté as well. He didn't know, didn't really care. All that mattered right now was that the girl he'd once thought of as the sister he'd never had, had grown in to the woman he couldn't imagine going another second without touching everywhere.

Emily's arms circled around his back and she wrapped her right leg around his left one, bringing them into closer contact. Her belly pressed against his swollen cock, caressing it just barely with each subtle movement her mouth made. Her hips shifted, circling in an instinctive rhythm that turned the gentle caress to an almost demanding chafe. The shy flicks of her tongue became bolder, her mouth feeding from his with an urgency he returned wholeheartedly. Her hands moved down his back to cup his ass and, giving his butt cheeks a squeeze, she moaned against his lips. Not a breathy moan, but one that sounded a whole hell of a lot like a growl.

Dade pulled free of her mouth, dragging in gasping breaths. He looked down at her flushed face. Her eyes were even larger than usual, darker green than he'd ever seen them, and in her gaze was an impatience she equaled aloud. "More ... please." Her staggered words ensured she was as breathless as he. "I need ... more. I need everything, now ... before it's too late."

As much as he would like to delay the moment when he would plunge into her warm, wet channel, have them both trembling with pleasure and their bodies afire with desperate need, he wouldn't keep her waiting that way. He would give her what she needed—both to lift the curse and to ease her state of mind—this first time. Next time, though, he would take things slowly, cherish her body, show her just how incredible and mind blowing "good" sex truly could be.

Brushing the wild, wavy length of her hair away from her face, Dade kissed her soundly. He lifted his mouth from hers then and took her hand. "I'll give you more, honey. I'll give you everything you need, but not here. You deserve a soft mattress beneath you."

"No."

He'd already started moving when the word caught up with him. Confused, he turned back. His gut knotted at Emily's expression. Her cheeks were still flushed, her pupils dilated, but her impassioned smile was gone.

What exactly was she saying no to? Everything? No way in hell. She couldn't have changed her mind. Not that quickly, not when his shaft was pulsing with the need to feel her small capable fingers wrapped around it the way Tammy had tried to last night. Even better, to have the muscles of her sex clamping around his cock, to feel her coming around him while euphoria danced over her stunning face.

She couldn't mean that she wanted him to stop. If she thought she did, then it was fear talking. Dade couldn't listen to fear. He had to have her tonight, now, not just because he ached near-painfully with his want for her, but because if he didn't have her she would no longer be in his life or, for that matter, even have one of her own.

He should take away her ability to say no. He should gather her in his arms, throw her back on the dining room table and fuck her right there where they'd shared dinner. He should, but his conscience wouldn't let him. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

Emily tugged her hand free of his and stepped backward until the rear of her thighs pressed against the wooden tabletop. She licked her lips and the pink tinge in her cheeks deepened as she glanced at the table. She looked back at Dade, and he could all but see her working her courage up to say what was on her mind. Finally, she did in a not quite steady voice. "I want you *here*, Dade." She patted the tabletop at her hip. "Right here. Right now."

The concern he'd felt with her "no" quickly took a back seat to shock. He looked to the spot she patted and gulped back a breath at the stab of desire that shot through him. He wanted her like he'd never wanted a woman, wanted her so damned bad he felt ready to explode with the need, but... "There? On my grandma's table? That's..."

"Exciting?"

Fuck, yeah, it was. In a really perverse sort of way. His grandma ate there, for God's sake. They'd just eaten there, and while he'd had that exact idea, of throwing her back on it and ravaging her, he hadn't been serious. Only judging by the expectant smile that had suddenly claimed Emily's face, she was serious and he wasn't about to tell her no.

Returning her smile with a grin, Dade pushed back thoughts of his grandma and food and focused solely on the beauty before him. Emily spread her legs in open invitation. Breath held, he moved between them and lifted her onto the end of the table free of food and dishes. Tension thick with anticipation weighted the air as they looked into each other's eyes. His gaze lingered from the hunger in hers to the dimples carved so sensuously into her cheeks. He'd wanted to kiss those dimples for hours now, wanted to run his tongue over them and then take it somewhere far lower and sexier yet.

He didn't make himself wait a second longer to do those things, but leaned forward and kissed each of the twin divots in turn. She laughed when his tongue drifted over them, and her arms found their way back around him, pulling him closer, before boldly moving his head lower.

He followed her silent order gladly, bending to kiss her breasts through her tank top. Her nipples beaded with the action and he realized she wore no bra beneath the soft cotton. There was just the sweetness of his Emily under it and he wanted that sweetness in his mouth.

Dade reached for the hem of the shirt, but then stopped and looked once more at her face, needing to be certain sure she was ready to move on. She didn't respond aloud or even with a nod, but joined her hands with his and helped him to pull the top over her

head. She tossed the shirt aside, and leaned back on her forearms, her breasts displayed firm and heavy before him.

At the enticing sight, he stood immobilized, transfixed by the idea that this was Emily—the sweet, naïve little girl who used to live next door to him. He had no right touching her this way. He wasn't fit to associate with someone as good and pristine as she was. He wasn't fit to associate with anyone in Lone Pine. They were thoughts of the past, thoughts put in his head by imbeciles he used to call neighbors and his own moronic parents, thoughts he'd long since stopped believing in, and yet they haunted him now.

Eyeing her nipple-hardened breasts, Emily wetted her lips. She lifted her gaze to his and mouthed a quiet, "Please suck on them, Dade. Show me how good it feels."

As low as the words were, they pulled him from his trance. He didn't have to feel bad for his actions, because he wasn't beneath Emily or anyone else who called Lone Pine home, and even more so, because Emily wanted this every bit as much as he did.

"Like this, honey?" Palming a breast in one hand, he massaged its aroused nipple and pulled its mate into his mouth. He teased the swollen crown, alternately tongued and suckled it.

The air rushed out of her mouth on a warm, breathy sigh. "Oh, yes. That feels ... oh, gosh, it feels amazing! I still need more. I need it all, fast."

He thought he could handle that, taking things fast this first time, but now he wanted to savor, wanted to taste every inch of her sleek little body. "It's not that late, Em. We still have time. We don't need to go so fast."

She stiffened beneath him and the anxiety in her voice was all but tangible. "I won't take chances, Dade. Please, give me what I need, before Tammy takes over."

Tammy. The reason they were here now, at least the reason Emily believed. Dade would give her fast, because until he did she wouldn't feel settled. First, though, he planned to make one thing clear. "All right, honey, but promise me you won't think about Tammy. Think about you and me. Think about how right this feels." Because it did. It felt better to be holding Emily, to be kissing Emily, than it had ever felt with a woman before. "I want *you*, Em. Not because you asked me for this, but because you've always made me feel like someone. And because you've become this beautiful, radiant woman I can't stop from touching."

Emily's eyelashes fanned against her cheeks, and he could guess by the unsteadiness of her voice that she fought back tears. "Thank you again. I know I keep saying that, but without you today would have been unbearable. Instead ... instead, it's been everything I've ever wanted."

Was she saying that she'd wanted him all these years; that she'd missed him as much as he'd come to realize he'd missed her? No, she had to mean he'd given her what she'd been wanting in general. As much as he believed the truth to be in the latter, her heartfelt words still touched deep inside him, brought a smile to his face he couldn't have pushed back if he'd wanted.

Dade peppered kisses over her breasts and upward to her collarbone, thankful she'd come into his life again, knowing that without her he might not have made it through his youth. As much as he'd hated life back then, had thought he'd been cursed with the shittiest upbringing ever, it hadn't really been as bad as all that. It hadn't because he'd had Emily and his grandma, and two more wonderful, giving people could never be found.

Forcing back the lump of emotions in his throat, he straightened. “Trust me, honey...” he took hold of the waistband of her shorts, “—you’re being here is all the thanks I need.”

Emily’s lashes raised and, for an instant, he could see the tears he’d guessed at glimmering in her eyes. Then he started to work her shorts down her legs and those tears gave way to the heat of expectation.

Dade’s hands shook with the thought of seeing her completely naked and exposed before him. He’d seen a good deal last night, but the lighting hadn’t been the greatest in the cab of his truck and he’d also done his best not to look. Now the early evening sun bled in through the dining room windows and the overhead light was on, as well, and he longed to look, to see every inch of her shapely body, to inhale her musky scent and drink her juices.

His hands came to a jarring halt mid-thigh and his thoughts evaporated and so, it seemed, did all the air in his lungs. He stood stock still, sucking in deep breaths, stunned beyond words. Emily wasn’t wearing soft cotton panties the way he’d guess she would be. She was wearing an orange and black thong with a slit down its center. She’d moved her legs together to help him in easing her shorts down. Now she pulled them apart, ever so slowly, exposing her sex to him and the blonde tangle of curls that covered it.

“Holy shit,” Dade gasped, amazed he could talk at all. “What are those?”

“Y—you like them?”

Her voice quavered and he could guess her face was red again. He wasn’t looking up to find out. Fuck, he couldn’t look up. He was glued to the erotic sight in front of him.

Did he like them? Christ yeah, he did. Liked them so damned much he couldn’t stop from reaching out and touching. Forgetting about her shorts, he captured her thighs in his hands and pressed a thumb at the thong’s opening. A rush of wetness met with the pad of his thumb as he pushed past her sodden curls to skim over her feminine lips. He dipped past the folds to the nubbin of nerves buried there and her head fell back even as her hips wrenched forward.

“Do you always wear things like this?” He still wasn’t able to take his attention away from her widespread thighs, from the honey dripping from her center, telling him how close she was to climaxing. He continued to fondle her clit, to coax her feminine lips with just enough pressure to drive her wild and send her over that soul-blistering edge.

“N—never,” Emily answered after several long seconds, her voice little more than a breathy sigh. “They’re T—Tammy’s. I just thought ... I thought you might like them.”

“You thought right.” The words sunk in then and finally Dade lifted his attention to her face. Her features showed bliss, and as tempting as it was to let her continue on the wave building inside her, he had to know one thing. “You planned this all along, to sleep with someone tonight? What if I’d said no? Would you have tried to seduce me, or would you have gone out and found another man?”

Her eyes went wide and the passion on her face fled in a heartbeat. “Oh, my gosh, no! I haven’t slept with anyone as me, as Emily, in years. I never planned to sleep with anyone ever again. But that changed when you came back. When you kissed me at the hospital, I felt something good, something I hadn’t felt before. That’s when I decided.”

He’d felt something good, too, even in that subtle brush. He’d felt something even better when she’d kissed him far more soundly moments later. And then when they’d kissed a short while ago ... well, good was putting it mildly. As much as he’d known her

answer before she'd voiced it, hearing it aloud brought sweet relief cruising through his veins, along with the need to finally give her what they both craved.

"I told you I care," Emily started up again. "I always have cared. I guess I'd ho..."

Silencing her with his mouth, with his tongue, Dade moved his thumb over her clit once more, petted the slick swollen lips of her sex; then slipped deeply inside her core. He pulled from her mouth, watched her eyes slam closed and then flare wide while the rest of her words spilled out on a rush. "I'd hoped you cared, too. That you would want me, too."

His body hummed with the admission, with the fact he wanted her too and then some. His blood sizzled as her eager vagina sucked at his thumb. He didn't move any further inside her, didn't ease back out to caress her clit. He didn't need to, because Emily was doing it all on her own. Clinging to the opposite edge of the table, her hips lifted and fell against his palm, her pelvis moving in a nonstop rhythm as her sex drew his thumb as far as it would go inside her wet channel. On a husky moan, she opened her legs wider and scooted toward him, pressing against his hand harder, grinding against his thumb with open hunger and urgency.

"Oh, my goodness, Dade," she breathed raggedly. Her breasts jostled with her erratic movements. Her long, blonde hair draped all around her shoulders and chest, making him too damned ready to feel it wrapped around him, as well. "I need more. I need you. I want you inside me now. I want to feel you making love to me."

God, she was so fucking hot, splayed out on his grandma's table, riding his thumb as if she did this sort of thing all the time. He knew better. Tammy might, but Emily didn't, and that she'd chosen him to let herself go with had his own need bursting to the limits.

"Let yourself go, Em. I want to fuck you ... make love to you ... but I won't until you come for me. Show me how much you want me, honey, and I promise to show you just how much I need you, too."

* * * *

Emily wanted that. She wanted to come for Dade so badly her body shook with it. There was just one problem... "I don't know how."

"Then I'm doing something wrong."

"N—no, you aren't." He couldn't be. She might not be sure what it felt like to climax, but it had to have something to do with the trembling of her limbs, the quiver deep down inside her belly. The fire of need chasing through her blood. "I feel like exploding, but ... I'm afraid."

His thumb stilled for an instant; then started back up. His dark blue eyes held a wealth of desire and sincerity. "There's nothing to be afraid of, honey. It's just you and me here. Let yourself go. Show me you trust me. I trust you. If we trust each other then there's nothing to fear."

She knew he was right. What she didn't know was why she'd said she was afraid in the first place. It had to be Tammy. Tammy and her endless antics had her fearful of experiencing pleasure, of becoming the woman Tammy was. That was ridiculous, because she was already going to become the woman Tammy was whether she liked it or not.

Emily shut out thoughts of Tammy, of the curse, of everything but Dade and the magic his hands worked on her body. She focused on the passion, the emotion in his

eyes, and the tidal wave of heat churning forth in every of inch of her. She'd told him she felt like exploding and that was the honest to goodness truth. She had to let go, had to explode. She couldn't hold back a second longer.

Her limbs shook, her heart squeezed tight, her breath left her altogether while a myriad of exquisite sensations she could never put into words washed over her. As the sweet friction of Dade's thumb against her sex left her to rasp over her clit, she gave into the orgasm completely and, more so, the man who'd evoked it. "I trust you, Dade. I ... trust ... you..."

Moments later, he lifted his hands from her body and grinned at her. "Better?"

She grinned back with zeal as bliss rocketed through her the likes of which she'd never experienced. If this was what it was all about, then maybe she didn't disrespect Tammy and her parade of men so much after all. Only she knew better; she'd had sex before. It wasn't like this with every man. Just one. Just Dade. "Much better. Incredibly so. That was..."

"Something you're going to repeat very soon."

She laughed at the cockiness of his tone while deep down inside her clit tingled and her sex pulsed with a fresh surge of desire. "I am?"

"Oh, yeah. Just as soon as I get you where I want you."

Dade stripped off his jeans and boxers, then pulled her to the edge of the table and stood between her thighs. His penis brushed against her damp hole through the slit in the thong, and she looked down and gulped. He wasn't as big as the guy she'd woken up with yesterday morning had been, but he was still big and her belly tightened with a fit of anxiety.

Emily opened her mouth to voice her concern. Before any words could come out, he took hold of her backside and plunged into her sheath with one hard thrust. Her eyes went wide, watered. She squeaked. Oh, gosh, he was *so* big! She could feel him all the way to her eyeballs. How in the heck had Tammy managed to fit that other guy inside her body?

Dade started to move inside her and thought fled as sensation took over. The tears of surprise and soreness vanished and rapture washed through her. Automatically, she reached for him, wrapped her arms around him and met him thrust for thrust while she found his mouth with her own. She feasted on his tongue, on the softness of lips, on the rough scrap of his stubble.

"Fuck, honey, you are so *tight*."

The harshness of his tone froze her. He didn't sound pleased. She pulled back, stilled her hips. She wanted him to want her, for this to be perfect, but she couldn't pretend if he wasn't feeling the same ecstasy that she was. "I'm sorry. I thought because of the way Tammy gets around I wouldn't be. I thought that I..."

Dade's hand on her chin cut her off. He lifted, forcing her to meet his eyes. There wasn't anger in them as she'd guessed by his tone, no trace of the shadows she'd witnessed in his eyes too many times to count. There was only affection coupled with amusement. "It's nothing to be sorry about. It's a good thing, but it also means I'm not going to be able to hold myself off for very long. Not when I've spent the last day imagining this very thing."

He had? Her heart beat faster. Her worries passed. She flung herself back at his chest, wrapped her arms around him, and rode him hard. "Then don't. I like fast. Ohhh ... my gosh," she squealed as a charge of pleasure rippled through her. "I *really* like fast. We

can go slow next time. There has to be a next time. If I'm going to die, I want it to be like this, with you."

"No talk about dying, Em. Only living. And you make me feel alive, honey, more so than I can ever remember being." The last words came out on a grunt and his movements soon mimicked hers, picking up in pace, losing the uniform tempo. Instinct took over control until they were both mindless, helpless from letting go, from giving in, from coming together in a blinding climax that Emily swore started in her pinkies and ended in her toes. A joining she knew she wanted to repeat as many times as possible before she became Tammy forever.

* * * *

He couldn't keep his eyes open a second longer. Sweet, naïve little Emily Sorenson had worn him out. Dade chuckled at the idea of Emily as sweet and naïve. In many ways, she was both. But, in many more ways, she was as he'd described her last night, sweet as sin. Not to mention twice as tasty. His cock thrummed to life at the memory of watching her face as he'd tongued her, licked at her essence as it flowed from her body. She was so beautiful. So giving. So willing to try anything. And he wished she was his for far more than one night.

He couldn't worry over that now. Or that she made him want to open himself up in a way he'd promised he would never again do with anyone outside of his grandma. Only one thing mattered at the moment. One thing that a glance at his watch revealed. It might not feel like that much time had passed, but it was already well after midnight and, judging by the way she'd acted when he'd woken Emily up just a few short minutes ago, the curse had been lifted. She wasn't a slut anymore. She was just an incredibly passionate woman who would be waking up in want of another round of sex if he didn't fall asleep soon.

* * * *

What in the hell was she doing sleeping this time of night?

The moon was out, the stars filling up the night sky, and a hunka hunka lying in bed next to her. Tammy raised an eyebrow at the stranger outlined by the light of the moon. His back was to her and, thanks to the covers falling away, she had a mighty fine view of his ass. She licked her lips and gave the left cheek a squeeze. He made a grunting sound in his sleep and rolled over onto his back. Recognition set in immediately.

Dade, he'd called himself. Dade musta been one mighty fine lay to have her back in his bed. She never went around more than once with the same boy. Things got boring way too fast—they started talking about tomorrow and all that other nonsense. But that must not have been true with this one. This one must be something special.

Only one way to find out...

Tammy moved down his body and took his cock in her hand. She gave a stroke that had it turning from flaccid to awake. Not as awake as she wanted him, though. Nah, she wanted him so awake he'd be spurting in her mouth in an instant. Then she'd let him go down on her and have a late night snack or two. She oughta make him do that first. Serve him right for conking out on her so early. Only, as she remembered, he was a difficult one. Acted like he didn't want her. Wasn't a boy alive who didn't want Tammy. He

wanted her, had already had her, or she wouldn't be lying in this bed with him, naked as she loved to be.

Giving his erection another stroke, she fit her lips over the swollen head. With her free hand, she fondled his balls while her mouth moved down his cock. His shaft pulsed between her lips and she pulled free as pre-cum lubricated the head. She licked at the gel, greedily sucking it back; then fitted her mouth over him a second time in the hopes of bringing about a whole lot more of the same.

Dade's hand fisted in her hair and gave a tug. "Sleep," he mumbled.

She had to be imagining things, because no way would he turn down a blowjob at good ol' Tammy's skilled lips. "Not on your life." He could sleep when the sun was up. Damned thing was bad for the skin anyway. Made her break out and get all rashy.

She wasn't going to think about rashes tonight. Tonight was about her and Dade.

Giving his cock a last lick, she moved to his testicles, teasing one with her fingers while she licked at the other, all but filling her mouth with the sensitive ball. Her tongue worked double-time, sucking at his balls and then moving to the base of his erection and back again. Each time his shaft jumped at her touch, her pussy swelled further, juices rolling out and down her thighs.

Impatient to get his mouth on her, his tongue buried deeply inside her, she moved back to the tip of his cock and sank her mouth all the way down to the base. His hand went back into her hair, tugged, and he grunted, "Tired."

She moaned her disgust against his erection. Tired her ass. No one got tired on Tammy. He wasn't tired and she'd prove it. Gladly, too.

Purposefully, she moved up his body, trailing her breasts along his chest, dragging her damp mound against his thigh, until she reached his mouth with hers. She sank her tongue between his lips and, guiding his cock with her hand, drove him hard inside her body. The pleasure of feeling his big member inside her was just too much to keep in. She pulled free of his mouth and let out a squeal of delight. Sitting back, she rocked against him, shifted her hips and changed angles until his shaft was hitting her clit in just the right spot. Colors flashed before her eyes and she knew she was about to come. And, God, how she loved coming.

Grabbing hold of the bed frame, she ground her sex against Dade's groin, delighting in the way the hard ridge of her mound hit the base of his shaft, the way her clit strummed against it. And then in the way her clit kept strumming against it as orgasm knifed through her body in an almost endless sea of tremors.

Dade's hands shot from her hair to grab hold of her waist. She sat back as the tremors subsided and waited for the next batch. They couldn't be far off when he was finally alert and responding.

"Christ, you're insatiable." He spoke the words like a curse, but then moved with her, pumping into her core, filling her with each deep thrust. She thought just maybe she could go on fucking him forever, but then another orgasm was upon her. An orgasm that clearly pulled at his own, as the next thing she knew he was pounding into her eye-popping hard and she was riding him back just as fast and both of them were hanging on for dear life.

Then she couldn't hang on anymore. Hell, she didn't want to. She wanted to throw her hands up in the air and shout... "Hallelujah!" Climax crashed through her and she felt it coming from Dade, too, his hot, warm seed rolling into her body and mingling with

hers. She waved her hands in the air and rode him harder still. “Yee-haw! This here’s what I’m talking about, honey muffin. This is the kind of thing ol’ Tammy’s all about.”

His jarring pumps came to a hasty halt and the room temperature seemed to gain at least ten degrees as he grabbed hold of her forearms and bellowed, “Tammy?”

She jerked her attention to his enraged expression and narrowed her gaze. No one cut Tammy’s orgasms short. No one! “Whoddya think it was, honey muffin,” she asked coolly, “the Energizer Bunny?”

The anger in his look seemed to triple in the moonlight. He pushed at her, clearly trying to get her off him, but then obviously realized it was pointless since she wasn’t going anywhere. They weren’t done yet. Not even close.

“I thought it ... you were Emily,” he ground out. “Son of a bitch, I can’t believe this. I have to get out of here. Or you do. Shit, you can’t go. You can’t take Emily’s body. She could still come back in the morning. The curse might have been wrong. Maybe tonight wasn’t the right night.”

Fuming, Tammy bit her tongue. He’d called her Emily last night and she’d let it slide. This time she wasn’t going to, because it didn’t sound like a mistake. It sounded like he had another woman on his mind. If that was the case, there was only one way to get that woman out. Fuck him until he couldn’t remember his own name, let alone someone else’s. She lifted her body free of his penis and moved down the bed, stopping when she was mouth level with his groin. She took his damp shaft in her hand and worked her palm up the base, certain she could get it back to life with little trouble at all. It just took finesse. If there was one thing ol’ Tammy had, then it was finesse. “I ain’t going nowhere, honey muffin, neither are you, so I suggest you lay back, enjoy the suck, and tell me what’s so damned special about this Emily broad.”

CHAPTER FIVE

What was so special about Emily? Was she fucking kidding him?

No, she wasn't kidding, Dade realized, grinding his teeth against the feel of her hand on his shaft and the way her gaze was zeroing in on it, as well. She was Tammy. The slut. A woman who wouldn't understand feelings if they slammed her in the face. He had to get her hands off him and now. It was bad enough he'd already done the unthinkable and slept with her. He'd thought she was Emily. How he could ever have made that mistake was beyond him. Emily wouldn't have pushed him into having sex when he'd told her twice how tired he was, she wouldn't have gone straight for his cock when his mouth was inches away from hers. Her body sure as hell would've been tighter when she slid around him then Tammy's had been.

Damn it, he should have known better!

Dade's temper shot to the boiling point. He bit out, "Everything about Emily is special. She's sweet, caring, beautiful. She's everything you could never imagine being."

Tammy stopped the pumping of her hand and looked up at him through eyes gone dead. "What're you saying, honey muffin, you don't think Tammy's beautiful?"

Considering she looked exactly like Emily, he should, but he didn't. Tammy didn't have the sparkle of life in her eyes, the touch of guilelessness in her features. She didn't even come close to having Emily's passion. "I don't think you're *anything*. I don't even think you're real." He jerked to a sitting position and captured her hand in his, pried it free of his body, and pushed her away from him. He came to his feet and scowled back at her. "It's time for you to go home. Past time. You live next door, in case you've forgotten."

Tammy rose up on her knees, planted her hands on her hips, and shook her head. The wild, blonde hair he'd loved on Emily stuck out like the devil's horns on her shameless alter ego. "I already told you I ain't going nowhere, so you might as well stop acting like a lovesick fool and get your fine ass back in bed."

He hadn't planned to listen to a word that came out of Tammy's mouth. Believed it would be nothing but nonsensical rambling meant to get him back in her arms or, knowing Tammy as he was quickly coming to, between her legs. But one of them was too much to ignore.

Lovesick she'd called him.

Was that how he was acting? Was that the name for the feeling that had seized him the instant he realized Tammy had taken control Emily's body? Judging by the knotting in his gut, the near painful constriction in his chest, it had to be. After his experience with his parents—the way as a young boy he'd ignorantly given them his love and they'd thrown it back in his face again and again—he'd never planned to love anyone ever again. He loved his grandma, yes, but that was different. She was special, one of a kind. A woman he simply couldn't forbid from taking up residence in his heart. And so, it seemed, was Emily, because... "You might not have a clue, lady, but you're right about one thing. I am lovesick, and it sure as hell isn't over you."

Tammy tipped her head to the side and eyed him with something akin to stupefaction. "Whatcha trying to tell me, honey muffin?"

Was she that obtuse, or did she just need to hear the words to finally get it through her thick skull he wasn't coming back to bed? "I'm trying to tell you that I love Emily. That you might look like her, might even feel like her to some extent, but you aren't her, and you never will be."

Tammy's disbelieving look faded to one of denial. She gave her head another shake, screeched out, "You can't! You can't love Emily! You don't mean it!"

"Yeah, I do. I only wish I could've realized it sooner. I wish I could have told her the truth." But he hadn't. He'd been afraid to acknowledge the feelings Emily stirred in him so easily after all these years. He'd been a damned fool and now it was too late.

Dade wanted to believe to the contrary, wanted to keep Tammy here with him in the hopes that when the sun came up she would become Emily again, but he couldn't do that. He already knew she wouldn't change back. That hope was nothing more than a senseless desire.

His mother had finally gotten even with Emily's parents.

Only she'd managed to do a lot more than that. She'd also destroyed Emily's and Dade's lives. The first she'd probably hoped for, the second was dumb luck, but he could guess it would delight the cold-hearted bitch all the same. She was probably in hell right now, having a laugh at the expense of his asinine heart. Maybe he wasn't giving her enough credit. Maybe she'd planned his downfall from the start, as well, planned on toying with his emotions until there was no going back. Maybe it was the reason she'd written the false information on lifting Emily's curse in her journal and left it along with the rest of her shit.

There were just too damned many maybes and only one truth. Emily was gone and he needed to be the same. He had to get the hell out of here and pretend like he'd never come back to Lone Pine in the first place, pretend like Emily had never been in his life, this weekend or ever. He could do it; after all, he'd done the same thing with his parents for fifteen long years.

Dade moved to the doorway and flipped on the light. He turned back to find Tammy sitting motionless on the bed. She looked defeated, in a daze. He couldn't wonder over her sudden mood swing, couldn't wonder for even a second if there might be a semblance of Emily hidden deep down inside her somewhere—that hope would break his heart even more than it already was. He could only leave and do his best to forget.

"I have to go." She didn't so much as flinch at the words, didn't even say goodbye as he grabbed his suitcase and left the bedroom. He went into the dining room, turned on the light, and pulled on the clothes he'd discarded just before he'd made love to Emily.

God, Emily. Sweet, naïve Emily. Emily who hadn't done a thing wrong in her entire life outside of being born to parents who'd vexed his mother.

Emotions pricked at the back of Dade's eyes. Shaking then off, he moved into the living room. A loud meow reached him as he was scooping the paperwork he'd attempted to go over last night into the top of his suitcase. In a black and white blur, Gigantimo jumped onto the couch and peered at him through angry yellow eyes. Fuck, he hadn't even thought about feeding the cat today. The thing was so huge it wouldn't starve without food, but he still felt guilty about the oversight. Just as he felt guilty about deserting his grandma's house when he'd promised to watch it for her, had driven numerous hours to do just that.

The house would be okay for a day or two without anyone around, but he couldn't take any chances with Gigantimo. Not when he knew how much his grandma loved the cat.

Tammy had yet to emerge from the bedroom and he hoped to hell she stayed put long enough for him to get out of Lone Pine altogether. All he needed was to pack a few of Gigantimo's things and they could be on their merry way. Okay, right about now merry was pushing things by a long damned shot.

Refusing to dwell on his misery, Dade hurried into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of cans of cat food from the fridge. He set them in front of the microwave and was going back for a second handful when the neon green numbers on the microwave caught his attention.

He stopped short. "What in the hell? How can it only be twelve thirteen?"

It had been six to one the last time he'd checked his watch. It was the reason he'd thought Emily was cured. That she wouldn't become Tammy ever again, let alone forever.

The insistent knotting in his gut intensified tenfold as he turned his attention to his watch. The miniature clock face looked back at him, mocking him as it showed a two hour difference from the microwave clock. Two hours later. He darted back out to the living room, checking the wall clock there, even though he already knew it was pointless. He already knew what he'd done. He'd judged Emily's behavior based on midnight Chicago time, which wasn't even close to midnight Colorado time. Midnight Colorado time had only rolled around a short while ago, and with it had come Tammy the harlot forever.

Dade pushed a hand through his hair, blew out a hard breath. "Fuck, this just sucks."

He had to get out of here, had to quit think about Emily, Tammy. His mother. The curse. Everything.

He returned to the kitchen, found a plastic bag and filled it with the cans of cat food. He tossed the bag in the top of his suitcase; then zipped it shut and grabbed hold of the handle. With his free hand, he scooped up Gigantimo. The cat let out an agitated hiss and bit down on the hand Dade had injured when he'd broken into Emily's house last night.

He hadn't given the cuts any consideration in the last day, and he wasn't going to think about the pain that came with the cat's teeth connecting with the barely healed-over wounds now. What he was going to do was hiss right back. "You can spit all you want and piss in my truck, too, as far as I'm concerned. Even if it means driving you all the way back here to appease Grandma, I don't care. I can't stay here another damned minute."

* * * *

"I don't think this is a good idea." Emily bit back the wave of nausea that passed through her at the thought of seeing Dade again. He was going to be furious with her for coming here. The way he'd run off the night they'd made love told her that much, guaranteed he hadn't been looking for anything more with her than casual sex. Even if it had felt like more, like something incredible and lasting and real, it hadn't been. She ought to have that truth through her head by now, given she'd spent the last two and half weeks plus repeating it.

“Nonsense, Emmy,” Joy tsked as she made her way up the stone path to Dade’s stunning log home. It was less than a half hour outside of the city and yet set so deeply in the canvas of trees that, between the surroundings and the style of the house itself, it made Emily feel like they were back in the rural areas of Colorado. “I’ve told you again and again how much Dade misses you. He’s not going to believe his eyes when he sees you at his home.”

Laughter bubbled up with Joy’s word choice, sedating Emily’s anxiety. Her friend was right about that much, at least. Before Dade felt anger he was bound to feel awe. Goodness knows Emily had experienced an overdose of it when she’d woken up at his grandmother’s house the morning of her twenty-seventh birthday and realized she wasn’t Tammy.

She hadn’t turned in to Tammy even once since then. She ought to be on top of the world to think somehow the curse had been lifted. Instead, her moments of happiness were bittersweet at best. The things she’d managed to entertain herself with in the past no longer appealed to her. She’d always known her life wasn’t perfect, but she’d never realized the extent of its imperfections. Not until Dade returned to Lone Pine and made that fact startlingly clear.

Oh, gosh, how she’d missed him.

And that was exactly why she shouldn’t be here now. Because in about ten seconds he was going to open his front door and she’d want to rush right into his arms. And he wouldn’t want her there. He couldn’t. Not after the way he’d left her without even saying goodbye.

Joy reached the front door first and was already rapping on it by the time Emily stood beside her on the porch. Less than her predicted ten seconds had passed when the door was pulled open. Emily stepped to the side and held her breath, prayed that Dade didn’t see her, that the cement at her feet would crack apart and pull her into it. That the telephone would start ringing and he would have to run back into the house and get it. Anything. Just so long as he didn’t notice her.

“Grandma, what are you doing here? I told you I would bring Gigantimo, er, Irvin home soon. My schedule’s just been too busy to do so yet.”

Emily couldn’t see him yet, just the toes of one large, bare foot. They were sexy toes, too. Toes she’d gotten to know intimately less than a month ago. Toes that the memory of tickling had heartache bursting up inside her. Then there was the effect his deep voice had on her, made her feel warm, tingly and desirable all at once.

“I know that, sweetie,” Joy said, stepping partially into the house and making Dade’s toes retreat in the process, “and I’m sure you’re taking good care of Irvin.” She chuckled softly. “Sounds like you’ve even given him a pet name of your own. I just wanted to see you, and bring you a present.”

“You should have called. I would’ve made it a point to come out next weekend.”

Joy let go a long sigh. “Sure you would have. You never came out for fifteen years, Dade, why would I think you’d want to come back so soon?”

“I would have.”

“Well, now you don’t have to, because we came here.”

“We?” The speculation in his voice had Emily’s anxiety returning in an instant. She forgot all about looking for the return of his toes and glanced around for a place to take

cover. So far Dade had stayed in the house and therefore hadn't caught sight of her, but, by the sounds of things, Joy was about to make her presence known.

"Me and your present," Joy said, sending Emily's heart in to a flurry of palpitations.

"It's alive?" Dade asked dubiously. "Please don't tell me it's furry. It's been ... interesting ... having Irvin around, but I don't know that I'm ready for a pet full-time."

Joy released a tinkling laugh and stepped backward onto the front porch. She glanced in Emily's direction and smiled. "She's not too furry, but she does have a good deal of hair. Something tells me you like it, though."

"She? What the hell—heck—are you talking about?"

Oh, my goodness, this was it! If she were going to flee, then she'd best do it now. Only she couldn't. She'd already come all this way and, now that she was here, she had to know the way Dade felt about her. Had to hear the words come out of his mouth.

As if he sensed Emily's thoughts, he stepped out onto the porch and followed his grandmother's gaze right to her. Incredulity flashed over his face; then was taken over by something that looked a whole lot like exasperation.

Emily's belly tightened. Her heart squeezed. She took a step back and was preparing to go much farther, away from his home completely, when his mouth opened and he asked, "Tammy?"

The tightening of her belly loosened slightly as she understood his look wasn't meant for her, but another woman. One who no longer existed. One who hadn't really existed in the first place.

Nervously licking her lips, she forced herself to take three steps toward him, then managed a low, "Do you *want* me to be Tammy?"

He shook his head, his gaze roaming from her feet to her face. "No," he finally admitted, "I don't. But you can't be..." He broke off, shook his head again.

Where he couldn't seem to say the words, she couldn't keep them in. Now that she'd started, she wasn't stopping until everything on her mind was out. Until she knew the truth for certain. "Emily?" At his nod, she continued, "I didn't think so either, but I am. I've been Emily now for almost three weeks. Tammy's gone, Dade. I don't know how it happened, but the curse was lifted that night we..." Heat raced into her cheeks with the thought of all that they'd done. The nerves in her belly were replaced with an altogether different sensation, one that had her blood pumping harder and her mouth going cotton dry.

"The weekend when you were in Lone Pine," she finally finished.

* * * *

Dade was tempted to go back in the house and wash his eyes clean. He couldn't really be seeing Emily on his doorstep. It just wasn't possible. He'd seen Tammy the day of Emily's birthday, damn it. He'd slept with the slut. Had felt guilty as hell about it ever since. "I don't understand, either. I tried to lift it. I thought I had, but it didn't work. I..."

"Perhaps it just took saying the right words."

The soft sound of his grandma's voice startled him. He'd forgotten she was standing next to him, he was so caught up in the sight of Emily. He looked to her now, allowed his confusion to flow over into his words. "What do you mean?"

"You read your mother's journal?"

"Yes. I know she was the one who cursed Emily."

"She was?" Emily gasped.

He glanced back at her and the shock in her eyes. He wanted to go to her, haul her into his arms, and apologize for everything his mother had put her through. He couldn't do that. Not when he didn't even know why she was here in the first place, let alone how. "I'm sorry, Em. I couldn't tell you about it. The only way to lift the curse was to make you ... want me on your own, not because doing it would mean curing you."

"Just as I couldn't tell you," Grandma Joy said. "It took more to cure Emmy than ... well, what you tried. It took words backed up with feelings. I knew if you read that part in the journal, you'd say them, you'd try to feel them, but it took more than trying. It took the real thing."

Dade narrowed his gaze at his grandma. "What are you talking about? What words?"

"You might have noted part of your mother's writing had been covered over?"

"Yeah, I figured she'd made a mistake." Only that didn't sound like what his grandma was trying to say. Whatever she was trying to say had his gut coiled with tension and anticipation weighing heavily on his shoulders.

"It was no mistake. While I don't always like to admit it, your mother was my daughter, Dade. She received her powers from me, just as you received yours from her."

His gut tensed further. He hadn't been able to stop wondering about that for the last three weeks now, if his grandma had powers. He also couldn't stop wondering about his own abilities. Still, he didn't want to hear this. "I don't have powers."

Grandma Joy reached out a comforting hand and placed it on his shoulder. "You do, sweetie, but only if you want them. You don't have to accept them. I rarely use mine and never for evil."

"If that's true," Emily asked, her voice thick with emotion, her expression one of wonder as she took in all that was being said, "if you have the ability to do the same kind of thing Dade's mom did to me, why couldn't you reverse the curse?"

Joy turned sympathetic eyes on her. "I wanted to, Emmy, more than you could ever know. It just wasn't possible. One witch can't reverse the hex of another."

"Witch?" Emily repeated almost silently. She looked to Dade. "You're a witch? Does that mean you can make people feel things they don't? Make them want to do things they normally wouldn't? Did you affect what happened between us?"

"No. Christ, no, Em. You have to know me better than that." She did. She knew the real him, in a way only his grandma had ever tried to get to know him. Emily might not be looking at him that way now, but he knew it deep down inside.

"Dade didn't know until today, Emmy. As he said, to lift the curse, your wanting him, caring about him, had to be real. Just as my desire to help you was. I couldn't reverse the hex. I couldn't even change the way it was lifted. I had to rely on you and Dade. On the way the two of you had always gotten on in the past. I had to pray that you would still get on that way, only in a much more grown-up fashion." Joy turned to Dade, a wealth of emotions in her eyes. "I did the only thing I could. I whited out the lines in your mother's journal that said the person lifting the curse not only had to be with her physically, but had to love her, as well. They had to admit it aloud and mean it. Since Emily is here, I'm presuming you must have done that."

"You did?"

The question once more left Emily's mouth on a gasp, but this time her expression wasn't one of wariness or wonder, but wistfulness. Dade forgot about his grandma's

words and focused on that look, on the hope that welled with him. He couldn't give in to that hope yet, not until the complete truth was out. Until she knew what he'd done. "Yes, I did, but not until after midnight. I said it to Tammy. Not about her, but about you. It was too late by then."

"No," Grandma Joy assured, "the process of lifting the curse had already started when you two were together. After that, you had the rest of the day to admit how you felt."

This time Dade couldn't ignore his grandma's words. He looked at her, torn between the urge to laugh and to pray, both with relief. "Then it's gone? She's Emily forever?"

"She is, sweetie." The euphoria that rocketed through Dade was reflected in his grandma's face. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek; then did the same to Emily before moving to the open front door. "Now, if you don't mind, I've missed my baby. I'm going to find him."

Joy disappeared inside the house, closing the door behind her. Dade looked back at Emily to find her shifting uncomfortably and color streaking her cheeks. Judging by her tight-lipped expression, she was speechless. He couldn't blame her, because he suddenly felt the same way.

"Um, hi," she finally said.

The little-too-late choice of words had him chuckling. "Hi yourself," he said when his laughter died away. He moved closer to Emily. Not as close as he'd like to be, but close enough to see the emotions swirling through her big green eyes, the glisten of her lips where she'd licked them with her nervousness. The soft rise and fall of her breasts beneath her pale pink T-shirt. His body responded automatically to that subtle movement and he almost laughed again.

Three weeks had passed and not one single woman had so much as made him look twice. One quick glance in Emily's direction and he wanted to keep looking forever. He also wanted to touch. To taste those sweet lips of her. "You look good, Em. Really good."

Her throat worked visibly as she asked in a breathy voice, "Edible good?"

Dade almost choked at the way the catch in her tone affected his body further yet, had his shaft rising to life with bone deep awareness. "What?"

"That's what I thought when I first saw you at the hospital that day, that you looked edible good. I'd never thought that way about a man before. I still feel that way about you."

She spoke the words with no stammer, only heightened color in her cheeks and hunger in her eyes. Hunger he felt in every fiber of his being. Hunger for so much more than just the physical. Hunger to pull her into his arms and never let go. "Yeah, you do look edible good. Better than I ever remember a woman looking."

Emily opened her mouth as if to respond, but then shut it again and only stared at him for the longest while. Finally, she said, "I need to ask you something, Dade, and I need you to tell me the truth no matter what. Promise me you will."

"I would never lie to you, honey. You have to know that about me."

"I do. I just ... I guess I'm nervous." But if she was it didn't stop her from plodding on, "Did you mean what you said to Tammy that night? Joy made it sound like you had to *mean* it in order for the curse to be lifted, but maybe the words just needed to be said, not meant. Maybe the only reason those words even came out of your mouth is because

you thought I was gone. Maybe it was survivor's guilt talking. I know you might care about me, but love is a pretty big..."

"I meant it, Emily."

Her mouth hung open and, once again, she stared at him. This time words seemed to elude her altogether. Dade took advantage of the silence, saying the one thing that had weighed on him for way too long. "I slept with Tammy. I didn't mean to. I didn't want to. She woke me up that night and I was tired, really tired, and I thought it was you. If I'd known ... hell, I didn't. It's the reason I left you. Had I known there was even a chance you would come back to me, I never would've left. I just couldn't stay there with *her* another second. I'm so sorry, honey."

An expression he couldn't place settled on Emily's face as she asked in a tight voice, "You slept with Tammy?"

He nodded, hating to have to admit it again. "By mistake, I swear."

"You slept with Tammy because you thought she was me?" Emily voice grew tighter yet, her expression pinched.

She looked like she might be about to break into tears. Damn, he would never be able to handle that. To know he'd hurt her that badly even if it really hadn't been his fault. "Yes. I did. And I have regretted it every day since."

Her expression grew further pinched still, her eyes going almost completely closed, her mouth firming into a tight line that had the dimples he adored all but fading from sight. Then, to his amazement, she broke out in laughter.

When the rolling waves of laughter passed, she smiled at him, her dimples back on high. "Dade, Tammy was me. I was Tammy. She might have had a different personality, but it was still me. Still my body. If I blame anyone, which I don't because it was me you slept with for all intents and purposes, then it would be Tammy."

Shaking his head at the words, at the way she'd passed off something that had plagued him for weeks, he went to her and did the one thing he'd been aching to do for way too long. Pulled her into his arms. "I love you, Em."

"Me, too," she mumbled against his chest. She tipped back her head then and looked up at him through eyes filled with sincerity. "I mean ... I love you, too. I think I always have."

"You do realize this could be the longest distance relationship ever?"

"There's been further, but I don't want it to be long distance anyway. I don't like Lone Pine much, Dade. Some of the people are nice, like your grandmother obviously, but most of them aren't. Most of them are pretty mean. I was afraid to leave it behind before because it was all I ever knew. I'm not afraid anymore. I want to know something else. I want to know this house, this city. I want to know that the shadows are out of your eyes forever the way they are right now. I want to make your days not quite so boring. You work too hard, I could tell just from the things you told me that night at dinner. I want to change that for you. I want to show you how much more there is to life than just work and..."

"Emily, honey, you won your case a long time ago, so quit your foolish rambling and kiss me already."

"Then I can stay here with you?"

"There isn't any 'can' about it, Em. If you don't stay here with me, I'm going to move back to Lone Pine and curse you with my presence until you let me be with you."

“You love me so much you would put a spell on me? That’s so sweet, Dade.”

He stiffened; then chuckled. That wasn’t quite what he’d meant by curse. Maybe someday he would consider that particular kind of curse, but not today. Today was all about Emily and making up for lost time. “You’re the sweet one, honey. Probably far sweeter than what I deserve. I don’t care, though, I’m having you anyway. Matter of fact, I’d have you right here if I wasn’t afraid Grandma and Gigantimo would walk out at any second and catch us.”

Emily laughed, her eyes lighting with love and mirth, then something else. Something just a little naughty. She licked her lips and raised a blonde eyebrow. “Does your dining room door happen to have a lock on it? If so, maybe you could introduce me to your table.”

Chuckling, Dade held her tighter and brought his mouth to hers, parted her lips and savored the taste of her. The warmth, the sweetness that was his Emily, whether it be the gentle, caring variety she’d shown him in her youth, or the far more sinfully tempting kind she’d shown him three weeks ago. Both were what made her the unique woman she was, the one he couldn’t manage going another day without, and he planned to spend the rest of his life getting to know both sides of her until there was nothing more to learn.

The End

About the Author:

A lifelong Michigander, Jodi Lynn Copeland lives near the state's capital on thirty acres of recreational farmland and woodland with her husband and children (both human and four-legged). She loves the outdoors and tries to spend as much time in them as possible. Since writing her first book more than a decade ago, she has completed numerous stories that span the range of genres and sensuality levels. Jodi’s books have received various awards and commendations, including 4½ Star Top Pick reviews from RT BOOKclub, Recommended Reads from The Road To Romance and Reviewer’s International Organization (RIO), and being selected as a finalist for the Scarlett Letter Sensual Romance Contest and the National Reader’s Choice Award Contest in 2004.

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