

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

M.A. Ellis

Love's Choice

Syneca

The Lovers

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Love's Choice

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LOVE'S CHOICE

M.A. Ellis

Dedication

For my son who teasingly tells me he never wants to hear the word “hunk” again and my daughter who rubs her hands together with anticipation and says, “Keep them coming.” You two have put a smile on my face for the past twenty-two years and I love you more than life itself.

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To the fine folks of coastal Mississippi. While it’s been years since I called Ocean Springs my home, I’ve never forgotten your welcoming natures, despite the fact that I was most certainly a crazy Northerner. Your women are strong, your men charming and your hearts are the biggest I’ve ever encountered. Thank you for your fine examples of Southern hospitality. You have provided me with many happy memories and tons of inspiration.

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The Lovers

Overtly, The Lovers represents the deep, soul-mate type of relationship. But it can also offer the possibility of the need to make a difficult personal choice—one that might or might not have a thing to do with love. It can indicate a moral or ethical intersection. The card suggests that once at a decision-making point, one should turn inward and let one's heart help determine what is truly important, then a choice will most likely be quite easy.

Chapter One

"Hey, Tawny."

"Hey, yourself. How's the vacation going?"

"Sucky. I'm only an hour out, I've driven exactly three miles in the last two and a half hours and my bladder's ready to explode." Claire Arnet eased her white convertible onto the shoulder of the interstate until she could see around the eighteen-wheeler creeping along in front of her.

"Major accident?"

"Must be. They're diverting the entire highway. The good news is I can see the exit."

"The bad news?"

"The bathroom line at the nearest gas station is going to be horrendous. Do you think a nice, crisp twenty will get me to the front of the line?"

Claire listened to her best friend's laughter echo through the cell phone.

"What? Now that you're on the verge of celebrity you can't use the men's room anymore?"

"Hey," Claire warned with a smile of her own. "That was one time. I'm not a habitual potty gender bender, you know. And I'm not famous."

"You will be," Tawny said. "If you decide to accept their offer."

Claire mentally cheered when she made it to the exit ramp and tried to push her friend's comment from her mind. She didn't want to think about anything at the moment except a quick bathroom break and the remaining two-hundred-plus miles she had to drive to reach nirvana.

"You can make it without them, Claire. You don't need their help. You're the greatest custom graphics artist on Jax Beach...in Florida...in the entire southeast."

"I love your faith in me, Tawn. It's never-ending and I do appreciate it."

"It's the truth, sweetie."

"Hey, I need to pay attention, Tawn. The police are detouring traffic to the right. I'm gonna let you go."

"Go left, Claire."

"What?" She maneuvered to the other side of the truck and looked at the wide open left fork.

"I just had a flash."

Oh, great. Tawny and her “flashes” were a force to be reckoned with. One that generally couldn’t be ignored because the conduit of said flashes wouldn’t let up until acquiescence was reached.

“Go the opposite way, Claire.”

“And what if there isn’t a restroom that way? If I piss my panties on this brand-new leather you’re paying for the cleaning, Nostradamus.”

“Just do it. And no Nike comments that will undoubtedly segue into the professional basketball players and their hotness topic which will then lead to thoughts of those yummy boxer brief ads.”

“You know me too well.” Claire laughed, pulled around the truck and drove to the stop sign. She turned left and in less than a hundred yards a small service station sat back from the road. The hair on the back of her neck rose, but only for a second. After six years of friendship she was used to it. “I don’t need to tell you that you were right. I’m pulling in now. I’ll call you back later.”

Claire spun into a parking space and refrained from running, thrilled the store was nearly empty. When she exited the tiny room the line was backed out the door.

“Great idea,” a woman said before yelling next to Claire’s ear. “George, did you get directions?”

Claire turned toward the counter and saw an elderly man wave impatiently. She caught the end of his conversation with the clerk and grabbed a pack of gum and placed it and a dollar on the counter.

“Could you tell me if there’s another way back to the interstate without following the traffic?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am, there is,” the freckled-faced clerk said, ringing up the gum. “Turn right out of the lot and go through the caution light. When you get to the traffic signal turn right again. That takes you straight back to ninety-five. Here’s your change.”

Claire took the coins and stuck them in the pocket of her cotton skirt and walked back to the car. She pulled up to the gas pump and filled the tank, watching more than a few cars head in the direction the clerk had suggested. Nothing wrong with a little detour from the detour. *Not if it gets me wrapped in seaweed and cocooned in a thermal blanket that much sooner.*

She slid behind the wheel and pulled out of the lot. Seven days and six nights at the plushiest mountain resort in the southeast awaited her tired body and confused mind. In no time she was rolling away from the populated exit and into the rural landscape. She needed a break from the stress that had built over the past six months and was being forced to a head.

The car hummed and she wished she had put the top down. She waited for a passing zone and blew by an old, dusty pickup truck. The houses became more and more isolated and despite the sunny day she shivered and picked up her phone to dial Tawny.

"Are you on your way?" her friend asked.

"Listen. According to the road sign I'm fourteen miles from Haisville, Georgia, so if you don't hear from me again you'll know where to have them start the search."

"Stop it," Tawny laughed. "You're the one who wanted to head to the boonies."

"Yeah. But I expected to hear the soothing tones of Zen instrumentals, not the sound of 'Dueling Banjos'," Claire replied, only half joking. She closed in quickly on the truck in front of her. "I'm currently stuck behind some guy going exactly the speed limit, pulling a boat named...oh, this is sweet...*Playin' Grab-Bass*."

"Ooooo. Is he one of those authentic Southern cutie pies? Not like the posers down here. I'm talking about the real cuties. The ones with refined manners and a body designed in heaven and chiseled to earthly perfection from toiling away in the hot summer sun?"

"I haven't a clue and in about three seconds he's going to be a blur. Hang on." Claire dropped the phone onto her lap, pressed the gas pedal and felt the surge of power. There really was nothing like two hundred twenty-seven horses under the hood of a sexy little car. She checked her rearview mirror before sliding back across the double line, leaving the big silver Dodge Ram in her wake. She picked up the phone and held it to her ear. "I'm back."

"So was he CPS?"

"CPS?"

"Cutie pie status?"

"Nope. Not at all."

"You didn't even look, did you?" Tawny asked, the disappointment clear in her voice.

"I am not on a stud quest, Tawn. Somewhere in the distance there's an aromatic sea salt scrub with my name on it. That's way more alluring than a McConaughey look-alike."

"He looked like Matthew McConaughey?" Claire pulled the phone away from her ear and grimaced.

"Did you just squeal?" she asked.

"Turn around, you crazy bitch. Go back there and convince him you're more tempting than a giant wave off the California coast and offer to let him ride you."

"I told you I didn't even look at him. He did have a sweet paint job, though. And a Hemi."

"Your priorities in life are all fucked up, you know that, don't you, Claire?" Silence stretched over the phone. "Just be careful. And don't try to break any land speed records. Call me when you're in for the night, sweetie."

"Okay, Mom. Bye."

Claire flipped the phone closed and dropped it into the cup holder, smiling when a flashing yellow light came into view. She slowed down and eased through a crossroads that boasted a bar, a feed store, an abandoned Texaco station and a coin-operated laundry. The latter seemed odd. Or maybe not. It was the perfect spot for a person wanting to throw in their overalls, pick up some rabbit chow and have a few cold ones while they waited for the rinse cycle to end. It was such a true piece of Americana that, if she had brought her camera, she would have stopped and taken a picture.

Claire would never admit it to city-born-and-bred Tawny but she had always felt at peace in the country. Maybe not such *deep* country as she was experiencing at the moment, but the small city in Indiana where she had grown up, could certainly be considered rural. At least by Jacksonville standards. She loved the unending activity the city offered but every now and again she had a hankering to toss her Lugz aside and run barefoot through some tall, cool grass.

The red-hued soil made famous in more than a few Southern ballads dotted the vista beyond her windshield and she pressed the gas harder. In no time she came upon a sign heralding Haisville was a mere two miles away. She assumed that was where she'd make the right turn back toward the interstate. Back toward civilization. Back toward a four-handed hot stone massage. The thought of warm river rock sliding over her oiled body prompted a sound of sheer longing. Her moan deepened when she looked into her rearview mirror and saw the flashing blue lights.

"Where the hell did he come from?" She applied her brakes and drifted to a stop in front of a vacant ice cream stand. She glanced in the mirror and saw that the officer remained seated in his patrol car, mic to his mouth. She pulled her sunglasses from her face and set them on the dashboard.

Claire watched his door open and dug through her purse to find her wallet. She reached over and popped the glove compartment open, pulled out the registration and turned to find herself blinded by the sunlight bouncing off the man's huge belt buckle. She squinted and looked slowly up his lanky frame and saw her reflection in his aviators.

"Where you off to in such a hurry, sugar?"

Sugar? You have got to be shitting me. Claire gritted her teeth and smiled.

"I'm trying to get back to the interstate, Officer. They shut down the highway and forced everyone to detour."

"Heard about that. Semi full of salsa did a double roll. Heck of a mess. License and registration, please."

That's better. She handed her info over and placed her hands on the steering wheel. Her brother was a state trooper. She knew all the right moves to ensure she didn't appear threatening or disrespectful. There was no Georgia state shield on this man's uniform and Claire assumed he was a local authority. With any luck, a little kindness would result in nothing more than a warning.

"Do you know how fast you were going, Miss?"

"I believe I was possibly five miles over the speed limit, Officer." She had no idea how fast she'd been traveling. Those thoughts of tandem hands easing away her aches had truly distracted her. She watched his lips draw into a thin line and knew she was in trouble.

"You were traveling at a rate of seventy-two miles per hour and had just crossed into a forty-five zone." His brow furrowed and then carefully swept over the lines of the convertible. "We have a number of children who ride their bikes on this road every day."

"I'm sorry, sir. I really wasn't thinking." *Oh shit. This is not going well.*

"Step out of the car, please."

"Excuse me?" Her heart started thumping wildly. She quickly pressed her finger onto the door lock button but it disappeared from her grasp as he pulled the lock up and swung her door wide open.

"I'd like you to step out of the car and move around to the back."

She gripped the wheel tighter and swallowed against the lump in her throat. "I don't feel comfortable doing that, Officer..." she looked at his name tag, "Bradley."

She totally expected him to unsnap the thin leather strap that secured his revolver and force her at gunpoint. Instead, he reached one huge hand toward her, palm up. What sort of overzealous cop offered someone their hand? If all the B movies were to be believed, he should be grabbing her arm in a bruising grip and hauling her into the woods to have his way with her, or forcing her to her knees right there in the middle of State Route 419, or cuffing her and taking her back to the local jail where he and his cousin/deputy would both have their way with her.

"Out of the car, missy. I want a better look."

Her stomach clenched. Claire ignored his hand and turned cautiously in her seat. She could see a pair of headlights down the road she had just traveled. *Okay, this is good. Everything's going to be fine. I'll just get out of the car and wave for help.* She eased out of the car and hurried around the back. To her surprise, Officer Bradley did not fling her up against her trunk and demand she spread 'em. He slid into the driver's seat.

"What are you doing?" she asked openmouthed, but kept her distance.

"I've seen these babies in magazines. Pretty hot for an American make. The retractable hardtop is supposed to be really somethin'."

Claire watched him run his hands over the back of the passenger seat, across the dashboard, around the leather steering wheel.

"Come on up here, sugar. Show me how to drop the top."

Holy crap. Her mind had been flashing visions of back-road debauchery when she should have been more in tune to an Andy Griffith mind meld. She leaned down by the open door and he turned and flashed an expectant smile that transformed his entire face and reminded her of her four-year-old nephew opening his birthday gifts.

"You have to shut the door, turn the car on and hold this button down until it says 'top move complete' then let go." She backed up and pushed the door closed. *Unbelievable*. Who would have thought it was as simple as boys and their toys.

She watched the trunk reverse open and the top of the car slowly retract, glancing now and again at the cop's animated face. She heard the crunch of tires on gravel and turned to find the silver Ram she had passed pulling to a stop beside her.

The tinted passenger window lowered and she heard his voice before she saw him.

"Everything okay, ma'am?" His deep Southern drawl had her leaning forward to look inside. She saw her wide-eyed reflection in the blue lenses of his sunglasses and slowly closed her mouth.

His chestnut brown, wavy-curly hair brushed just below his ears and when he pulled the glasses off his face, Claire caught her breath. He actually *did* share a few facial features with the drop-dead gorgeous actor. His face was rugged and rectangular, a strong jaw covered with stubble and his eyes! They were a bright, bright blue and the creases at the corners deepened as he leaned toward her and smiled.

"You might have made a big mistake letting Brad slink behind the wheel of that beauty."

Claire watched as he slid his well muscled arm along the back of the seat and gripped the passenger-side headrest. His fingers were long, his nails neat and clean. Those fingers flexed and she noticed the way his forearm tightened. It matched the gripping stab of desire that shot through her and came to rest between her thighs.

"I really didn't have a choice," she said, looking up to find his smile a lot wider.

"You always have a choice, darlin'."

Collyer Evans turned the engine off and hopped out of his truck. He knew the minute the sleek convertible with Florida plates blew by him that it wouldn't be long before he saw it pulled over along the roadside. He walked around the front of his vehicle and made a concentrated effort at peeking inside the car instead of giving the dark-haired beauty who had poked her cute little face into his cab a thorough once-over.

"Hey, Brad."

"Hey, C.J. Take a look, buddy."

Yeah. I'd like to if I could pull it off as a casual glance and not some lascivious stare. It was the outline of her curvy body that had prompted him off the road and into the lot.

Coll rested his hands along the top of the door and gave a low whistle. "Pretty sweet."

"Yes sir. Listen to this." Brad raced the gas a few times then let the car idle. "Hear that, C.J.? Purrs sweeter than a horny cheerleader on prom night."

"That's it."

Coll heard the disgust in her voice and quickly spun around. She wasn't happy with that remark, no doubt about it. He moved closer and saw her eyes were a shade lighter than his and narrowed dangerously. She had crossed her arms over her ample breasts and he had spent enough time surrounded by women to know a bad thing when it was coming.

Without a second thought he grasped her upper arms lightly and turned her, his legs brushing hers as he two-stepped her back against the side of his truck. "Let him go, darlin'. This is probably the highlight of his year."

Her eyes widened and then flashed with something a little more elemental than annoyance. *Shit*. He was out of practice, for sure. But not so far gone. He watched her gaze roam over his face, pause to stare at his mouth and then her lips parted. His cock gave a little twitch and he released the breath he'd been unintentionally holding.

"Well, it's not shaping up to be so memorable for me, *darlin'*," she mocked in a soft, shaky whisper.

He pushed a wisp of her shoulder-length hair behind her ear then moved his hands to the warm metal of his truck hood, capturing her tall frame as he leaned forward and whispered near her ear, "Give it time."

Claire stopped short of stepping into his rock-solid body and wrapping her arms around his neck. Barely. She settled for resting her hands on the sides of his waist just above the waistband of his cargo shorts.

Give it time. Yeah. She had all sorts of things she'd like to let run their course and observe the outcome but that wasn't happening. That laid-back attitude wasn't part of her nature. It hadn't gotten her where she was and it certainly wasn't going to secure her future. But give him some time? He did look so, so yummy with his lightweight shirt unbuttoned and his tight abs outlined against the fabric of his snug white undershirt.

She felt him inhale and a moment later his warm breath teased her ear and a shiver of pure want rippled from her breasts straight to her cleft. His muscles tightened under her fingers and she thought about running her hands over him until she had explored every rock-hard muscle he possessed.

"You smell like spring," he said huskily, brushing his lips against the sensitive skin below her ear. "Like lilacs."

Clair rubbed her thumbs over each corded muscle and waited for him to move his mouth around and capture her lips. That's what she wanted. She was certain he'd be skilled enough to have her all but begging him to take her up against the right front quarter panel while local law enforcement sat ten feet away stroking her leather interior as if it were...a cheerleader on prom night.

His soft lips traced the shell of her ear with a featherlike touch. "Mmmmm. Exactly like lilacs."

"Oh, god," she moaned under her breath, giving up and urging his hot body up against hers. She could feel the firm bulge behind his zipper and waited for him to press it against the gentle throbbing between her legs. He didn't.

His long fingers brushed against her bare arms as he pulled away and took a step backward. He took her left hand and ran the pad of his thumb over her knuckles and she looked up to see his eyes were dark and clouded.

"Coll Evans, ma'am."

Great! She'd read about that famous Southern boy gallantry on more than one occasion. No self-respecting good ol' boy was going to do something as ungentlemanly as pulling her skirt up and banging her in broad daylight. Even if she'd sent every signal in the book that was just what she wanted him to do. *You hussy.*

And didn't those articles always warn that the sons of the South were turned off by women who were that easy? But he hadn't let go of her hand.

"Claire Arnet," she said through suddenly dry lips.

"Claire," he purred. His blue eyes sparkled as he brought her fingers to his lips.

Wow! Flirtation had never been one of her strong suits but if she had a whalebone fan she'd be plying it like a fiend to cool the blush that his simply stating her name caused. She imagined herself peering over the top, all Scarlett-esque as she batted her eyes. She was about to insert a "fiddle-dee-dee" into the scene when Officer Bradley's deep voice cut into her daydream like a sharp knife.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Coll dropped her hand and they turned as one. The cop was holding a zipper-sealed plastic storage bag between his thumb and forefinger as if its contents might be considered a biohazard.

Claire would have laughed if it weren't for the fierce scowl on the man's face. He was apparently over the thrills her convertible had to offer.

"It...it's a biscuit?" Claire said, her answer more of a question than a statement.

"A biscuit? And just where did you get this?" Bradley demanded.

"The freezer section at Publix," Claire replied, glancing at Coll to gauge his reaction. He was staring stone-faced at the bag but she thought she saw his shoulders shaking.

"Publix," Bradley spat. He closed the distance and pushed his sunglasses on top of his head. His eyes were a strange combination of gray and green and Claire tried to back away but a large warm hand was suddenly spread across her lower back. "This is truly a crime, Miss Arnet."

Coll's fingers were tracing a firm path up her spine. It felt so good she shifted her shoulders from right to left and back again.

"I'm taking you in."

Coll had just worked his way to the back of her neck, rubbing firm circles against her skin and it took a moment for the words to sink in.

"What?" she asked incredulously, feeling the quick squeeze against her skin.

"You're comin' with me."

"I am *not*," she said, reluctantly stepping away from Coll and up to Bradley.

"Yes, indeed. You sure are, missy. It's my personal duty."

"So you're a speed cop and the freakin' pastry patrol?"

"You use that sort of language and kiss your mama?" Bradley chided, shaking his head.

"You leave my mother out of this," Claire warned, placing her hands on her hips.

"Claire, all he wants —"

"It's clear she never taught you how to bake."

"You're arresting me because I'm not goddamn Betty Crocker?" Her raised voice sounded like a scream in the sudden silence.

Both men were staring at her with shocked looks on their faces.

"You know what you need, missy? You need a few days in a kitchen and your mouth washed out with soap." The cop said it with such disdain Claire actually felt her already heated face flush another few degrees.

"I wasn't going to arrest you but if you don't get your fanny into that car and follow me into town without another word, I'll do just that. Reckless vehicular endangerment is a punishable offense."

He put his glasses back into place and stalked back to his car.

"What the hell is going on?" Claire demanded.

"If I were you, I'd do what he says," Coll suggested, giving her hand a little squeeze and heading toward the driver's side of his vehicle. He hopped in and started the engine then leaned over to yell out the passenger window. "It won't be as bad as you think."

Claire backed up as he pulled away, the boat bouncing as it left the gravel lot and moved onto the pavement. She turned and found the patrol car inching forward, Bradley's Ray-Ban enshrouded gaze watching her as he passed.

"Shit," she uttered. *Shoot, not shit. Say shoot.* She shook her head and slid back behind the wheel of the car, threw it into gear and pulled onto the main road. The top was still down and the late morning sun was already scorching. Had there been a nice breeze it would have been a perfect day. Except for the small fact that she was headed for an unknown town with an extremely bizarre law enforcement officer and every nerve ending below her belt was still thrumming from less than two minutes in the arms of a total stranger.

She drove a little more than a quarter mile before small, well-kept houses began lining each side of the road. The speed limit dropped to twenty-five and she kept a safe distance between herself and the patrol car. When he stopped dead, she did the same.

She watched Coll maneuver the back end of the boat into a bare spot between the local pharmacy and a pale pink wooden building.

When the big Dodge was off the main street the patrol car moved on and Claire followed. She saw Coll wave at Bradley and when she passed he gave her a thumbs-up.

Right. Way to go. Things are great. Good job. Whatever meaning he was trying to convey, Claire doubted it was appropriate. She picked up her cell phone and wasn't surprised to see she had no reception. When she got back to the interstate, *if* she got back to the interstate, she would call Tawny and tell her to shove her "flashes" straight up her Pilates-honed ass.

The patrol car rolled to a stop in front of a long, single-storied brick building with four large picture windows in the front. The sign over the door read Miss Molly's.

"Well, good golly," Claire muttered, grabbing her phone and purse and getting out of the car. Bradley was already at the front of the convertible waiting. When she reached his side she pressed her remote and the horn blasted.

"No need for that here," he said, pulling the glass door open and nodding for her to go inside.

"Hey, for all I know, this is some sort of hillbilly con job where you divert my attention and your accomplice with the baby blues gets his hands on every saleable part of my car. I get lunch," she said, looking around at the diner booths that lined the front wall and the center counter filled with lunchtime patrons. "You guys get a small fortune in jacked parts."

She was shocked to hear him chuckle. She really didn't think the man possessed a sense of humor.

"First of all, hillbillies live in the mountains so you need to drive another hour northwest until you find some. Secondly, I don't appreciate you suggesting I would do anything illegal. And third," he stopped before an empty booth and tucked his glasses into his shirt pocket. "If Coll's interested in fondling something of yours it probably won't be your wheels. Hey, Mama!"

Claire had no chance to comment as a skinny woman in a paisley house dress rushed up to their side and wrapped her arms around the man.

"Give me some sugar, son."

The woman waited for Bradley to plant a big kiss on her cheek, then looked Claire up and down. "I'm Molly Bradley, when's the last time you had a decent meal, girl?"

Claire took the woman's hand and returned her firm handshake with a small smile. "I'd tell you what I had for breakfast but there's a good chance repeating that might land me an overnight stay in the town jail."

"Store-bought biscuits, Mama," he whispered and the woman raised her eyebrows.

"Sweet lordamercy. You sit yourself down and we'll get you the real deal." The woman turned abruptly and rushed through a metal swinging door.

Claire slid into the booth and looked up at Bradley. "Aren't you joining me, Officer?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not. Eatin' mama's biscuits and gravy for the first time is what you might call an earth-shattering experience, if you know what I mean."

Claire's eyes widened and he laughed aloud.

"You think I'm jokin'? Just wait and see. People drive for miles to get them. Folks give them up for Lent. The governor has them shipped in for special events. You're in for a treat, Miz Claire. Haisville has a lot more to offer than you might think."

Claire watched him walk to the kitchen door and poke his head inside. A minute later he walked back to the table. "No more speeding. There's nothing so important it can't wait an extra hour or so."

No sooner had he left than his mother walked up with three small plates lining one arm and a glass in the other.

"Here you go. I brought you sweet tea. You're not one of those crazy diet gals, are you?"

"Not really," Claire said, eyeing the array of food before her.

"Good. You don't need to worry about such things. Here you've got a plain biscuit with some honey straight from our local bees. Jefferson Dells—sittin' right there at the end of the counter—keeps us supplied. I'm telling her about your clover fields, Jeff." Molly yelled to the man at the counter and he raised a hand in greeting. "He's a little hard of hearin'."

Claire returned the man's wave as Molly went on.

"Old Jeff has the best bees around. Then we have the traditional sausage gravy over this one. My great-granny's recipe. And this last one that's a little deeper in color—that's my own twist. It's got a little kick. You like hot stuff, missy?"

"I do," Claire replied, thinking of a certain someone with brilliant eyes and a body so ripped he could grace the cover of any fitness magazine. The wafting aromas made her stomach growl but they didn't have a damn thing to do with her whole body contracting.

"Listen to me talkin' and you starvin'. Eat up, girl. I'll be back to see what you like best."

Chapter Two

To say the sporty little car stood out in the parking lot full of pickups and late-model cars was a major understatement. Coll pulled in a few spots down, surprised the diner was still crowded. He'd rushed to get the trailer unhooked and grab a quick shower and shave, knowing full well where Brad was taking Claire and for what purpose.

He didn't want her to leave town without getting another chance to see her and he wasn't sure why. She was tall enough to be a model but the extra curves that graced her frame would have prevented her from ever stepping foot on a runway. And that was suddenly just fine with him. Coll usually liked his women petite and fair and a little subdued. The auburn-haired beauty who had brazenly run her fingers over him was none of those things. Not at all.

He pushed the door to the diner open and was met with a cacophony of noise. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, which was more than odd. Usually Miss Molly's was the epitome of Southern reserve. He watched old man Dells ease off his favorite stool and walk over to the booth where Claire sat.

"I'll bring you a special batch over tomorrow, missy." The man's voice was loud and Coll could hear her response just as easily.

"Oh, that's not necessary, Mr. Dells. I'm just passing through town. Hopefully I'll be in Reynolds by tomorrow. But thank you anyway. It was truly delicious."

Coll was surprised to see the man's weathered face break into a wide grin.

"I thank you, sugar. I'm pleased you liked it. And you never know what might happen betwixt here and that fancy resort." He yelled over his shoulder, "Molly. You give this angel a bottle of the good stuff. I'll replace it tomorrow."

Coll held the door as the man approached.

"You're just in time, boy. That gal in booth one is wound tighter than a drum. Might be in sore need of a little somethin', if you know what I mean," he said with a wink.

Coll winced as the old man's bony elbow jammed into his stomach. He shook his head and moved to the booth where Claire was sitting with her back pressed up against the front wall. Molly was beside her and across the table were Brad's sister and her new husband. When he reached their side the conversation died and all eyes turned on him.

"Well, Collyer," Molly said, rising and motioning the others out of the booth. "How've you been, son?"

"Miz Molly. I'm doin' just fine. Della. Steve."

"Fishin' good?" Steve asked.

"They're hitting pretty well. Brad's taking the boat out tonight. You ought to call him."

"He got customers?"

"Not this evening. He's taking the weekend run for me."

"So you're finally taking a few days off?" Molly asked, picking up the remains of Claire's lunch. "It's about time. Your mama's been worried about you."

"I know," Coll said, sliding into the booth and glancing across the table to meet Claire's amused grin. "Mama does worry."

"With good cause," Della interrupted. "Isn't Sunday gonna be a year since—"

"Della, honey. You go fetch Coll here a Barq's and a piece of coconut cream pie. Y'all have a nice chat," Molly said before ushering her daughter and son-in-law away.

Coll watched their departure a little longer than he needed to. He was fully aware that he had Claire's undivided attention.

"So *Coll-er*," she said, his name rolling off her tongue like a silky caress. He turned to find her elbows on the table, her hands cradling her face. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "You a mama's boy?"

Old man Dells had hit the nail on the head. She did look like an angel with her heart-shaped face and those crystal clear eyes. Her lips were plush and ripe and a stab of regret twisted his belly at the opportunity he'd let pass back on the roadside. He should have kissed her. He should have forgotten about manners and memories and just hauled her up against him and tasted her. Maybe taken it a little further and offered her that little *somethin'*. The mere thought made his balls ache.

"Yes ma'am. Through and through. And on top of that, I've got two sisters who fret just as much." He leaned back, shifting in his seat as he rested his arms against the back of the booth and grinned. "It's a curse, being an only son."

"I'll bet. Don't call me ma'am, okay? It makes me feel like I need to sign up for a special parking decal or something."

"Fair enough. And you just call me Coll."

"Here y'all go. I brought an extra fork in case you want to try a little," Della said. She placed a huge slice of pie and his drink on the table between them.

Coll picked up one fork and nudged the other one toward Claire. "Go ahead, help yourself."

He watched her cut off a piece, open her lips and pass the sweetness to her tongue. She closed her eyes and groaned loudly and his second bite stopped midway to his mouth. *Je-sus*. He wondered if that was how she looked and sounded when she was wet and throbbing and ready to come. His dick came to life and he wished he had donned a pair of baggy shorts instead of jeans.

"Officer Bradley called you C.J. Would you be miffed if I called you that?"

She had a little piece of meringue stuck to the corner of her mouth and he reached his arm across the table, brushed the sweet goo away with his thumb and drew it across her lower lip.

"Darlin', you could call me 'shithead' and I think I'd answer just to hear the sound of your sweet voice," he admitted, staring intently into her eyes.

"Is that Southern charm?" she whispered, her lips barely moving.

"No," he said, dipping inside her lip and pulling the soft skin down, the particle dissolving in the heat of her mouth. "That's Southern fact."

It took every fiber of Claire's willpower not to wrap her tongue around his thumb and suck it into her mouth. She was pretty certain that wouldn't be an appropriate response to his caress, at least not in the middle of Molly's diner. Now if they were somewhere private...she'd probably be sucking something a little bigger than his thumb. The thought sent a ripple of want arrowing straight to her cunt.

She hadn't stopped thinking about him since the moment he'd pulled out of that gravel lot. Not while she'd been devouring the unbelievably delicious food, not while, one by one, the patrons had been introduced to her, not while Molly had not-so-covertly grilled her on her life story.

She really hadn't expected to see him again, hadn't imagined he'd walk up to her table looking like something from a *Hot Men of Dixie* pictorial. His damp hair had been slicked back from his tanned face and the second his eyes looked her way her body tightened. The shades of blue in his plaid, short-sleeve shirt brought out the color of his eyes but it was the hint of exposed chest that held her attention while he chatted with Molly and her family.

Claire imagined that chest matched his abs in firmness and she wanted to see both. Bare and glistening as she ran her hands over them again and again before letting her fingers drift downward –

"Hey, Claire." Della had appeared at the booth and Claire's fantasy dissolved with a silent *poof*. The woman reached across the table and snatched her cell phone off the bright yellow Formica top. "Mama wants me to program in the number here in case you ever decide to order some biscuits. You're only an hour and a half away, that's not so far. And here's that honey."

Claire looked at Coll and sucked in a breath. His gaze had heated a degree or two hundred. Maybe he could read minds. Maybe he knew exactly where her thoughts had been headed. She heard the little *beeps* as Della punched in the number then flipped the phone closed.

"Mama says lunch is on Brad. Y'all need anything else?"

"No!" they answered in unison.

"Well, shoot. There's no need to yell," Della said and stalked off.

Claire was about to call her back to apologize when Coll's husky voice froze the words in her throat.

"I want to kiss you."

Claire looked quickly into his eyes and her stomach clenched. He'd said *kiss* but the emphasis he put on the word made it all but clear he was thinking about something a little different than lips meeting lips. *Depends on which lips are meeting which lips, Claire.*

"Here?" she asked, shocked to hear the waver in her voice.

"Not unless you like an audience."

The corner of his mouth had risen to form a sexy little dimple and Claire grabbed her phone and the honey, stuffed them in her purse and quickly slid out of the booth.

"You have a good ride, sugar," Molly yelled from behind the counter.

She looked at Coll and watched his smile widen to its extreme.

"Thanks. I will." Clair walked through the door he held open. It had barely swooshed shut before she was urged across the street by a gentle nudge to the center of her spine.

"What are we doing? Town tour?" she asked, hurrying down the sidewalk, easily matching his long stride.

"Maybe later," he said and then twined his fingers through hers and gave a light squeeze. He looked down at her lips until they started to burn. She leaned toward him as a loud, familiar voice called from their right.

"Y'all going over to your mama's place?"

"No, sir. Just going for a walk," Coll replied shortly. He pulled her past the row of rocking chairs in front of the awning-covered hardware store.

Claire looked around Coll's broad frame in time to see the old man wink at them.

"Nice day for pickin' wildflowers," he said, chuckling.

"Shit." Coll slowed his pace and they came to a stop just before the pale pink building she had driven by earlier. She saw his truck sitting in the open space just beyond the building but he turned toward a narrow opening and led her down an uneven walkway.

"What's wrong?"

"This town. The lack of privacy. The fact I can't wait to get my hands on you and this is the only place we can go at the moment without someone alerting the media."

"You have media here?" she asked, following close behind.

"Yeah. It consists of three old men with CB radios, but trust me, they report quicker than CNN."

He pulled open a screened door and motioned her into a small room with a severely sloped floor and high, tiny windows that allowed only a fraction of the afternoon sun to shine in. Against one wall a front-loading washer and rumbling old dryer stacked with folded towels were making noise.

Claire was about to make a predictable comment about the spin cycle when he wrapped an arm around her waist and spun her into his embrace. Without a word he brought his lips to hers in a hot, long kiss so unexpectedly forceful that it left her momentarily stunned.

"Lord, darlin', you taste so sweet," he whispered as he backed a hairsbreadth away.

"It's the pie," she replied softly, wondering how the throbbing of her heart and lips and pussy could beat in perfect unison.

"It ain't the pie. I've been eating that for years and it's never had this effect on me." He cradled the cheeks of her ass and ground his erection against her.

She moaned into his mouth and hooked a leg around his hip, forcing the material of her skirt higher as she gave a tiny wiggle in return. She'd meant it to be a teasing little movement but the contact had brushed her plump clit and brought it thrumming to life.

"I think you're confused. That pie was phenomenal," she said, her breath hitching when he pushed her skirt up until there was nothing between his jeans and her bare skin except her knit panties. "Maybe you need another taste."

She saw his lips part in a sexy smile and her heart drummed quicker.

"Maybe you're right," he purred, trailing the tips of his fingers along the crease of sensitive skin between the back of her thighs and her ass before he took a globe in each hand and eased her upward onto her toes. "Open up."

She wasn't exactly sure what he meant. Like a total wanton Claire parted her lips, wrapped her arms around his neck and cinched her legs around his waist. She threaded her hands through his silky hair. She saw his nostrils flare and then he assailed her mouth with tiny strokes and sips and the occasional nip until she couldn't stop her hips from rocking against the front of his jeans.

He pulled his lips away and gasped. "Hold up, sugar."

He bounced her until he was supporting her with one arm and quickly popped the button of his jeans and slowly lowered his zipper. A second later he had her in a double-hand grasp and his cock was wedged into her panty-covered cleft. He was long and thick and beautifully bare.

"They call you Commando Coll?" she asked in a surprised voice, meeting his hooded gaze.

"That's me, darlin'," he said and kissed her again. Longer. Harder. And with an urgency that had her gripping his shoulders as he lifted her up and down as if she were as light as fluff. He rubbed his cock along first one side of her contained pussy and then the other but never touched her very center.

His tongue explored her mouth, parrying with hers as their hips moved. Each time she tried to rotate and press his length against her folds he pulled her body away but thrust his tongue into her. Relentlessly he teased her until she broke the kiss and was panting into his ear. The string of desire from her nipples to her cunt had tightened to

nearly the point of pain and she closed her eyes, unable to think of anything except her need for release.

"Please. Let me come."

"You do it, baby." His voice was a strained whisper, his breath tickling her ear as he finally lined her up against his rod. "Show me how you like it, Claire. Show me, sugar."

Claire leaned back enough to look into his eyes and then pulled his mouth to hers and rolled her clit against his swollen tip. It only took seven tiny strokes until the waves crested and he drank in her scream. The loud buzzer that heralded the dryer's end startled them both. Coll walked forward and plopped her ass onto the top of the washer. She watched him pump his long, smooth cock with one fist as his face twisted. Without looking he grabbed an old hand towel off the dryer and caught his pearly release as the second warning buzz covered his small moan.

Claire watched his chest rise and fall and then heard him curse.

"You prayin' for redemption, Collyer James?"

Claire jumped off the washer and pulled her skirt down with a quick jerk. Coll eased back into his jeans with hurried movements, tossing the towel in the trash just as a platinum blonde-haired woman entered the room.

"What're you up to? And who are you?" she asked, turning her questioning blue-gray eyes on Claire.

"Josie, don't start. This is Claire. She's on her way to Reynolds. I was givin' her a little tour."

"Of my laundry room?" The woman was, without a doubt, one of his sisters. She looked from Claire to Coll and back again. Her gaze settled on Claire's lips then moved slowly to the undone button on her brother's jeans and her frown deepened.

"Hold on a second," Claire interrupted. "This is not what you're thinking."

"And how do you know what I'm thinking, missy?" The young woman moved her trim frame to within a foot of Claire's.

"Josie—"

"You hush, Coll. I'm talking to her."

"Don't call me 'missy'. I'm older than you, for heaven's sake," Claire bristled.

"With a heck of a lot less sense, no doubt," the woman said with a little headshake.

"That's up for debate," Coll said under his breath.

"Oh, ya think?" his sister queried. "Last time I checked, I never had anyone go down on me with our mama getting a perm in the next room."

"Josie!"

"I did *not* go down on him," Claire said, not missing the look Coll cast toward the doorway.

"Claire, please. Let me handle this."

"I'm bettin' you handled enough for one day," Josie chided. "I never thought you'd be takin' Trish's words to heart and layin' it down with the first willing piece of ass that rolled into town."

"That's enough." Coll's words were sharp and stern and the look he gave his sister was less than brotherly. "Apologize."

"It's not necessary," Claire said, picking her purse and heading toward the back door, squaring her shoulders as she went.

"See there, Collyer. She didn't take offense," Josie said. "This sort of thing probably happens to her all the time."

Claire stopped and turned, meeting the other woman's stare. There was a look of fierce loyalty and a tad of daring in her dark eyes. Her head rose just a little and Claire couldn't allow her to have the last word.

"I know what's going through you're bleached-beyond-attractive head right now but don't think for a minute you're running me off," Claire said, walking to the door and pulling it open. "And while we both know your brother's as gorgeous as they come, I have enough willpower to resist dropping to the ground at his feet. I have never, nor will I ever, get into a territorial pissing match over a man. Especially with his sister. That's a little borderline creepy, don't you think, *missy*?"

Claire stepped into the afternoon sun and slammed the door. She hurried down the walkway toward the street, her sandals slapping against her heels as she went. She turned the corner and headed toward the diner, not pausing to stop when he called her name. God, what *was* her problem? She had never done anything so spontaneous in her entire life. What the hell caused it? Lack of sex? *Maybe*. Lack of sense? *Definitely*. Lack of focus on what was really, really important?

"Claire, please." He caught up to her and she saw him reach for her arm and then stop. Smart man.

"Let's not make this any more ridiculous than it already is," she said.

"That wasn't ridiculous."

"Joint masturbation in the back room of a beauty shop? Not ridiculous? Then what was it?" she demanded.

"Unrequited lust?" he said laughingly, lifting her purse back onto her shoulder as it slid down her arm.

"Well, contrary to what your sister Attila thinks, I don't do lust."

"Well then, we won't call it lust. Let's call it picking up where we left off earlier. If Brad hadn't been there, I think we'd have been doing more than easin' a little happiness from between our legs."

"Oh, you so have a way with words, Mr. Evans."

"Thank you, darlin'. I do try."

She hurried a few more steps.

"Don't go, Claire."

His words caused her to falter and she stubbed her toe on the uneven pavement.

"Don't go? *Don't go?* You're kidding, right?" She kept her eyes straight ahead, relieved when she saw the bright white of her car.

"No. I'm not."

"Well, as great as that little bout of rub-a-dub-dub was, I can't imagine spending another minute in this place. You're all very nice and I certainly wasn't expecting the extent of your Southern hospitality but I've got too much going on at the moment to consider an X-rated version of *Lost Horizon*."

"So you're admitting how hot this attraction we have is?"

His slow, deep voice rolled over her like warm molasses and she nearly dropped her bag and slammed him up against the weathered boards of Marilyn's Used Books and Sundries to suck his coconutty tongue into her mouth one more time.

"We do not have an attraction."

"We don't?" he asked, the humor clear in his voice. "Then what is it that has me wanting to do exactly what we just did all over again? Right now."

"Horniness." Claire pulled her remote out of her purse and clicked it. "End of story."

"Not likely. Horniness I can control."

She yanked her car door open and his large frame moved in front of her as he wedged into the opening, blocking her entrance.

"A little lotion and a nice tight fist and I'm good to go," he whispered sexily.

Claire inhaled sharply. The Georgia heat and his purely masculine scent caused her vision to blur. When his hands gripped her waist she told herself they were only there to steady her and the little wave of delight that rippled through her was clearly an illusion.

"What about you, Claire? You think this feeling's going to stop when you're in your fancy hotel room with your hand between those sweet thighs? When your fingers are slick with desire and you're ready to come, can you truly admit you won't be thinking about us. Together."

Claire's heart was beating so fast, drumming so loud she felt certain he could hear it. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. She stared into his eyes, thinking of the tableaux he suggested and her desire coiled a little more.

"And I don't mean grinding away like two hopeless teenagers. I'm talking about me riding you the way your eyes are telling me you want to be ridden and you returning the favor."

Claire clutched the door tighter as his hands moved up her sides until his thumbs reached to barely graze the underside of her breasts.

"I want to run my tongue right here," he said, brushing back and forth against her rib cage. "Then I'll just have to work my way up to your tight nipples. Lick them. Suck them. Give them a nice little pinch and see what sort of sound you make. See if it makes

you as wet as you were before. You know I felt how drenched you were. You realize that wet heat burned my dick when you were writhing against me, don't you, darlin'?"

"Stop," Claire demanded hoarsely, pressing her thighs together against a fresh wave of need.

"You want to believe this is just lust, that's fine. You put those blinders firmly in place if you have to." He dropped his arms and slid around her side until she was forced to turn to look at him. "I've had the sudden impression you probably do that a lot. Especially when something comes up that makes you a little unsure. When you don't know which choice to make."

His words hit precariously close to a nerve. It was just what she needed to snap her out of the foggy realm of "what-if" she had almost stepped into. She narrowed her eyes, tossed her purse into the passenger seat and drew a steady breath.

"The fact I don't want to be your afternoon fuck buddy does not mean I'm afraid or uncertain. It means I'm not interested." She dropped into the leather bucket seat, jammed the key into the ignition and started the car. She tried to ignore the way his jeans cupped his package when he stuffed his hands in his front pockets. Right there at eye level, seeming to scream *here I am, darlin', all for you*.

"Not interested? Or just afraid to take a chance?"

She ignored him and backed out onto the street. From this moment on she would focus on the mountain spa and getting there as quickly as humanly possible. Once there she would ponder her choices and they wouldn't include some sexy stranger with rock-hard abs and a cock that would make any pizza-boy-turned-porn-star proud. Her thoughts would center on her designs and whether she could actually relinquish control of them. Her choices would absolutely not include Collyer Evans who, as she put the car in drive, she pretended was not standing in the middle of the street giving her a tiny salute as she glanced in her rearview mirror and drove away.

Chapter Three

Coll drove down his long, secluded driveway trying to focus on the beauty of the afternoon. He pulled into the clearing but the usual joy he felt when he caught his first glimpse of his little piece of serenity was missing. He shut the truck off and rested his hands and head against the steering wheel.

How could such a great day turn to total shit? It had started just fine with a guide job for one of his favorite customers, a seasonal resident who had rewarded Coll with a handsome tip for his services as well as cutting the day short after they caught so many fish the man's arm was tired. It had been such a great morning he didn't even get pissed when her white convertible had blown past him on the double line but he had laughed out loud when, near town, Brad had her pulled over.

But the laughter had died the minute he'd seen her sexy silhouette. Her long shapely legs. And that ass. He wasn't about to forget the weight of her firm cheeks anytime soon and he tightened his fingers around the wheel. What the hell had he been thinking, dragging her into Josie's back room like that?

You were thinking of all those soft curves and lush lips.

"And the fact I haven't been laid in a while," Coll said disgustedly, getting out of the truck and walking toward the front door.

Not laid in a while? The gestation period for the Berkley's prize mare was shorter than your self-imposed dry spell, son.

"It's a wonder she didn't run screaming from the room. I haven't been that smooth since what, tenth grade?"

She wanted you. No doubt about it.

Coll's laugh was devoid of humor. He turned and walked toward the lake. "She sure as fuck doubted it."

He picked his way down the overgrown path as the image of her wide blue eyes and memories of the way she'd grabbed his neck and pulled him down for that last kiss, floated through his mind. He wasn't about to forget the way her orgasmic scream had vibrated through him and alerted his dick it could fire at will.

"Shit." He shifted against his sudden semi-hardness. It wasn't as if she was the first woman since Becca to catch his eye. But there was a big difference between the familiar twinge of mild interest and a rush of desire so strong his balls ached and his dick turned to iron in less than twenty seconds.

Hey, isn't it nice to know everything's still in quick-time response mode after all?

"Quick being the operative word," he groaned. Three pumps and he'd gone off. No wonder she hadn't wanted to stay.

She left because she was afraid. When Trish did that reading, she told you the cards showed a woman uncertain.

"Right. And I'm supposed to believe she's the one who'll rescue me from the ravages of Emotional Shit Storm Rebecca?"

I think your sister put it better when she said you needed to free yourself from the regressive pull of the memory that was smothering you.

Coll didn't want to think about any of that at the moment. His mind wandered back to how smooth Claire's thighs had been when he'd pushed the stiff cotton of her skirt upward. That little lack of control in the laundry room had gone against every bit of courtesy and respect that had been pounded into his head since an early age. He had been totally unprepared but had still planned on pulling her panties straight down those legs and sinking into her warmth.

He imagined how it would have been when he worked his fingers into her tightness. Lord, he knew she'd grip him. Mold to him. He'd stroke her soft heat until she was begging. Pleading for him to bury his dick into her scorching pussy –

Oh, Lord. Now you're making me hard.

"That's it," Coll muttered, picking up a smooth stone and rolling it around his palm. "I know I'm totally fucked when the voice of reason gets a boner."

He was about to skip the stone across the surface of the water when his cell phone rang. He looked at the number and silently cursed before flipping it open.

"Hey, Mama."

"Collyer, honey. Molly just called and said she thinks there's a situation you might be wantin' to drive back into town to check out, though why any of this would be a bit of your concern, I don't know."

"Any of what, Mama?" he asked, not too concerned at all as he flicked his wrist and watched the rock fly. His mother and her best friend were in constant contact each and every day and shared a competition of you-think-you-have-it-bad-listen-to-this. One woman's idea of a catastrophe was the other woman's delight. It had been that way since forever.

"It seems Bradley brought in some sweet little Northern gal for his mama to feed. Molly said she was quite a looker. Ate like she hadn't had a bite for over a week."

"I know, Mama. Her name's Claire."

"I heard you two were sharing a piece of coconut cream."

Shit. "Yes ma'am, we sure were. But you're slippin' with your gossip, old woman," he teased, picking up another stone. "That was over an hour ago. Claire's probably halfway to Reynolds by now."

He waited for her chastisement, waited for her to tell him she was far from old, that she was the youngest widow woman in town and if she had any choice in the matter that wasn't about to last for long. When the silence on the other end of the line stretched, Coll dropped the rock.

"No, son." Suddenly the hair on the back of his neck rose. "She's not."

* * * * *

"Who in hell leaves a herd of goats in the middle of the road?" Claire asked in a voice that sounded far and distant and nothing like her own. The blanket around her shoulders slipped off and a pair of latex-covered hands pulled it back into place. She shifted her hips against the cold metal of the ambulance's bumper and stared unseeingly into the distance.

"Claire. Sweetheart. Let me talk to one of the paramedics."

"Who the *fuck* leaves a herd of *fucking* goats in the *fucking* middle of a *fucking* country road, Tawn. Who?" Her voice rose to shrillness and she closed her eyes and tried to quit shaking as she handed her phone to the young woman by her side.

"Miz Claire. You need to let them take you to the hospital, sugar."

"Officer Bradley. Is that acceptable law enforcement lingo or are you just a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen?" She tried to force her gaze upward in the general vicinity of his voice but it was too great an effort and she gave up, focusing instead on the crookedly elevated back end of her beloved car.

"Just let them take you in for a quick look."

"No way, Barney," Claire said with what she thought was a smile but she couldn't be certain at this point. "I'm in shock, Officer. Plain and simple. Even paramedic Pam will back me up on that. Tell him, Pammy."

"Your friend wants to talk to you again, Ms. Arnet," the paramedic said with an indulgent smile.

"Pam. Don't leave me hangin' here. Tell Officer Wolf Eyes that I'm fine." She took the cell phone back and put it to her ear.

"Claire Arnet. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Claire, I want you to go to the hospital."

"Tawny, I'm fine. Really."

"Do it for me, Claire."

"Oh, that is so not fair."

"I'm worried, sweetie. You don't sound fine."

"Well, shit, Tawn. If you had gone airborne and missed slamming into a massive tree trunk by an eyelash you wouldn't sound fine either."

"I know, I know. Sorry. I'm just concerned. Can't I be concerned? You're all I've got for family, you stupid shit. What the hell would I do if you ended up dead? You know that's not acceptable, Claire. Not in the least. You're stranded in East Bumfuck, barely missed leaving your imprint in wood and I never had any goddamn sign any of that was going to happen. Not one single *fucking* flash. I'm allowed to be concerned," she yelled. "Let me talk to whoever's in charge if you're going to be a freakin' hardhead."

Claire pulled the phone from her ear and handed it to Bradley. "It's for you. I hope you two will be very happy together."

She half listened to Bradley's voice trying to placate Tawny's questions and demands. Claire couldn't help looking at the right side of the car with its two flat tires and a severely bent rear rim. She was sure the accident was a sign but she had no earthly clue what it might mean. Not when there were so many possibilities. Why was it the one that kept working its way to the center of her mind suggested leaving that sexy, Southern man standing in the middle of the road had been a giant mistake?

She should be considering the fact that maybe a higher power didn't want her to make it to the resort, didn't want her to sign that contract to turn over five years of her art to the successful bike builders looking to go mass production. Maybe the four-legged bleeters in the middle of the road were an omen. If things with the new venture went poorly, there was no question who would be the scapegoat. A sudden *beep-beep-beep* interrupted her musing and she watched a big red tow truck move backward toward her car.

"She hung up on me," Bradley's annoyed voice said.

"She does that when she reaches overload," Claire said, taking the phone from his hand. "I'll call her in a bit. Where's he taking my car?"

"Jimmy's garage is on Poplar Street. I already talked to him. Those rims are aluminum and he doesn't carry any. He'll tow you in, order some tires and the rim. It's probably going to take a couple of days. I got your insurance info from the glove box and called and informed your carrier about the accident. I told them you'd be in touch as soon as you calmed down."

"Peachy," Claire said. Her purse was lying on the floor behind her and she dropped her phone on top of it. "I need to grab a few things before he takes her away." She forgot her desire for sheer and utter independence as she took the hand Bradley offered and rose slowly.

* * * * *

According to his mother, via Molly, via a quick call from Brad, there had been no serious injuries but as Coll rounded the bend and drove onto the shoulder of the road the knot in his stomach tightened. Fresh black skid marks stood out against the worn pavement of the roadway clearly marking the car's attempt to stop and eventual trajectory into the field.

He saw Brad standing by the open passenger-side door. The car had missed hitting a massive oak tree by what appeared to be inches and his gut twisted a little more. He shook his head and hurried to the open back of the ambulance.

"Claire?" he called, rounding the corner.

"She's with Brad, Coll. Getting some clothes and such before Jimmy takes the car in."

Coll looked up at Pam standing inside the ambulance and then glanced back toward the car. "She okay?"

"She won't go to the hospital. We checked her out and she seems fine except for a little case of shock."

"There's such a thing as a *little* shock?" he asked skeptically.

Pam laughed and jumped to the ground beside him. "She's a tough cookie, your girlfriend."

Coll whipped his head around and met her eyes. "She's not my girlfriend. I barely know her."

"Not the news on the street. Or the highway. Jimmy filled my partner in while I was checking her stats." She placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a coon-like grin. "Old man Dells has you two all but pickin' out a china pattern."

"Goddamn. This place is ridiculous. Why do I continue to put up with this shit?"

"Same as me, sugar," she said with a sad smile and gave his chest a quick pat. "Because you're not ready to let go. You tell Trish I said hey."

He leaned over and gave her a brotherly peck on the cheek. "I will. Take care."

Coll watched her walk through the alfalfa, following her progress until she reached Bradley's side and motioned him out of the way. He'd yet to see Claire but if Pam wasn't overly concerned he'd wait right here, not run down to the car like some overzealous suitor and pull her into his arms. But, damn. That's what he wanted to do. He simply wanted to feel her against him. Again. And for more than a few minutes. He wanted to cradle her head and feel her lips moving beneath his own before he slowly stripped her bare.

The loud techno strains of "Crazy Train" shattered his fantasy and he picked up the phone and flipped it open without thinking.

"Claire, I'm sorry, sweetie. I shouldn't have yelled. I shouldn't have hung up. It's just—"

"Uh," Coll tried to interrupt the soft feminine voice.

"I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you in my life, Claire. I thought I was okay with you going off on your own, I mean, who wouldn't want a week of being fluffed and buffed and all those happy hands roaming over your body. And hey, make sure you tell them about that really tight spot at the base of your spine, sweetie. For what they charge at that place they ought to be able to rub you until it feels so good you're moaning Helga's name or whoever you end up with."

Coll tightened his grip on the phone and swallowed hard. The woman apparently knew Claire pretty damn well.

"The point is I shouldn't have let you go alone. If I had been there maybe none of this would have happened. Dammit, Claire, if anything had happened to you I don't know what I would have done. You know I love you, your crazy bitchiness and all."

Coll heard the woman's tiny little sniff and felt as if he'd been sucker punched. He'd been pretty certain Claire didn't want him because she was afraid of her unexplained desire. *Shit*. It wasn't unexplained...it was suddenly crystal clear. She apparently hadn't been lying when she said she wasn't interested. He felt a slow heat move over his neck and creep upward. *Fuck*. She'd kissed him like there was no tomorrow, ground against his dick as if she couldn't get enough.

"Claire? You okay, sweetie?"

"This isn't Claire," he answered more gruffly than he'd intended.

"Who the hell...is that you, Officer Shitforbrains? It doesn't sound like you. Are you disguising your voice now so you have another shot at telling me what you think is best for my friend?"

"This is Coll, not Brad."

"Coll?"

"Yeah. Coll Evans."

The silence stretched and he thought they may have been disconnected and then her soft voice spoke.

"Are you the guy with the boat?"

The guy with the boat? Claire had probably called her the minute she drove away and told her about their little laundry room hump-fest. Maybe out of guilt, maybe because the whole damn thing seemed suddenly juvenile and pathetic. Coll paused then answered. "Yeah, that's me."

"Do you look like the sexiest man alive?"

"What?"

"I can't get any image of what you look like. Are you tallish, ripped with big blue eyes? Wait! You do have blue eyes. That I get. Who do you resemble? What smolderingly hot celebrity do you look like? Quick, give me the details before Claire gets back. Where is Claire?"

There was no doubt he was talking with a kook.

"She loves to have her feet rubbed."

"What?"

"Her feet. She's usually on them all day and completely melts over a foot massage."

"A foot massage?" He wondered what kind of game the woman was playing and was suddenly so drained he really didn't care. This was probably the sort of thing the two of them did on a regular basis. The woman on the other end of the phone was probably just as hot as Claire. They'd make a knockout couple strolling into a bar, no doubt. Every guy would want them.

"Oh, definitely, Coll. It's all a matter of knowing where to massage and which strokes to use. If you have a minute I can tell you —"

"Don't bother." He'd had enough for one day. For one fuckin' lifetime. "I think I know what your friend likes to have rubbed and just the way to stroke it."

Dead silence and then, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Ask your girlfriend," he muttered and slammed the phone shut.

Claire was being petty. Petty and less than subtle. And that was so very unlike her.

"Paramedic Pam and your buddy Coll seem like pretty good friends," she said over her shoulder. She pulled her design book out from under the driver's seat. It had flown off the backseat at impact but was miraculously pristine.

"They are. Pam and Coll's little sister are best friends. Let me help you, Miz Claire. You shouldn't be having your head bent over like that for so long."

Claire rose up and took another quick glance out the side window just in time to see Pam touch Coll's chest. When he returned her action with a kiss Claire's head started to ache.

"Seems like they might be more than friends."

"Not anymore. Not ever, really. They both went through a bad time."

"Really? And they were they to comfort each other?"

"Miz Claire," Brad said with a long sigh. "If you're wantin' gossip, you're barking up the wrong tree. You head on over to the beauty parlor and you're bound to find out anything you want to know about Coll. Just be careful how you go about it. His sister Josie is sort of leery of strangers."

"I know," Claire said, easing around to plop back on the seat. Her temples were suddenly throbbing. "We've met."

"Bradley, what the hell's wrong with you?" Pam pushed him out of the way and poked her head inside the car. "I can get anything out of there you need, ma'am," she said, her voice filled with chastisement.

"I'm okay." Claire handed her heavy black binder to the woman. "I've got everything I need."

"Take a minute and sit," Pam said. "You're pretty pale. You feelin' lightheaded?"

"No," Claire lied.

"Mama called," Bradley said. "You've got a choice of staying at Miss Jennie's— she's got a nice place with three extra rooms and no one else is there at the present, so you'd have the upstairs and the bathroom to yourself— or at Coll's mom's. She also has rooms to let. Didn't know what you'd think about that. Or, you could...you know," he cleared his throat and shrugged. "If there's someone else you know...someone who might let you stay with them—"

Claire looked up and met two pairs of questioning eyes, both of which seemed more than a little curious.

"Miss Jennie's would be fine for a few days."

"She's my aunt," Pam said, grabbing Claire's elbow and helping her out of the cramped backseat. "She's a little forgetful but a sweet lady."

"I'm sure," Claire said, breathing in the fresh air in deep gulps. "So the whole town's related, I take it."

"Pretty much," Pam said, smiling. "Every now and then we corral some new blood."

"That's right," Brad said, offering his arm to Claire, as if they were ready to take the dance floor, not trudge through a field. "We have to call for backup now and again."

"It's the only way to keep from perpetuating that small-town stereotype of loving your neighbor...who just happens to be your first cousin." Pam laughed, hefting Claire's overnight bag onto her shoulder.

The smile Claire shared with them fizzled when she looked up to see Coll turn from the back of the ambulance and quickly walk away without a backward glance.

Chapter Four

Coll bent down, ready to shoot a cut to the right when he heard the ripple of whispers behind him. He inhaled and cracked the cue ball, the little bit of left-handed spin he placed on it carrying the striped ball it hit into the corner pocket.

She'd made it. He knew she would. Where else was there to go on a Thursday night? Even if you had a car, no one made the hour-long drive to one of the more bustling coastal bars mid-week. He eyed up another shot when the familiar floral scent drifted by.

"Excuse me. Jimmy, right?"

Coll watched his pool partner whip the worn Georgia Tech ball cap off his head and nod mutely.

"I was wondering if I could get in my car first thing in the morning. I left my phone charger in the console and my battery died."

Coll turned his head and looked at her. She'd changed into a pair of knit capris that accentuated the enticing curves of her hips and a high-waisted white T-shirt. It hugged her breasts but flowed loose around her waist. Dressed like that, all she need do was flip her shoes off, lean back against the bar and smile. There wasn't a man in the place who wouldn't take a run at her. For all the good it would do them, Coll thought.

"I'd be happy to get it for you right now, ma'am," Jimmy said with a wide smile.

"No. That's crazy. Don't interrupt your game. I'll get it in the morning," Claire said and Coll sensed that she glanced his way.

"I'm always in early," Jimmy said. "I'll set it on Miz Jennie's porch swing, how about that?"

"That would be great. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, Miz Claire."

"Please, just Claire. Okay?"

"Claire."

Jimmy said her name in an awe-filled voice and Coll snorted.

"What is your problem?" she asked, arms over her chest as she turned her narrowed gaze on him.

He gave a little shrug but didn't meet her eyes. "No problem at all."

"Whatever," she muttered and walked briskly away. He watched the gentle sway of her hips all the way to the bar and beyond, until she disappeared into a booth opposite Della.

"She's lookin' pretty good for someone who's had double airbag deployment and a nice whack on the side of the head, don't ya' think?"

"If you say so," Coll said, swearing under his breath when his shot scratched.

"When you gonna snap out of it, Coll?" Jimmy asked, sinking the seven ball with ease.

"Mind your own damn business, Jimbo," Coll said, his attempted humor coming out a soft growl.

"Becca's gone, pal."

"Like I don't know that," Coll spat, tossing his stick on the table, scattering the remaining balls across the felt.

Jimmy's usual good humor darkened and he stalked around the table until they were standing toe to toe.

"She was my sister, Coll."

They were the same height and Coll stared into a pair of deep brown eyes that reminded him of someone else and brought back more than a few painful memories. Memories that, if he were to believe his sister and her mumbo jumbo soothsaying, were on the brink of being pushed into the past if he'd let them.

"I've forgiven her, man. I've made peace with what she did. You need to do the same."

Christ. He did not need this now. Not tonight. Not ever. Coll swore and turned his head.

He tried to leave but Jimmy's beefy hand wrapped around his forearm in a viselike grip.

"It was her decision, Coll. She was always out there. Pushin' the envelope until we were all forced to notice. You've mourned her long enough. A year pretty soon." Jimmy let go of his arm and clamped his hand on Coll's shoulder. "If she were here she'd tell you 'go for it, asshole'."

Coll stared at the man and then finally smiled. "You're a dick."

"Truer words have never been spoken, son. But what if she's that soul mate Trish was telling you about?"

"Is nothing sacred in this fuckin' place?" Coll shook his head in disgust. He hadn't told a single person about the reading.

Jimmy tapped him in the chest with the tip of his pool cue. "All I'm saying—that woman is a bundle of smokin' curves and pure temptation."

"She does look good," Coll admitted and then remembered exactly why she wasn't the one meant to mend his shredded heart and lead him into the great wide happily ever after. "Trust me, Jimmy. She's not here for the andouille, brother."

"Not what I hear," Jimmy said with a leering smile as he walked to the table and handed Coll his cue stick. "I heard she was more than happy with a certain someone's sausage earlier today."

"Where the hell did you hear that?" Coll nearly shouted.

"Come on, Coll. Josie has the biggest mouth in town."

"My *sister* told you?"

"Not me, pal. I was out rescuing a sports-car-drivin' damsel in distress. I heard it about fifth- or sixth-hand, I'm guessin'."

"I'm gonna kill her."

"Give her a break, Coll. She's just hoping all that stuff Trish told everyone actually works out for you. What was that card that told her all that shit? Oh, yeah. The Luuuuv-ers," Jimmy sing-songed and Coll shook his head. "Claire and Collyer sittin' in a tree."

"Shut the hell up," Coll said, punching him lightly in the shoulder. "What are you? Fuckin' five or somethin'? Anyhow, y'all are wastin' your time. Claire isn't the one. She not interested in me. In men."

"What?" Jimmy was staring at him as if he'd grown horns.

"She's got a girlfriend. I'm pretty certain she's gay."

"Gay?"

"Gay."

"As in a carpet muncher?"

"Jesus, Jimmy."

"A lesbian?"

"Yes."

"And you two were dry-humpin' in your sister's laundry room? Just killin' some time or somethin' like that?"

"It seems that way," Coll said, his discomfort growing.

"C'mon, Coll. You're startin' to imagine there's one around every corner." Jimmy stood there shaking his head and then broke out in a belly laugh that had half of the bar's patrons turning and staring.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Well, buddy. If she's got a fondness for dialing O on the little pink telephone, why'd she just all but skip out the back door with Dirk and the Chipmunks?"

Claire would never have expected four men familiar with her work to walk up to the booth she and Della were sharing. At home, she rarely went out, and if she did, it was to the mall or the local coffee shop. The most attention she had ever received came from a visit to the tattoo parlor where Tawny worked to sign a few autographs when *Biker Ally Magazine* did an article on her and four other women across the country who

made their livelihood from their airbrush artistry. While her designs were well-known, her face wasn't.

"I'm Dirk Caldwell. An honor to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

Claire took the man's weathered hand and smiled. He was tall and skinny but undeniably fit. His gray hair framed his face in two long braids. He wore a leather vest with MIA and POW patches and his leather pants were well worn. He looked the part of seasoned biker from the tips of his scuffed boots all the way up to his wire-rimmed glasses with mirrored lenses.

"Thank you." She didn't know what else to say. The three men with him were huge, barrel-chested and of varying heights. Each had a beard that touched his chest. One was apparently going for a Blackbeard look since he had twisted the dark hair into five long strands.

"I'm Teddy," he said, wrapping his big hand around hers and squeezing gently. "Your *Sirens on the Rocks* series was unbelievable."

"My boss's dad had you do one on his boat. The *Makin' Waves*. Out of Boca. We saw a picture of that one. I'm Simon. I don't shake hands, so don't think me disrespectful. I'm trying to cope with a little obsessive-compulsive problem."

Claire smiled up into his golden brown eyes. An OCD biker? She wondered how he handled the occasional bug in the teeth. "I completely understand. You should see me when I'm working. Can't be a speck of dust anywhere."

"Hey there, sugar. I'm Al." He slid into the booth until he was flush against her side and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "When you're ready to move away from those pinup babes and do a *Hunks on Harleys* series, I'm your man."

Claire stared at him with wide eyes, her smile faltering. She couldn't tell if he was joking or serious. And she certainly didn't want to piss him off.

"Quit teasin' and leave her alone," Dirk said, kicking the man's foot lightly with his boot. "And get out of her personal space."

Al gave her a great big grin and eased away.

"I've been very blessed, Miss Arnet," Dirk said, folding his hands in front of his body like a minister about to address his flock. "I won a chopper from Big Dog Motorcycles at Daytona a few years back. A Ridgeback. One that you did the work on."

"You're kidding," Claire said, sitting up in her seat. "Which one?"

"The one with the grease monkey gal straddling the gas tank, holding her shirt down with one hand and an open-end wrench in the other. I keep thinkin' if I drive fast enough she'll have to let go and hang on, then maybe I'll see what you painted underneath."

Claire tossed her head back and laughed. She remembered that bike well. She'd done it for free, but the work that had come her way after Bike Week was unbelievable.

"I think she's wearing panties, so you're out of luck."

Della chuckled and Claire looked across the table. She'd totally forgotten the woman was there. "Do y'all know Della?"

"Y'all?" Della questioned with a smile.

"We sure do. How's your mama doing?" Dirk asked.

"Very well. Lovin' life."

"As we all should," Dirk agreed then turned his attention back to Claire. "That bike's in the back room."

"The back room?"

"The shrine," Della said. "He's got it propped upright with some special stand. Temperature's set to some particular degree. The rug he has it sittin' on cost more than my car."

"Would you like to see her again? See how she's holdin' up?" He dropped his head and looked at her over his glasses.

Without a second thought Claire pushed against Al's massive form until he moved out of the way and she shot to her feet.

"I'd love to."

Coll thought about not following them. For all of about six seconds. He passed Della and gave her a sharp look, one she completely missed as she chatted away on her cell phone. He pushed through the back door and made his way down the narrowed hallway, around stacked cases of empty beer bottles and large canisters filled with soda syrup.

Where the hell was the woman's intuition? Dirk Caldwell had been the county's local badass for the past twenty years and it wasn't as if he didn't still look the part. The man was equally feared and revered. When he had taken his nephews under his wing, everyone had thought they'd be forming an unruly gang. So far that hadn't happened. But the Chipmunks' reputations for getting just what they wanted from a woman were far from exaggerated and Coll hurried around the obstacles.

He reached the old wooden door to the unused storeroom and pushed. It was locked and he raised his fist to knock. *Right. Just politely ask Simon, Alvin and Theodore to open up and let you in.* He heard the sound of a muffled discussion and pressed his ear against the door.

"It's not going to fit." Claire said.

"I think it will." Alvin's voice was loud and cocky.

"It's too big. Don't even try. I'm begging you."

"C'mon, Dirk. Don't listen to her," Teddy said.

"Go for it, Dirk. Don't be a pussy," Simon taunted.

Coll had heard enough. He braced his hands on each side of the wall and kicked just below the lock, sending the door flying back on its hinges.

"What the fu —"

Alvin turned first and Coll quickly dipped behind him. The sight of Claire on her knees in front of Dirk propelled him forward. It wasn't until he had his hands wrapped around the man's neck that he realized he might have overreacted.

"I would not modify this exhaust," Claire advised. "It'll look stu —"

The wooden door hitting the wall sounded like a crack of gunfire and she reached out and grabbed the nearest solid object, Dirk's leather-clad calf. In a flurry of motion she watched Coll duck around Al and turn toward Dirk, a look of utter fury on his face. Her eyes widened in disbelief as he pushed her out of the way and grabbed Dirk by the throat.

She landed with a soft *plop* on her ass. "Coll, what are you doing?"

He turned his gaze to her quickly, his eyes roaming rapidly over her before glancing at the piece of white sketch paper she still had clutched in her hand. It was a pencil drawing of an elaborate exhaust system. Slowly, his eyes moved from the paper to the bike and then to the image of the pinup girl. He stared at the design for what seemed like forever, realization dawning. He took one more look at the beauty on the tank and slowly released his grip and lowered his hands.

"Those are your eyes," he finally said.

"And her tits," Al said in a whispered chuckle that ended abruptly when Coll spun toward him.

Dirk stepped between them and placed a hand flat against Coll's chest. Coll looked slowly down and then up again.

"Don't do it, son," Dirk warned softly before moving his hand away. "I understand now what you're thinking and why you're thinking it. I wasn't aware."

Claire watched some of the tension leave Coll's body as his shoulders relaxed but he kept his fists balled at his sides, his eyes never leaving Dirk's as the two men simply stared at each other.

"Now you are," Coll said in a menacing voice so low Claire almost didn't hear him.

The corner of Dirk's mouth twitched and he nodded his head.

His eyes still on Dirk, Coll reached a hand down to her. She grabbed it, shocked when he pulled her up so fast her feet nearly left the floor.

"A pleasure, Miss Arnet." Dirk turned and walked toward the door. He slapped Al on the head on his way.

"Sorry," Al said, dropping his eyes. "I meant no disrespect, Miz Claire. It's just that you have such a nice rack and —"

The other men grabbed his arms and pulled him through the door before he had a chance to finish. Claire stared at the splintered opening for a few extra moments before she spoke.

“Well, you want to explain all that weird alpha shit to me now or la—”

His large hand shot under her hair to cradle the back of her head and he brought his lips down with such force she staggered, the only thing keeping her from falling was the steely forearm he had wrapped behind her back.

She knew punishment when it was dished her way and she was about to pull back when he suddenly gentled. In a split second his lips went from bruising to a soft teasing pressure that had her running her hands over his chest and burying her fingers in his soft curls.

Claire parted her lips, ready to welcome the thrust of his tongue but it never came. He ran just the tip over her bottom lip and then stroked the soft skin between her teeth and upper lip. He teased her mouth with gentle little stabs, always pulling back before she had a chance to return the caress and the act he was mimicking was far from lost on her. A sudden jolt of want shot to her pussy and she pressed against his rock-hard form.

The hand at her neck glided down and along the outer curve of one breast and the silky covering of her bra constricted as her flesh swelled and her nipples tightened. She wanted his touch, wanted to feel his large calloused hand rubbing against her aching bud.

He pulled his lips away and whispered against her mouth. “Lord, woman, you’re driving me crazy. Please tell me you’re not gay.”

“I’m not gay,” she said, not even caring why he asked. The warmth of his breath begged for her kiss and she pulled his mouth back down and swirled her tongue around his, savoring the taste that was part beer but all Coll. His small groan echoed between their mouths and he cupped her breast and rolled the hardened tip between his fingers. She all but climbed up the hard ridge pressing against the front of his jeans.

“Not this time, sugar,” he said. His voice was raw with desire as he set her away from him and walked to the door. In one synchronized move he threw the door shut, grabbed an old metal chair and wedged it under the knob. When he turned back around the fierce look in his eyes made her take a step back. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor.

“Whoa.” Claire’s heart drummed with anticipation. She had felt his strength that morning but never imagined his body would be that hot. A mass of sculpted ridges just begging for her touch. He popped the button on his jeans and the zipper worked its way down in small increments with each step he took in her direction.

His warm hands smoothed over her hipbones then settled low around her waist but his thumbs kept moving. They swept back and forth until he worked his way under the bottom of her shirt and hooked the elastic of her pants. “I want to make you come, Claire.”

His words made her cunt throb and she gripped his arms and felt the smooth flesh of his biceps flex beneath her fingers. She bit her lip as a tiny wave rolled through her lower body from the mere thought of all that power and what he might do. What she

wanted him to do. She looked up into eyes, as desire-filled as her own, and leaned forward.

His fingers tightened and he held her away. "It isn't going to be like earlier. I want you writhin', sugar." His voice was filled with huskiness and he eased her pants down until he reached the lace band of her panties. "I want you pantin'," he said just as her lips parted on a short exhalation of pent-up breath. A moan followed when he shifted his hands, bunched her capris and panties in his fists and pushed at both until they were halfway down her ass and the top of her curls were exposed to the cool air. She closed her eyes and let his Southern drawl envelop her.

"That's right, sugar. I want you makin' little sounds just like that until you're ready to burst. 'Til you can't take any more and beg me to take you. I want to fuck you, darlin'."

Claire's eyes shot open. She never thought hearing something so graphic paired with a little endearment could have her, the woman who had earlier attempted to convince herself that she didn't need anything he had to offer, melting.

"If for some reason you don't want that, Claire, you need to stop me now."

Oh, yeah. I'm melting. Staring into his expectant blue gaze, she ran her hands down his arms until she reached his wrists and then covered his hands. *Sizzling quicker than the wicked witch.* She pressed downward, certain beyond a doubt it was going to be a great way to go.

Chapter Five

Coll dropped to his haunches and, with excruciating slowness, bared her legs. The cool air of the climate-controlled room washed over Claire but the trail of his fingers burned her skin. His hand closed around her ankle and pulled it out of her sandal and free of her pants leg. He placed her bare foot on the thick rug and didn't release her until he had rubbed her anklebone to the point of delicious warmth.

She looked down and rested the tips of her fingers against his broad shoulders and scratched lightly. She heard his small intake of breath but he didn't look up. He repeated his actions with her other leg but when Claire started to place her foot back on the floor he tightened his grip and moved her leg outward. She stared down at his hands, bonding her in a wide stance, and felt a surge of wetness seep from her soft folds.

"Claire." His voice was deep and reverent and when he dropped to his knees her legs began to tremble. Her heart was pounding unevenly. He moved his body forward, releasing her ankles to move his big open hands up the back of her calves, behind her knees, over the soft skin of her upper legs.

She watched his biceps bulge as he grabbed her under each cheek, picked her up and set her gently away from him onto the bike's seat.

"Oh." She was startled by the cold leather. "No, no, no. Not here."

"Oh, yes, darlin'." He scooted toward her on his knees, his mouth splitting into a seductive grin. "Right here's perfect."

"He'll kill us," Claire said, looking nervously left and right over the lines of the bike, silently admitting the angle just might be perfect.

Coll rose tall on his knees and met her gaze. "I'll take that chance because I honestly can't wait another minute to taste you, Claire." He slanted his lips over hers and plundered her mouth again and again until her overloaded senses screamed mutiny and she gasped for air.

"Coll...take off...your pants."

"Not yet, baby. I want you out of that bra."

Claire crossed her arms over her stomach and quickly grabbed the hem of her T-shirt.

"Not the shirt," he said, stopping her by grabbing her arms. "Just what's under it."

Claire stared into his eyes as his hands moved around her back. His fingers skimmed under her shirt. He had her bra unclasped in seconds and reached inside first one armhole and then the other to drag her straps downward so she could pull her arms free. She actually laughed when his smile turned triumphant and he reached

under the front of her shirt and freed her breasts. He winked as he pulled her bra free and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Mm-mm-mm," he said leaning back and shaking his head. "Rock-hard nipples and a white T-shirt."

Claire shifted on the seat and reached forward to brush a curl off his forehead. "Is that all it takes to get you goin', *darlin'*?"

"With you, Claire, I don't even need that. It's just an added bonus." He cupped her breasts in his hands and barely brushed the distended tips with his thumbs. "All you have to do is look at me and I'm timber-hard, sugar."

She looked into his eyes and watched the corners crinkle.

"See. That's what I'm talkin' about," he said, glancing down.

She let her gaze roam slowly down his chest and over his abs until she saw his erection sticking out of his jeans, the tip flushed and swollen. God, he was gorgeous. Every single inch of him.

"Mm-mm-mm," she mimicked. "A rock-hard cock and a..."

"And a what?" he asked, sitting down on the rug to toe off his shoes and ditch his jeans, his eyes never leaving hers.

She took a moment and then raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "I guess just the rock-hard cock will do."

"Well, that's good to know." He rolled up and crawled toward her until his chest was flush with her knees. "Are you drippin' yet, Miz Claire?"

Claire stared into his eyes and thought about a number of offhand remarks. Instead, she settled for the truth. "I've been dripping since I saw your ass bent over that pool table, Collyer."

He swallowed hard and his eyes drifted to her damp curls. "Then open for me, sugar. Let me have a taste of that honey."

His words sent a long, slow shiver up her body. She moved, resting one heel on the adjustable highway bar and the other on the top tailpipe. Her hands were actually shaking as she placed one against the bottom of the gas tank and grabbed the edge of the saddle seat with the other.

He grasped her knees, rubbed his thumbs along the top of her kneecaps and then widened her to the point that she had to reposition her ass to keep her balance. She closed her eyes and tried to get her heart rate under control. She felt as if she'd run an uphill marathon.

"You sure as hell weren't lying, were you, Claire? I don't think I've ever seen a pussy glisten like that."

He made one hot, flat-tongued sweep, straight as an arrow, up her exposed sex and she rose off the seat. The tip of his tongue flicked her clit lightly when he reached the top and her thighs quivered. He placed his hands against them and made little circles with his palms, pulling his fingers back so they didn't touch her but hovered tauntingly.

"Damn. You do taste delicious." He turned his head and his soft curls brushed her thigh right above where his hand rhythmically caressed her.

Oh, god. Her stomach coiled and her hands tightened their hold.

"So plump." His parted lips ran up one side of her outer labia before he opened wider and sucked the sensitive skin into his mouth until it touched his teeth and then let it go.

She felt her pussy give a torturous squeeze and she tried to close her legs to ease the pressure but his fingers closed around her flesh and then inched upward. He shifted his head to the opposite side and his hair teased her again.

"And soft." He focused his attention on the other pillow of flesh and using a little more force, drew it past his teeth. When he stroked it with his tongue Claire couldn't stay silent.

"Oh my god!"

"Hush darlin'. You can't be that close already."

Claire felt his fingers dance over the skin he had just caressed then open her fully.

"I am," she cried, wondering if he could actually see her clit throbbing.

"You haven't given me near enough time," he said, his tongue circling her until she was gasping for breath.

"I...I'm...sorry."

"Don't be sorry, sugar. Just try to hold on."

"Oh god, I can't," she whispered, threading her fingers through his wavy curls, not sure if she should pull him against her or push him away. "Not when you're doing that."

He blew a stream of cool air up and down her folds and she offered up a small sob. "Do you want me to stop, Claire? Take a little break."

Little tremors were working their way to her pussy, begging for a release that he was apparently in no hurry to provide. She knew what he was trying to do but she doubted his attempt at distraction was going to work. She had absolutely no self-control.

She watched his fingers move so he was holding her open with one hand. "We'll do whatever you want, sugar," he said, placing the tip of his finger just below her opening and pressing lightly. "But I really was looking forward to this."

He sank one long finger into her warmth and her response died on a moan. When he pulled out and a second one joined it on the next plunge she gave up all hope of reasonable thought.

"That's not so bad, is it?" he asked, eyes darkening as he stroked her inner heat in a gentle motion that kept her wound without spinning her out of control. "You like this, Claire?"

She nodded her head, mesmerized by the dewy sheen on his fingers as he pulled them nearly free of her body and then plunged them back in.

"I love feelin' those tiny squeezes. Can you still hang on if I do this?"

His hot mouth closed softly over her clit and she threw her head backward.

"No," she moaned, hips moving against his fingers and mouth. The tip of his tongue wiggled over the very top of her swollen nub and she started to plummet.

"Come on, sugar." His words were muffled and vibrated against her aching flesh.

His slippery fingers twisted on their next plunge just as his lips clamped over her and her cry of release echoed through the room.

Coll liked to think he had masterful penis control but when Claire shuddered against his mouth the throbbing appendage between his thighs demanded a shot at what his tongue and fingers had already delighted in. He looked at the sleek thin curves of the bike's upper body and thought he might have a chance at taking her right there...if they were contortionists. Plus, it just wasn't right to do any kind of riding on another man's bike. Not unless that man offered an invitation. And Coll knew for a fact that the last thing Dirk wanted was some bare male ass straddling his custom leather seat.

But he knew he had to have Claire right then. Thoughts of getting her off and then taking her back to his house for some long, slow, mind-boggling sex was out of the question. Her bare legs and firm breasts with their hard little points had only been an appetizer to the hunger he felt when he'd tasted her. And it had grown with each passing minute.

"Claire. Come on down here." He grabbed her hand and leaned back on his heels. She looked slowly down at him, her eyes still shaded with desire. "I can't wait any longer to be inside you, sugar."

She eased off the bike and dropped to her knees in front of him, pressing her body against him. Her stomach felt like ice compared to the heat of his hard-on and he sucked in a breath.

"You're freezing," he said, rubbing her arms briskly before glancing down. His movements slowed and he gripped her arms just above her elbows.

"Not really," she said softly, running her fingers up his sides until he wiggled against the tickling caress. There was still desire in her blue eyes but they had cleared to the point that she had regained some control. "I'll bet you can warm me up." She pulled one hand free and gave his dick a flat-handed rub from base to tip.

"Shit, sugar." He watched as she took her time exploring. He gritted his teeth and tried to think of anything but her small hand and the havoc it was wreaking on his willpower.

"Lean back, junior." She brought both her hands upward and ran her fingers over his chest. She brushed her knuckles over his small nipples and his pulse spiked. He

could still smell her excitement and he started to reach for her hips, intent on lowering her to the floor and sinking into her in teasing increments. He wasn't prepared when she splayed her hands flat against his pecs and pushed him on his ass. "Now I believe it's my turn for a little taste."

Her gaze leisurely reviewed his body and the corners of her perfectly formed mouth rose. He felt a surge of raw, male pride at the fact that she clearly liked what she saw. His full erection gave a little bounce just to let them both know it hadn't missed her heated look and her lips split in a wide grin.

"Well, hello to you too, big boy," she said, staring straight at his dick.

Coll eased onto his elbows and held his breath. She was leaning over him. Poised. But he had no earthy clue what to expect next. There really weren't that many choices. *Then why's it takin' her so long to touch you?*

"I think I need to be between your legs." She brushed the inside of his knee with her fingers and he quickly spread his thighs. "Let's see. Where to start?"

He shifted his weight to one arm and grabbed his dick, stroked it twice and pushed it toward her in a less-than-subtle manner.

"Now, Coll," she scolded, unwrapping his fingers one at a time and then grasping his wrist. "That was a rhetorical question. Lie down. And who said you could touch yourself?"

He flopped onto his back and she moved his hand to his side and then slid it upward against the soft rug. She reached as high as she could and her damp curls brushed against his dick and it was all he could do not to thrust his hips against her.

"Who said I couldn't? " he asked, running his free hand up her side and over her breast until he had the taut little peak between his thumb and finger. "There's no law against making yourself ready, is there, sugar?" He applied a little pressure and her lashes brushed her cheeks in slow motion.

"No, there isn't," she said, arching her back. The action brought her pussy lips down hard against his shaft and the moan that filled the room was his and his alone. She tucked the back of her hand into the palm he held at her breast and eased his hand away. A second later she had it on the floor near his head in a mirror image of his other arm. She squeezed his wrists tightly and he got the message—he wasn't to move. She slowly let go and slid her hands onto his chest.

"You really are too, too gorgeous." Her fingers danced across his pecs and he flexed from the sheer pleasure of her touch.

She worked her way down to his abs and a shiver ran through him as she lowered her head to his stomach. "God. One part of you is harder than the next," she said, running her lips over his muscles.

"Keep going. You haven't made it to the hardest part yet."

He couldn't see her face through her hair but he felt her smile. "Best for last," she said. She ran her tongue around his navel and Coll pressed his fists into the rug. He

wanted to bury his hands in her hair and guide her sweet, hot mouth straight to his dick. When he felt her run her thumb across his sac he almost did.

He watched as she played with his balls. Rolled them. Tested their weight. Ran one fingernail against the band that divided them. When the tip of her tongue followed the same path, he closed his eyes. She slowly showered each sphere with caresses while he lay there listening to his breathing become more and more harsh in the quiet room. She circled the base of his dick with her fingers and he opened his eyes just in time to see her stroke him until his swollen tip rested against the top of her fist and his dick wept one perfect pearly drop.

"Do you think you're ready, Coll?"

"I believe I am, ma'am," he replied in a voice he hoped sounded more casual than pleading.

Her tongue scorched as she licked the drop away and then laved his cock head, dropping her fist just far enough that she could suck the entire tip but nothing more. His balls were hugging the base of his dick and his thighs were on fire and when he spoke, he knew it was pure pleading.

"Claire, please."

She pulled her mouth away and looked him square in the eye. His dick twitched when he met her heated gaze. She straddled him, grabbed his shoulders and pulled herself slowly up his body until his hardest erection in memory was nestled against her folds.

"Do you think *I'm* ready?" she asked softly, trailing her hands along the hem of her T-shirt before moving them upward.

"You're drenched, darlin'. My dick couldn't be any wetter if I were standin' naked in the middle of a downpour."

She chuckled and he closed his eyes against the unbearably erotic feel, the tiny movements her mirth subjected him to.

"Well, I don't think I'm wet enough. Your cock's so big and thick. Want to open your eyes and watch me make myself ready for you?"

Coll's eyes snapped open and he caught his breath. Her breasts were too big for her hands but the sight was more alluring because of the fact. Her thumbs alternately swept her nipples in light little strokes.

"Mmmm. Not bad. It'd be better if you were touching me. But you have to stay still," she added before he could move. "This fabric is sooo soft. Not at all like you." She moved upward until her hot entrance was less than two inches from his engorged cock head.

He was transfixed by her motions, by her nipples straining against her shirt. When she gave a slow tug he ground his teeth and dragged his eyes away from her hands and met her teasing blue gaze.

"Claire." His voice was strained and hoarse. "Take that fucking shirt off."

"Coll!" she gasped in mock horror, covering her heart with both her hands. "My tender ears."

"Off," he ordered. A man could only take so much teasing and he broke his invisible chains and grabbed her thighs in a firm grip.

"I thought you liked the whole nipples-under-wraps thing." Her eyes had darkened a shade and he gripped her tighter, fighting the urge not to hurry her progress and rip the shirt off her body. She pulled the garment free and he took a good long look at a pair of knockout breasts tipped in a very suckable shade of rose.

"You've driven me to the point I don't know what the hell I want anymore." *Ain't that the god's honest truth, Collyer.* "Except you underneath me."

Claire wasn't prepared for the force with which he hugged her to his chest and rolled her to her back, his cock never breaking contact with her cunt.

"You get one point for the reversal," she said, her breath hitching when his legs forced her thighs together and his hips rocked against her.

"Not the way I see it," he said with a slow, cocky grin. He planted his elbows on the rug and softly caressed her collarbone before moving his hands outward and pressing down. "Both shoulders on the mat, darlin'. That means I win the match." His thumbs reached out and brushed the soft swell of her breasts and she closed her eyes and hummed. A moment later he covered her nipples with the palms of his hands and brushed them back to unbearable tautness. Her hum turned to a moan when he caught her nipples between his thumbs and the base of his index fingers.

"Oh, god. I think that's an illegal hold," she said, pussy clenching.

"Deduct a point then and throw out a caution," he suggested, running his nose along her collarbone, his breath teasing the exposed skin above the scooped neck of her shirt. He placed quick little kisses down her cleavage before moving over her breast.

He opened his mouth and sucked shirt and nipple between his teeth. She moaned as a red-hot jolt of desire rocketed straight through her. "I think I yelled caution awhile back."

"Even so. It's a clean pin," he said, running his tongue over the damp fabric until she was squirming against him. "And how do you know the particulars about takedowns?"

"Wrestling cheerleader. Three years varsity." He was kissing his way up her chest and she wanted to scream for him to come back and cover her nipple. It was cold and aching and longing for the warmth of his mouth.

"So that's why you got so pissed at Brad." He found the little spot at the base of her neck and was slowly licking it as if it were his favorite of the thirty-one flavors. She couldn't stop touching him and ran her palms over the expanse of his back. When he finally sucked the skin between his teeth and nipped, she dug her nails in and ground her clit against him.

"Easy, sugar. Are you showin' me how horny you were on prom night?"

"I can't even remember that far back but I guarantee I wasn't as hot as I am now. Are you going to fuck me or not?"

"I most certainly am." He leaned back from her neck and Claire turned her head. His eyes were so dark she could barely see his irises. "Right after I get my prize for winning that match."

"What do you get for your victory?" She tried to sound aloof but the torrent of heat flooding her lower body was inhibiting her ability to banter.

"The chance to kiss you senseless," he said, his warm breath tickling her ear. His tongue licked the little hollow at the base of her lobe and she moved her hands to his sides and squeezed his firm flesh.

She grazed her nails against his ribs and smiled against his ear. "Give it your best."

"Oh, I plan to, darlin'. I plan to."

Claire felt shivers of desire flare as his lips nipped their way down her jaw to her mouth. One thing became abundantly clear—he wasn't in a hurry and she closed her eyes, concentrating on his lazy movements. His lips were soft and smooth and they angled first one way and then another. He learned the contours of her mouth while the remainder of his body stayed perfectly still. His teeth grazed her bottom lip and a ripple of need zinged to her pussy. She tried to rub against his erection but he exerted a little more force with his hips and held her immobile.

He broke the kiss and she blinked her eyes open to find him staring at her. His eyes were a swirling mass of emotion and her heart picked up its pace. His desire was unmistakable but it was the flashes of confusion and wonder and respect that had her mind screaming that it was time to run for the door. She'd have been more comfortable if he just looked at her like he wanted a quick screw and nothing more. That she could handle.

"First in a laundry room and now on a floor," he said, brushing his nose back and forth against hers. "Tell me you don't think I'm not the biggest ass on the face of the planet, Claire."

So much for running for the door. He was adorably hot with his wavy hair falling in his face and his soft gaze waiting for an answer. *Don't do it, Claire. Make a cross in front of you with your fingers and resist. It's your last chance. You don't need another obstacle.* But he was one she'd love trying to overcome. Or come over. All he had to do was give her a quick flip and she'd ride him into ecstasy.

"Maybe not the biggest," she said, raising her head and brushing her lips against his as she snaked her hands down his back. "But possibly the tightest."

She grabbed his ass cheeks and massaged his hard muscle before running her fingers down his cleft. "Certainly the hottest. I want you so badly, Coll," she whispered against his lips. "More than I've wanted anyone."

He growled against the column of her throat and rained hot kisses over her neck, her shoulders, the tiny patch of soft skin at the corner of her breast. His mouth opened and his caresses turned urgent and the bulk of her desire shot upward in a wave of pure longing. He rolled his tongue around one nipple.

"Christ, sugar. I could spend eternity just lovin' on these rosebuds." He licked at her breasts. Lovingly. Leisurely. Over and over again until she thought she might die. She threaded her fingers through his hair and tried to press his mouth closer but he refused to budge. She swore when he finally pulled the hard little tip against his teeth and she urged him to take more. When he sucked her entire nipple into his mouth she arched her back and bucked against him.

"Not yet, sugar. I want more." He turned his attention to her other breast and before long she was gasping for breath.

She raked her nails down his back when he plied his fingers along with his mouth. "I want...more...too...Coll. Now. Right...now."

He slid down her body and she tried to part her thighs but he held them together and looked up at her through sinfully long lashes. She watched as he pursed his lips and placed a single lingering kiss against her clit and then leaned back on his knees and spread her wide.

He grabbed his jeans and pulled a condom packet out of the front pocket. Claire snatched the foil out of his hand and took the corner between her teeth and tore it open. She wrapped her hand around his shaft and rolled the condom down his length with a precision that seemed shocking considering how long it had been since she'd had anyone's cock inside her.

"In a hurry?"

"Yes," she hissed as he leaned forward and rubbed his swollen tip through her folds and across her clit. She covered the hand he had on his dick and urged him forward. The thick head of his cock pushed between her pussy lips and she swallowed her moan. "You feel so good."

"Not as good as you, sugar," he said, closing his eyes and clenching his jaw as he inched his erection into her using torturous little rolls of his hips, until he was buried to the hilt. Then he waited.

Claire exhaled little bursts of air through her nose in an attempt to control her breathing. He truly was huge and she had never had so much hard heat cradled inside her. She saw a fine sheen of sweat break out along his brow and brushed his hair behind his ears. He opened his eyes and looked down at her, his mouth forming a tight smile.

"Claire," he whispered sharply as he eased his cock out of her to the point that she thought he was pulling out altogether. "You know what this is, darlin'?" He stroked into her again, but nowhere near as deep, and she groaned her displeasure. He grabbed her calf and pushed her left leg up until her knee was at her shoulder. Then he angled his hips and pulled out again. "It's pure Southern sweetness."

"But I'm not from here," she mumbled, her body thrumming with need as he guided her leg under his arm to rest high across his back. "I'm from Indianaaaaa—"

She couldn't harness the moan that escaped her lips as he drove into her fast and hard and so much deeper than before. She thought her previous orgasm was gone and forgotten but as his thrusts grew more frantic she felt her insides clench, felt the familiar fullness press at her from the inside out and realized it had never truly dispersed. Somehow he had skillfully kept it just below the surface.

"Oh my god," they said in unison and managed strangled little laughs.

"Claire, you're killin' me."

"It's too much. I can't take it," she said, tossing her head to the side.

"Yes you can, sugar." He dipped his head down and licked a hot path from the hollow of her throat to her shoulder and nipped the skin. Hard enough that she moved her leg against his back to grip him tighter. He gave one last hard thrust and ground against her clit and she closed her eyes and watched the little spots dancing behind her eyelids turn into bright white comets as she came, Coll's short little groans muffled against her neck.

She had no idea how much time passed before the tremors stopped and she eased her leg down his body, her toes tickling his calf as she worked her way to the rug. He had relaxed on top of her, not to the point of discomfort but just enough that if she hadn't realized how solid he was before, she sure as hell knew now. She ran her palms along his deltoids before moving to his lower back. *Here's where you give him a little pat, he gets up and the awkwardness begins.*

"Oh darlin'." He raised his head and looked at her with hooded eyes and a very satisfied smile before he placed a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "That was fantastic."

She raised her eyebrows and his low, sexy laugh washed over her, pushing the beginnings of stone-cold worry right out of the way. He took her face in both hands and kissed her. Soft and slow, using only his lips and her heart took a little tumble. "Thank you, Claire. You're amazing," he whispered against her mouth before pushing up and slowly withdrawing from her body. She followed him up, resting on her elbows.

Amazing? She hadn't done a damn thing to warrant that accolade. In retrospect, she had let him do it all. She watched him stand, sinewy muscle flexing as he turned his back, pulled the condom off and walked over to the trash can in the corner. *Idiot! What were you thinking?* She had had all that rock-hard flesh to explore, to run her lips and tongue over. His ass was unbelievable. He turned around and she looked at his cock, long and soft with the slightest of sheens and did a mental I-could-have-had-a-V8 slap.

"Next time," she said under her breath, looking up when he stopped suddenly and met her eyes.

"What did you say?" he asked, massaging the muscle just below his left shoulder.

"Are we going to do this again?" she asked in a shaky voice that couldn't possibly be her own. It sounded anxious and wanting and not at all like it belonged to a woman who wasn't interested in mind-blowing sex with nearly total strangers. Not the voice of

the woman who had told him she had too many distractions in her life to worry about mutual attraction and the sexual perks it held. Her head tilted back in degrees as he walked up to her until their toes were touching and she had a bird's-eye view of his cock.

"We most definitely are," he said, offering her his hand. She placed her fingers in his palm and he effortlessly pulled her to her feet and anchored her hips to his own with one hand splayed flat against her ass cheeks. His middle finger pressed inward and she rocked against him. "But not right this second," he said, taking her other hand and bringing her fingers to his lips. He kissed each one before curling them into a fist.

"I'm not sure how long it'll take me to recover. I haven't done that in a while." He quirked his mouth and that sexy little dimple appeared. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "And the next time, we'll find ourselves a bed and do things proper."

Claire gave him a grin of her own and nipped his knuckles. "Maybe I don't want proper," she said, turning out of his embrace to start the search for her clothes. She found her panties, pulled them on and when she turned her bra hit her square in the chest.

"That's great news for me," he said, halting the process of zipping his jeans to spread his arms wide. "In case you hadn't noticed, this ain't the Taj Mahal, darlin'."

Claire snorted, fastening her bra and then pulling on her capris. By the time she bent down to pick up her T-shirt he was already pulling on his shoes. "Too bad," she said, suddenly in the mood to tease. She whisked the garment over her head and slid on her sandals. "If we were in India we'd be locked in some secret tantric position having drawn-out, karma-scorching climaxes that last four days."

He climbed to his feet and placed his hands on his hips and drew his face into a mask of mock upset. But the whole effect was lost when he tried not to smile and wiggled his eyebrows. "So that wasn't hot enough for you?" he said, snatching his shirt off the floor and coming toward her.

"It was okay," she said, smiling when he spun her around and nestled his groin against her ass.

"Just okay?"

He nuzzled the back of her neck and her stomach fluttered.

"Tepid," she offered.

"Tepid?"

"It means lukewarm."

"I know what it means," he growled, cupping his large hand over her mound and giving it a slow, slow squeeze. "But if that wasn't hot enough for you, why's your pussy juice all over Dirk's seat?"

Claire's half closed eyes shot open and she looked at the bike. He wasn't lying. There on the pristine black leather were the remains of a large wet spot.

"Oh shit," she cried, pulling his shirt out of his hands and rushing forward to rub the wetness away. "Oh my god. You don't think that's going to leave a mark, do you?"

His chuckle filled the tiny space. "You'd know better than me, sugar. Does all your tepid desire leave a stain?"

"This isn't funny. He'll freak."

"I don't think you have to worry about it," he said, taking the shirt from her clenched fingers. He brought it to his nose before giving it a little shake and pulling it over his head. "If I were you I'd be more concerned about the smell."

Claire watched him squat down beside the bike and give an exaggerated inhalation. "Yep. No doubt about it, darlin'. It's unmistakable. The scent of a woman ready to come."

She couldn't tell if he was joking or serious. He rubbed his fingers over the leather and gave her a serious look. "The good news is, the seat looks fine. The bad news—every time Dirk bends down to check that oil tank he's gonna end up with a hard-on."

* * * * *

Claire crawled between the cool crisp sheets and plopped backward with a heavy sigh. She'd finally made it to a bed but she was totally alone.

When Coll had taken her hand and led her back to the bar she'd assumed they were going to hop in his truck and take themselves off to his place. She was so focused on that fact, she nearly missed Della calling her name as she walked past the booth. The woman, and probably every person in the bar, seemed to know exactly what had transpired during her extended tour of the storeroom. She had given Claire an all-too-knowing grin and a sly wink before pushing her forgotten purse into her hands. When they walked past the pool tables there had been no catcalls or high fives but every guy there had raised their beer bottle to Coll. She heard the clinking of glass as he pulled the door open and they stepped into the night.

Claire sighed and rolled to her side, pulling the extra pillow into her arms and breathing in the smell of fresh linen. She smiled as she recalled the comforting weight of his arm draped lazily around her shoulder as he walked her the short distance to Miss Jennie's. He'd politely refused when she had asked if he wanted to come up and then quickly explained just how much he did want to make love to her. Explained it so well she was panting against his neck and nearly ready to come again. But then propriety, in the form of Miss Jennie turning on the porch light and telling her to come on inside, reared its ugly, Southern-coiffed head and she'd walked up the creaking steps to the second floor alone and horny. A nice hot shower and the suds from a bar of lavender-scented soap had taken care of the latter issue. She closed her eyes and drifted off, thinking of ways to remedy the alone part.

Chapter Six

"So tell us. What do you do for a living?"

Claire looked around the salon, touching on each of the four pairs of eyes waiting for her answer.

"I'm a graphic designer."

"You do living rooms and such?" The woman who was sitting to her right having her hair rolled into a perm felt the need to clarify. "Like those folks on the cable television station?"

"That's an interior designer, Miz Sophie," Josie said, looking over the woman's yellow and pink roller-laden head to meet Claire's reflection in the mirror. It was clear she wasn't in any better mood this morning than she had been the day before.

"I specialize in airbrushing – primarily custom projects. Most on motorcycles. Some on boats. I've done a few classic cars and a bunch of trucks."

"Ever done a tractor?" Trish asked, waddling toward Claire with a steaming portable foot bath. When the water stopped sloshing back and forth she set it down and Claire could smell the soothing scent of eucalyptus.

"No, I haven't."

"Ever done my brother?" Josie's voice was barely audible and when Claire turned and looked at her, the woman continued about her business as if she hadn't said a word.

"Are you the one who painted my nephew's motorcycle?" The woman to her left asked, knocking the tip of her cane against Claire's bare foot. "You paint that gal with her bosoms fallin' out of her work shirt, her legs spread wider than the Devil's grin?"

"It's a classic pinup pose," Claire said, trying not to take the defensive with Dirk's aunt. "I'm sure you saw tons like that during the war."

"I did. But back then they weren't near as racy. Oh, don't get me wrong. My Donald had more than a few pictorials of those sexy girls with their nipples showin'. Kept them in the bottom of the cedar chest, he did."

Claire looked down when Trish tapped her knee and motioned for her to put her feet in the tub. The soothing water surrounded her and she stifled a moan of delight and thought of Coll. She'd come down to the kitchen that morning and found a note addressed to her propped up against the coffeepot. The script was quick, bold strokes and she immediately knew it was from him.

Hope your dreams were as sweet as mine. Thought you might like a little pampering after the day you had. Be at Josie's at eleven and ask for Trish. I'll pick you up there when you're done. Wear something comfy – Coll

She had been more than a little curious as to what he had planned but, at the moment, she was thrilled at his unexpected gesture. The water felt heavenly. When Trish turned the switch and the bubbles began, she sighed and Dirk's aunt raised her voice.

"I never did understand how a man could look at those girls in those silly poses and not see how ridiculous they were." The elderly woman got slowly to her feet and steadied herself against the corner of the work station. She stuck her skinny, double-knit-clad bottom out at an exaggerated angle and brought one gnarled finger to her chin as she looked over her shoulder. "'Oh my goodness. My puppy scared this kitten up a tree and...oops! My panties fell down.' Good godamighty. Only a man would think up something like that?"

Claire knew the print she was referring to. The woman had the pose and expression perfect and everyone erupted in laughter. Even Claire. There was no doubt some of the artists had taken the images to a campy level but there was also no denying the genre had cultural worth and remained a true art form.

"I'll leave y'all to your primpin'," the woman said before shuffling across the floor and out the door.

Forty minutes later Claire looked down at her cotton-candy-colored toenails and smiled. She'd have never picked that color in a million years but they looked good. And her feet felt great. Trish had exfoliated and moisturized and rubbed until Claire was silky smooth from the calves down.

"You best not move until they're completely dry. Want a magazine?" Trish asked.

"No," Claire replied, moving her feet in a fanning motion.

"Some water maybe?"

Claire looked up, puzzled at the expectant look on the woman's face.

"No thanks."

"How 'bout a tarot reading?"

"Very subtle, Trish," Josie said, unwinding one of Sophie's rollers to check the curl.

"Tarot?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Does your mama know you're still doin' that?"

"No, she doesn't, Miz Sophie, so please don't tell," Trish said, pulling a satin rectangle out of a drawer and unwrapping the cards. "I'm taking an online course, Claire. I've always been more in tune with our spiritual side than other folks."

"That's why you dropped out of Sunday school and broke Mama's heart."

"It's a different sort of spirituality. And it's a gift I'm choosing to explore. I want to share it with as many people as possible."

"My sister the carnie," Josie said sarcastically but Claire saw her glance at the cards.

"Shut up, Josie. You're just jealous 'cause your reading sucked balls and Coll's didn't."

That got Claire's attention. Somehow she couldn't imagine Mister Studly giving a shit about some colorful cards and their purported meaning. But she could see him indulging his sister. She was so darn cute and peppy that Clair couldn't help but like her. Her happiness was actually contagious. She was the complete opposite of Atilla.

"C'mon, Miz Sophia, time for the neutralizer," Josie said and the two women walked to the sinks.

"Now, Claire, I'll do a simple three-card spread. Past, present and future."

"Oh boy, that last card ought to be a doozie," Claire mumbled.

Trish dragged a Naugahyde footstool between them. "Claire. If you're not receptive, this won't work. Take the cards and shuffle them while you think of a question you want answered. I'm going to say a little prayer for guidance in interpreting them while you do that."

Claire shuffled the deck while Trish whispered her words. She had a hundred questions she could ask. But in the end she focused on the one that had been ruling her sleeping and waking thoughts for the past three weeks. Was selling her designs the thing that would bring her happiness?

She placed the cards in Trish's hand and waited. She laid three cards facedown on the footstool, paused a moment and then turned over the first card.

"The Ten of Wands suggests struggling...feeling burdened."

Claire listened as she described aspects of her past. She was dead on when she mentioned the uphill battles Claire had faced in her career, how more was expected of her, how she took all responsibility onto her shoulders and refused to let anyone help. But apparently she had done the right thing by lightening her burden when she'd hired Quentin. His salary had taken a chunk out of her profits but his knowledge and untiring work ethic had all but paid for itself.

Josie had just walked up to Claire's side when Trish turned the middle card.

"The Lovers," Trish said softly and Josie gasped.

Claire looked away from the cards and caught the two siblings staring at each other. One had a look of pure shock on her face and the other had parted her lips in an angelic smile.

"Claire. Remember what your question was," Trish said, her face returning to its previously unreadable expression. "This is the first card in the deck where the central figure is portrayed as human. There's no figure of authority present that he can appeal to for help."

She looked at the card with the man who appeared to be torn between two women and the tiny cherub hovering above him, arrow ready to fly. "So, this doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to have to choose between two lovers? Or two things I love?"

"The actions governing the card can obviously be sexual or offer a relationship to others but they encompass personal beliefs and values as well. The figure on the card is meeting confrontation and he needs to resolve that by using his inner strength, consider things carefully and not let the end justify the means."

Claire felt a cold chill wash up her spine. Trish had no clue as to her current dilemma.

"Does that make sense?"

Claire nodded her head.

Josie plopped down in the chair next to her, looked at her watch and leaned forward. "But it could mean something else. Right, Trish? Claire, deep down are you looking for that one man who will make you whole? The man who holds your future in his hands."

"Will you hush!"

"I don't really think I need a man to make me whole," Claire responded, looking Josie square in the eye. "That's not what I need to focus on right now."

"You sure about that?"

Her shrewd blue eyes narrowed and Claire leaned forward as well. "Absolutely."

"Come on, you two," Trish scolded. "Josie, quit interrupting."

"Isn't she supposed to stay open-minded to various interpretations?"

"You have been paying attention," Trish said in a happy voice. And then she swore like a sailor. "He's here. We won't get to finish."

"Why not?" Claire asked, watching as Josie rose and Trish swept the cards off the footstool at lightning speed. She was more than a little disappointed that she wouldn't get to hear about her future.

* * * * *

Coll paused at the door to his sister's shop and peeked through the glass, shocked at what he saw. In the far back corner the two people who generally tended to make his peaceful existence a level of pure hell and the woman who had simply turned the past twenty-four hours up on end were sitting on the edges of their respective seats, huddled together in what appeared to be a deep conversation.

He quickly pushed the door open and their heads snapped up.

"Hey," they all said at once and the lighthearted feeling he'd had all morning flipped into a mass of uneasiness.

"Hey yourselves," he said suspiciously. *What the hell was going on?* He didn't trust his sisters. Not one bit. When he had called Trish and roused her out of bed last evening to ask her to work Claire into her schedule he had secretly hoped the two would get along. His younger sister tended to see the good in everyone and he knew they'd hit it off. But Josie? Now she was a whole other ball of wax. And she was up and out of her

seat and rolling his way. When she was a few yards away she nodded toward the door and he turned and followed her.

"What do you have planned for later tonight?" she asked softly, without preamble, in typical Josie style.

He could tell the cogs were spinning and he looked into eyes the exact color as his own and truthfully said, "I don't know."

"Bring her to dinner."

"Not a chance."

"Why not?"

"Because you're up to something."

"Am not."

"She's not ready for the inquisition."

"I won't pry...promise."

"I don't want to scare her away."

"Who's scary?"

He raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice further. "I only have another day with her, Josie. Two at best."

His sister stopped her protests and looked at him long and hard. It was the same look their mama had used to measure the truthfulness of their responses for years.

"Is that gonna be enough for you, Coll?"

He held her stare and then shook his head slowly. "I'm not sure. I'm thinkin' maybe not."

"That's what I figured," she said, grimacing and crossing her arms. "Well, if that's the case, you better be plannin' something pretty damn spectacular to keep her here."

"I can't imagine there's anything that will keep her here, Jos." He said the words and an imaginary hand tightened around his heart. It was the same one he'd been slapping away all morning when thoughts of her leaving kept creeping into his head. He really didn't want to admit his feelings might be a little more involved than a simple passing attraction and a few sessions of fabulous sex. Certainly not to Josie.

"Use your head, Dick Tracy. And not the one she's leadin' you around by."

Coll gripped her arm when she started to turn. "She's not leading me around by my dick."

"No?" Josie's eyes glanced down at his hand and he loosened the pressure but didn't let go.

"No."

The silence stretched and he released her.

"Do you believe all that stuff Trish told you when she did that reading? You believe there's a woman coming into your life who's not sure which choice she's supposed to make?"

"I don't know," he admitted, running his fingers through his hair. The possibility that there was someone out there destined to make him whole, to fill all the giant scars in his heart was something he might be able to get his mind around. Two days ago – not a chance in hell. But now, looking at the animated woman talking to Trish as if they were best buds – it didn't seem so strange a notion.

"Maybe you should give it some serious thought, Collyer James," she said, turning on her heel and walking straight through the shop and into the laundry room without a backward glance. He watched her disappear then met Claire halfway across the floor. Her bright smile pushed a fair quantity of his uncertainty away.

"All set, darlin'?"

"Thank you so much for the pedicure," she said, rising on tiptoes to plant a soft kiss on his jaw. "Didn't Trish do a wonderful job?"

She wiggled her toes and the vivid color caught his attention. So did the bare expanse of lightly tanned skin that ended just above her knee. He looked appraisingly over the cornflower-colored sundress and smiled wolfishly.

"I love the dress, Claire. Tell me you're not wearing anything under it." Her eyes widened and just as quickly two rock-hard points pressed against the cotton bodice. He placed his cheek against the side of her face and whispered. "No bra, huh? How 'bout panties?"

She surprised him by clamping down gently on his ear and teasing him with the soft tip of her tongue. "Thong," she whispered and her tickling warm breath shot a stab of fire to his already contracted balls.

Without a thought he cradled her face in his hands and gave her a quick, deep kiss, sweeping his tongue around hers with unmistakable demand. "Let's go. Before I end up doin' you right here."

"And that would well and truly be the definition of a nooner," Trish said from her perch behind the desk. She tapped a pencil against her cheek and pretended to study the appointment book.

He had completely forgotten they weren't alone. In fact, he seemed to have recurring memory lapses when Claire got anywhere near him. He'd have to be more careful in the future.

"We'll see you later," he said to his sister, taking Claire's hand and heading toward the door.

"Hey! Don't leave on my account," she said. "I'm expecting the oldest Rollins boy any second now for a cut. If Melanie over at the laundry can be believed, he sure could benefit from learning a thing or two. She's apt to give you six months' free shirt pressin' if you can teach him not to use football analogies when he's describin' all the ways he wants to fuck her."

"Goodbye," Coll said sharply, opening the door and motioning Claire through.

"She seems so pure and innocent," Claire laughed, giving his fingers a little squeeze.

"She's got the vocabulary of truck driver. None of us can figure out where it came from. You mind walkin'? I parked at Miss Jennie's."

"That's fine. It's a pretty day."

Coll looked down at her. "It sure as hell is," he said softly.

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"Who? Trish?" He watched her nod her head. They walked passed the diner and both raised a hand to wave at Della who was wiping down a table below one of the big windows. "Nope. No boyfriend. Not at the present but ask again tomorrow and the answer will probably change."

"Josie?"

"No way," he chuckled and they walked a little farther.

"What about you?" Claire asked.

He glanced down at her and noticed how tense she'd become. He didn't like that at all. He'd rather see her smiling. "Me? No, I don't have a boyfriend either."

"Very funny," she said dryly and he pulled their entwined fingers behind his back until her soft curves were forced against his side. They had made it to the bottom of Miss Jennie's front porch steps and Coll turned and brought their bodies close together.

"You're not too good at trollin', are you, darlin'?"

She looked up and gave him a tiny smile. "Not really."

"You could have asked my sisters. I'm sure they'd have jumped at the chance to tell you all about my love life or lack thereof."

"I did. I asked Trish while you and Josie were deep in conversation. She told me to ask you."

"Really?" Now that surprised him. "What do you want to know?" He watched her throat move as she swallowed and he wondered how much she would ask.

"I saw a picture of you and Pam with another woman and man in Miss Jennie's living room...parlor, rather. It looked fairly recent. I just wondered if she was still around or if you two weren't together. I guess I was hoping that it hadn't just happened last week or something like that..."

"Oh darlin'. Still trying to find some justifiable reason for why we can't keep our hands off each other, huh?" To emphasis his point he slid his hand down the center of her back, stopping just before the cleft of her ass. *Damn*. She hadn't lied. He rubbed the "T" of her thong. The knowledge that a set of elderly eyes were probably peeking through the lace curtains right now was the only thing keeping him from hauling her up against his semi-hard dick.

"This isn't some rebound thing, Claire. Becca's been gone for almost a year."

"A year," she asked in an incredulous voice and he watched her eyes soften.

Great. Just what he needed. A little more pity.

"I'm sorry, Coll. Was it an accident?"

An accident? And then it hit him. The way everyone danced around the truth and never really just came right out and said what had happened. And he had been no better than the rest. Once the shock and anger had died down, he had looked at it as if it were one horrific tragedy. It was easier for him to deal with that way. It kept the blows to his ego at bay.

"She's not dead," he said. It felt as if it were the first time he had admitted the fact and the constant reminder he carried around in the form of a dull pain in his stomach seemed to burst open and disappear.

Claire's brows moved together and he felt the light touch she'd been showering across his back stop.

He looked into her eyes and simply stated, "She left me." When she continued to watch him he swallowed hard and added, "For another woman."

"Ouch," she said, bringing her hands around to creep up his chest and grip his shoulders. "You had no idea?"

"Other than the fact that she loved when I went down on her but tended to usually fall asleep or have some sudden ailment before I could get my dick in her?" He closed his eyes and shook his head. It wasn't like she'd refused to fuck him, she'd just never really been there with him. Never really connected. The thought of it still hurt. Still made him resentful. "She did give a helluva hand job though."

"Poor Coll," she said, her voice more seductive than pity-filled. "You've clearly picked the wrong kind of girls."

"That's obvious," he said, eyes narrowing when her hands slid down his front, her thumb teasing his navel through the thin material of his T-shirt.

"And she's skewed your opinion of every woman you meet. Is that why you asked me if I was gay?"

She worked her way back up his chest and spread her fingers wide. To anyone passing it would look like an innocent action. They'd never guess she somehow used the underside of the rings she wore on both her hands to teasingly scrape his nipples. But if she didn't stop they'd be more than able to see the huge bulge behind the zipper of his jeans.

"Maybe...not really. That's a whole other story," he said, grabbing her wrists and pulling her hands away as he lowered his head toward her inviting lips. "I'm about to do something very inappropriate by Haisville standards, Claire."

He saw her quick smile and gave her one in return.

"You're going to kiss me in broad daylight?" she asked, grasping his hands.

"No, ma'am. Somethin' much more scandalous."

"Whatever could be more scandalous than that, Mr. Evans?" Her attempt at a sultry Southern accent was pathetic and he laughed aloud.

"Go grab your bag and come with me, sugar. If you're amenable to the idea I want us to spend the weekend screwin' ourselves into oblivion."

* * * * *

They cruised down the street in Coll's truck and Claire wondered if he had actually thought, even for a millisecond, that she would refuse his offer. *The whole weekend, baby! Invisible high five!* She looked over at Coll and the dull ache that had been present since he'd whispered in her ear at the beauty shop intensified. He was so freakin' hot. She couldn't wait for Tawny to meet him. The self-proclaimed stud finder would drop to the ground at Claire's feet and chant "I'm not worthy" over and over again.

She looked out the window when they stopped to let three boys on bicycles cross the street.

"Hey, Mr. Dells," she yelled loudly, waving at the old man sitting in his usual spot under the hardware store awning. He raised his hand and waved back.

"You've made a friend for life," Coll said, pulling away.

"He's sweet but a little preoccupied with the whole wildflower thing. I saw him going into the diner on my way to Trish's and he asked again if we'd been out to pick some. I guess it must have to do with his bees or something." She saw his shoulders vibrating and shifted in her seat to look at him. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, Claire darlin'," he said with a lopsided smile.

"What?"

"You're too damn cute, you know that?"

No one had ever called her cute. Even when she had been a child. She was about to argue but he reached over and ran his hand along her inner thigh. He stopped, stretched his fingers toward her crotch and she scooted over as far as her seat buckle allowed.

"You're cute and hot." His rubbed against the tiny piece of fabric covering her pussy and she wiggled against him, craving his touch. "And you're so wet," he said, working one finger under the satin to stroke her swollen pussy lips.

"Can you drive and do that at the same time?" she asked breathily.

"Probably shouldn't," he said, slowly removing his finger and then running his palm down her thigh to give her a consolatory pat on the knee.

Shit. Note to self. Next time keep big mouth shut.

"Don't pout, now," he chuckled, pulling at her bottom lip. She could smell her excitement on his finger and crossed her legs against a rush of moisture. "We'll be home in less than five minutes."

His log home looked rustic on the outside but as he led her through the house she noted more than a few creature comforts—the extra-deep leather sofa, a huge flat-screen TV, a hot tub off the deck that was big enough to throw a party in. He led her into the bedroom and she saw the massive rosewood bed with its intricately carved headboard.

“Coll,” she whispered, climbing onto the sage green comforter to examine the workmanship. “It’s amazing,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him.

“I know,” he replied, his eyes fastened on her ass. She waved a hand behind her and he looked up and shrugged.

“Am I imagining it or is this the story of Little Red Riding Hood?” Claire was awestruck at the detail of the carving. Right down to the tiny drops of drool coming out of Granny’s pointy-toothed mouth.

“I’m holding it for Brad. It’s been in his family for ages. He showed up one day with it and asked me to burn it.”

“You’re kidding,” she gasped, running her hand over Little Red’s basket of goodies. “Why’d he do that?”

“I don’t know. And you can never tell with him. He’s my best friend, has been since the second grade but he does tend to have these moments of unpredictability. I figure one day he’ll be bitchin’ about how he should never have gotten rid of it and I’ll be able to make him feel better and give it back.”

“He doesn’t know you kept it?” Claire asked, turning over and sliding down into an overly exaggerated come-take-me position.

“We don’t hang out in each other’s bedrooms, sugar,” he said, walking to the end of the bed.

“Aren’t you going to join me?” She batted her eyes and trailed one hand across the curve of her breast.

“Nope.” He pulled at the front of his jeans and shifted.

“If you don’t come up here and help me, I’ll have to do things myself.” She’d never tried the sultry temptress act before. She sort of liked it.

He crossed his arms and gave her a smug grin. “As ready as you were on the way out here? Go right ahead. It ought to take all of about, what...ten, twenty seconds.”

She narrowed her eyes, pulled the pillow from behind her head and whipped it at him at record speed only to have him catch it with one hand. “So much for Southern gallantry,” she said, scooting to the side of the bed. “A woman in need and you just—”

The pillow whacked her in the shoulder and she fell to her side, stunned. When she sat back up he was holding the corners of the pillowcase in one hand, twirling it slowly.

“Oh, that was so not fair,” she said, grabbing another pillow and rounding his right side.

“You started it, sugar.”

"Well, get ready. I'm gonna finish it." She dodged one way then the other, holding the pillow in front of her like a shield. He swung once and barely grazed her hip. She rounded on him and connected hard enough with his back that he took a few staggering steps.

"Ei, yi, yi, yi, yi, yi," she yelled, running around him in circles until she heard his soft laughter. She gave him a light "whomp" to the ass and the next thing she knew he scooped her into his arms and swung her around.

"Let's go, warrior princess," he said, covering her mouth with his until she pulled away and gulped for air.

"Where?" she asked, threading her fingers along his temples and into his hair.

"First a picnic." He lowered her to her feet and ran his fingers lightly over her cheekbones. "Then we're goin' to make old man Dells happy and finally pick those wildflowers."

Chapter Seven

"Wow." Claire slowly opened her eyes and squinted at the dappled rays of sun peeking through the leafy canopy high above her head. At one point there had been some speckled brown birds perched on the branches but her orgasmic scream sent them flying. Coll's head rested on her stomach and she smoothed the length of his hair with her hand. "That was wonderful."

"*That,*" he said, kissing his way up her torso, pausing to nuzzle the valley between her tingling breasts, "was pickin' wildflowers, darlin'."

"You're kidding?" He was caressing the skin along the front of her throat and she parted her lips, waiting for him to reach her.

"No, ma'am." Coll gave her a quick kiss and rolled onto his back.

"So the beekeeper is a dirty old man." She turned her head and saw he had closed his eyes but he was smiling.

"Not at all. He's just a good ol' boy who knows the benefits of country livin'."

Claire closed her eyes and thought about some of those benefits and how appealing they suddenly seemed to be. Especially the naked one lying beside her. "It's not like you can't have an afternoon romp in the city, you know."

"Maybe. But I'm bettin' the view's a helluva lot better out here."

She opened her eyes. He was staring at her with an expression on his face that caused her heart to miss a beat or two.

"I agree," she said and rolled onto her side to face him.

"What do you want to do next, sugar?"

"Gee, I don't know," she said, stretching like a contented kitten. "You've wined me, you've dined me, you've...done some sort of Dixieland rendition of sixty-nining me—"

"If that's a complaint, you're cuttin' me to the quick," he said, running one large hand down her side and settling on her hip. "Me and every man past, present and future with Southern blood runnin' through our veins. Pleasurin' our women is serious business, Miz Claire."

Claire laughed, reaching down between their bodies to give his tight curls a little tug before finding his cock. "I'm not complaining, just trying to embrace the local customs and courtesies, honey." She gave him a little squeeze and felt him lengthen. "That's all."

"Yeah? Well, one of those courtesies is to let a man catch his breath," he teased, easing her fingers away. "I'm not going be any good to you half primed."

"So the powder's a little damp, huh?"

"Only 'cause your hot little mouth made it that way."

"I see how it is." A nip to his jaw belied the sternness of her voice. "Blame the invading Northerner." She scooted backward and put a little space between them. "While you get General Jackson back to full invading power I'm going to roll over and take a little nap."

The thick quilt they were lying on was a surprisingly effective buffer between her flesh and the ground and it didn't take long for her to wiggle into a comfy position.

"Claaaaaire?"

She smiled against the soft cotton. "Whaaaaat?"

"When did you get this?" His thumb rubbed little circles against the base of her spine and she knew which of the two tattooed fairies he caressed.

"About three years ago. Tawny did it. Which reminds me – when we get back to the house can I use your phone and call her? I can't get reception with my cell even though I charged it."

"Sure. This looks just like you."

"Tawny's idea. I asked for two butterflies to represent our friendship. Tawn told me butterflies were overdone. She suggested fairies. She never told me she was putting real-life faces on them."

"She's very talented."

"Yeah, she's the best. Tawn's garnered quite the returning clientele. It doesn't hurt that she's a total babe, either. She's the other fairy. And before you start touching her, just know her boobs aren't really that big. She took a little artistic license. She's a crazy woman."

His breath warmed her as he chuckled and then placed a tiny kiss over the tattoo. "I got that impression when I talked to her."

"You talked to Tawny?" She lifted her head and was going to turn but his lips had drifted to the swell of her ass. "When?"

"The day of the accident. You were getting your stuff out of the car. Your phone rang and I picked it up. I didn't think. I was still too wound up from seeing just how close you came to slammin' into that damn tree."

"Tawny talked to you?" She had to get hold of Tawn as soon as she got back to his place. "What did you think of her?"

"Honestly?" He had kissed his way up her back and thrown one leg over her upper thighs and his cock bounced teasingly against her hip. "I thought she was a nut...and I thought you two were lovers."

Claire rose up on her elbows at that declaration and looked at him in disbelief.

"It was a fucked-up conversation, Claire. She thought she was talking to you, pouring out how much she loved you and something about not knowing the accident was going to happen and how she couldn't live without you."

"And you now know the whole deal with Becca leaving. I took it all the wrong way. Totally ridiculous." He looked at her apologetically and she fell onto the quilt in a gale of laughter.

"Oh my god. You don't have any idea just how ridiculous it is," she said, turning her head and meeting his eyes. "Tawny is the biggest lover of cock on the face of the planet. There isn't a gay bone in her body. And believe me she's had plenty of bone buried in her to be able to make that claim."

"Do you think she'd appreciate you making her out to be a slut, sugar?"

"She's not a slut," Claire said with a grimace. "She just loves men. All of them. Any of them. She truly believe she won't find the perfect one if she doesn't do a thorough search."

"And she hasn't found him yet?"

"No. She thought she had a few months back. But once his big old yacht sailed out of the bay that was the end. I think she's over him. It took awhile."

"Two months is a while?"

"It is for Tawny. She had trouble this time because the guy was a pretty close ringer for Clive Owen."

"Why do women go completely apeshit over that guy?" He gathered her hair into one hand and draped it over her shoulder. "Even Josie has a picture of him tacked up on her back bulletin board."

"His eyes," Claire responded. "And that accent. A woman loves a great accent." And a man she can actually carry on a real conversation with despite the fact they're lying naked on a quilt in the middle of nowhere. A feeling of pure and utter contentment rolled over her and she closed her eyes, accepting the languidness.

"Does that include you, darlin'?" he drawled and pressed a warm kiss on her shoulder.

"Mmmmm. Sure does," she mumbled as her eyelids got heavier. "I love...your accent."

Coll sat there with an ache in his chest, listening to the soft, even rasp of her breathing, wondering when he had turned into a complete moron. She wasn't looking for more than a weekend hookup. Hell, she hadn't even been looking for that if he believed what she'd originally told him. But he'd be a fool to deny he found her more attractive than any woman he'd ever known. And there'd been plenty. Before Becca.

Damn. If he'd gone the therapy route that everyone suggested, maybe he wouldn't have wasted a year of his life thinking he was less than adequate. But if he'd done that, maybe he would have missed Claire. Maybe those heathen cards of Trish's were dead on and this was the progression of events that would bring him to total oneness with himself. Help find his soul mate.

It all sounded corny as hell and he moved quietly to his feet, pulled on his boxers and went for a walk. Large clumps of daisies shone bright in the open sunny areas and he headed toward them. Claire had mentioned how pretty they were when he'd led her down the slope to the flattened area where he'd laid out the picnic feast. And it had been a feast. Down the road he might not remember what they'd eaten but he sure as hell wouldn't forget the way she'd pulled her dress over her head and crawled toward him with her full tits swinging and a seductive grin on her face that had his balls rolling inward.

He bent down and grabbed a handful of flowers, mentally telling his dick it wouldn't do any good to get hard now. But god, it had grown like a nursery rhyme beanstalk when she had undone his shorts and pulled them off. She had made enough of a fuss over him wearing underwear that he was pretty certain he'd be free ballin' from this day forward. And then she had leaned over and wrapped her lips around his dick.

The batch of daisies he was tugging at came out at the root. He gave a short laugh and shook off the dirt. He hadn't hung on near as tightly as the flowers. She had worked him in short little strokes with her hand while her mouth had done some sort of suck and release act that had him begging her to just draw it deep one time and put him out of his misery. He'd never felt anything like it. And when she'd finally moved her hand and sunk her lips down to his base he barely had time to pull her head away before his balls pulsed and he came all over his stomach.

"Shit," he muttered, picking up a flat rock and heading back to her side. She was weaving some sort of spell over him, no doubt about it. And it had nothing to do with the fact that she had leaned over when he'd quit groaning his release and run her finger through his cum. It might have had something to do with her sitting back on her heels, tits jutting out as she sucked that finger into her mouth, looking every inch like the pinups she created. No one had been that bold. Ever.

He sat down and dug his pocketknife out of his pants and began systematically cutting each daisy the same length. He glanced at her every so often as he split a stem and pushed another flower through the opening. She did have a fine ass. And that little tattoo was just too cute not to look at again. Her friend was clearly a talented artist. He'd have to ask Claire why Tawny was flying around naked and she was perched on that mushroom with her knees up to her chest, absolutely none of her charms able to be seen. If the woman was trying to convey Claire was the more subdued of the two, he couldn't imagine what her friend must be like.

He worked away at the little ring of daisies, pushing the final stem in as she rolled to her back and stretched. There truly was nothing more beautiful than the dots of sunlight moving over her body as she arched provocatively against the multicolored squares. And his dick obviously agreed.

"What are you doing?" she asked, pushing to a seated position. "What is that?"

He held the delicate circle of flowers in his hands and presented it to her with a flourish, one he thought probably would look a lot more genuine if his dick wasn't suddenly popping through the opening of his boxers.

"A crown. For the fairy queen. From her loyal subject." Her eyes lit up and she bent her head forward so he could place the ring of flowers on top of her auburn hair.

"Loyal, huh?" She sat up and straightened her crown and his mouth went dry. Sitting naked, cross-legged with a band of daisies atop her head she looked as if every inch of her unbelievably fine body belonged in a fantasy realm.

"Like an old hound dog," he replied, getting to his feet before he leaned in and kissed her. Which would directly lead to a helluva lot more and he was committed to finally making love to her in his bed.

"Does that mean you'll obey my every command?"

"Probably," he said, picking up the remains of their lunch and tossing it back in the cooler. "As long as it doesn't have anything to do with you wanting me to bend you over that big ol' tree branch until you're screamin'."

She stood, put her hands on her hips and glanced at the remains of an uprooted sugar maple. "How did you know that's what I was thinking?"

Coll chuckled and tossed her sundress at her. "When your eyes are rimmed with desire you're an open book, darlin'. I know what you're gonna do before you even think about it." He pulled his shorts on and looked up, surprised to find her still standing there naked.

"Really?"

"Really. Get dressed so we can head back to the house. There's a bed and some nice soft sheets waitin' for us. No more roughin' it. I'm gonna spread you out and lick every square inch of your beautiful body."

"Oooo. That sounds so yummy," she said, walking over and pressing against him until he had to grab her hips to keep from stumbling backward.

Coll looked down into her mischievous eyes and knitted his brow.

"In fact," she said, spinning around and tossing her dress over her shoulder, "I'm so anxious I think I'll just go like this. No need to get dressed if you're planning on stripping me bare anyhow."

He automatically picked up the quilt and folded it, watching as she slipped on her sandals and started up the hill.

"You're gonna traipse right through the field buck naked?" He closed in behind her, waiting for her to stop and slip the dress over her head.

"I sure am, you sexy thing." Her voice had an innocent tone but her eyes were smoldering when she looked over her shoulder. "What's the matter, Coll? You look like you didn't expect this. Have you been speed reading again? Maybe you missed a chapter in my open book."

Goddamn. He hadn't pegged her for such a tease but he sure did like it. Almost as much as the view of her swinging hips as she picked her way up the path. She got a point for knocking him down from that dangerous perch of a man thinking he knew a woman. They were just nearing the rise when she stopped and doubled over at the waist. Coll felt as if he'd been gut punched when he looked up and saw her slick folds less than two feet away.

He sensed her looking around her legs but he couldn't draw his eyes from the inviting sight of her pussy. The blood flowing through his veins took a quick detour straight to his already engorged dick.

"Sorry. I got a little pebble in my shoe." She picked up one foot and jiggled it, the movement forcing him to close his eyes and swear. There wasn't a rock within a hundred yards. "And I dropped my crown."

She just started to straighten when he reached out and slapped her hard on the ass. She spun around, eyes wide.

"Sorry," he said, trying not to grin like a fiend. "Little skeeter. You best start movin' before another one lands."

She put the flowers back on her head, held them down with one hand and took off running, her carefree laughter floating back to him on the breeze. Coll let his own grin break free and started to jog.

* * * * *

Claire repositioned herself on the big bed and waited. She'd raced through the field and over the stepping stones at the side of the house to make sure she reached the bedroom first. She heard him clunking around in the kitchen and switched positions again. She was ready for him and couldn't remember a time when she'd been so wet for so long. On the rare occasions she had actually found someone who made her hot enough that her cunt relinquished more than a drip or two, the excitement usually faded right after the guy pulled out. Her desire for Coll showed no signs of abating.

Where was he? "Are you coming?" she yelled.

"Not yet. How 'bout you?"

"Funny," she said under her breath, hopping off the bed and folding the comforter down. She crawled onto the cool sheets and lay down on her back, sliding against the super softness. "Ahhh. Mmmm...these are nice."

"Can I join you or should I come back after you and the eight-hundred-counts are through rubbing each other off?"

He was propped against the doorframe, one thumb hooked in the waistband of his shorts and the other holding a big glass of iced tea. If Lipton put that image on their boxes, instead of the old mustached guy holding the tea cup, profits would quadruple.

"I guess you might as well join us," she said with a sigh. "They're a little too soft to be effective." She watched him unsnap, unzip and walk out of the shorts with great

dexterity. His boxers were hugely tented and Claire smiled. "Looks like the troops have had plenty of time to reconvene."

He walked to the bed and offered her the glass. "Thought the enemy might like a drink before I breach her defenses, sound the charge and raise the flag."

"Why thank you, kind sir. I am indeed a bit parched." She accepted the glass and took a hefty swallow.

"Hey, you're getting better with the accent." He winked and Claire smiled. "Best pace yourself, sugar. Save that replenishment. It's going to be a long, drawn-out siege."

"Should I bar your path?" She set the glass on the nightstand, watched him work his boxers off and smiled. His cock was simply gorgeous. She crossed her legs tightly and covered her breasts. "Keep you from pillaging all that I have?"

"You sure as hell can try," he growled. Claire attempted to bolt to the other side of the bed. He caught her just above the knee and pulled her back, covering her heavily with his hard body. The length of his rigid erection pressed between the cheeks of her ass. A tiny moan escaped her lips when he rocked against her, the force pushing her clit into the mattress.

"Ready to concede, Claire?" He used his chin and moved her hair to one side. His slow, even breaths drifted against the side of her neck, the thought of his lips touching her coaxed the heat within her to blossom.

"Never," she said. She wasn't prepared when his tongue licked a hot path from her shoulder all the way to her temple and she squirmed beneath him. She wondered how far he would take the marauding-rebel fantasy and a fine sheen broke out upon her skin.

"Never's a long time," he said, dropping light kisses on the shell of her ear before working his way down to the dangling tiny gold hoop. He flicked it lightly with his tongue. Drew it into his mouth and rolled his tongue around it. What else he could be caressing in just the same manner wasn't lost on her and her pussy clenched. "Think you can hold out, darlin'?"

"Absolutely." It was a lie. They both knew it.

He spread his legs, his strong thighs hugging the sides of her ass as he repositioned his cock so he could stroke against her full globes. The moisture on her skin was far from lubricating and the jerky motion prompted a curse from him and Claire gave a strangled snort.

Coll rose up on his knees and she immediately missed the heavy warmth of his body. If she taunted him a little more maybe he'd lie back down. "So much for breachin' my defenses."

She heard him open the drawer to the nightstand and tried to turn. His large hand landed between her shoulder blades and pressed her down and her heartbeat picked up. Drops of something cold and wet tickled the crack of her ass before sliding downward to where she had no need of added lube. He leaned forward and this time his cock slid freely as he thumped a bottle of baby oil on the nightstand to her left.

He worked his cock against her in tortuously slow strokes and she turned her head to the other side, wiping the dampness off her brow in the process. The pressure on her back lessened and his voice took on a deeper timbre. "You know I'm in a position to breach a lot more than your defenses, don't you, sugar?"

His hands dug gently into the flesh of her ass before his thumbs dipped into the crack and eased her open. His cock was like hot steel and when he rubbed against her she felt it swell. He leaned back and changed the angle so he could work his tip against the hypersensitive patch of skin between her cunt and her asshole and she let out a ragged sigh. He tilted his hips on a downward stroke and Claire moaned when the ridge around his cock head brushed against her puckered skin.

"Yes," she whispered as her hips started to move.

"Was that agreement or were you asking for something different?"

Claire closed her eyes and tried to focus. The feel of his erection rubbing against her was beyond temptation and she nearly told him to fuck her, right now, however he wanted. But memories of how thick and long his cock was stopped her.

"You're too big...god...I want you to...but...I can't."

He leaned back and a second later he was covering her back. His cock was trapped against her spine and he placed gentle kisses along her shoulder. "Shhh. Settle, sugar. Just tell me I broke through the line." His soft drawl was nearly hypnotizing.

"You broke through the line," she admitted and his weight lifted. He rolled her onto her back, tucking a pillow under her head.

"Good girl. Now tell me you surrender or I'll have to wage the second phase of the offensive."

My sweet lord. With him leering at her with raw desire and his slicked cock plastered against his abs, what woman with a smidgen of a libido would admit defeat in the midst of a wet dream come to life.

She shook her head from side to side and his eyes narrowed. He looked far from annoyed. In fact, his eyes glistened.

"You won't do it?"

"No," she whispered.

"You leave me no choice." He grabbed her wrists in his hands and gently yanked them above her head. His eyes drifted down to her breasts and Claire's nipples puckered. "Time for the charge, darlin'."

Claire raised her hips and brushed against his erection. "Is that a bugle in your pocket or are you just *horny*?"

His full lips rose in a grin and he looked into her eyes, his amusement clear. "You shouldn't taunt the man who holds your future in his hands."

The air rushed out of her lungs and if he hadn't been holding her down she would have jumped and run. Fast and far. *Common phrase, Claire. Nothing more.* Unless he had been a dust bunny under one of Josie's workstations he had no way of knowing it was

the second time in one day Claire had heard those words. They were a lot more frightening when the man who had effortlessly wormed his way under her skin spoke them.

"What? No smartass retort?" He leaned down and dropped a band of feathery kisses along her collarbone, his silky head pushing her chin backward to allow him better access. "I must be wearin' you down, darling."

Claire closed her eyes and let the sensation take her. He *was* wearing her down, to a point she'd thought she would never reach. Forget the fact all it took was one sexy lopsided smile for her breasts to swell. But how could she when he was systematically working hot, wet, openmouthed kisses on first one breast and then the other. His bottom lip teased, coming ever-so close to her nipples but never quite touching them. She reached for his head but he easily pushed her hands back onto the pillow.

"I want to touch you," she whispered in a whiney voice that certainly wasn't her own. *You must be channeling some weak-kneed belle of eras past.*

"Can't let you do that," he said, looking up at her through thick lashes and doing the grin thing. "Not 'til all flanks are secure." He shifted his head and cradled the underside of one distended nipple with the tip of his tongue, his eyes never leaving hers. Poised for what seemed like an eternity, until he finally swirled around the peak and drew it against his teeth. Claire's back arched off the bed as a jolt of electricity zinged a path to her cunt. He nipped the taut nub and wetness rolled from her folds.

"Oh god," she moaned. "Please, Coll."

"What is it, Claire?" He turned his head toward her other breast and she tugged at his hands.

"Let me go. You're taking too long." Her pussy was throbbing and the juice dripping down her slit was making her writhe. He sucked her breast into his mouth and flicked his tongue repeatedly against the aching peak. He bit down and white-hot need rocketed through her.

She bent her wrist and dug her nails into his hand. He slowly entwined their fingers in response.

"I'll let go if I have to. If you really don't like playin'."

Shit. How did she answer that? How could she deny the fact that her body was humming like it never had? How could she deny that she wanted to see what came next?

"Let up. I'll try to keep my hands still." That was closer to concession than she'd ever come with a man.

"Here." He let go of her hands and reached across her body to the farthest corner of the nightstand. He plopped a weight into her hand and she tilted her head back and saw it was a huge crystalline geode. "That'll help."

The blend of clear and milky quartz was beautiful...and heavy. "You're not afraid I'm going to become weary of your advance and bop you in the head with this?"

He ran his fingertips along the soft undersides of her arms and down her sides until he reached inward and palmed her breasts. "I'm thinkin' in about fifteen seconds I can divert that train of thought."

"Cocky."

"For sure," he said, rolling her nipples between his thumbs and the base of his fingers. "Did you like that, sugar?"

"Is that part of the game?" He arched one brow in response and she said softly, "You know I liked it."

"I don't know a damn thing about you Northern beauties." He ran his knuckles along the inside of her breasts before blazing a path to her navel.

"I'm your first one?" Claire asked, licking her lips invitingly. His hands halted for a second.

"God's truth," he said, placing a hand over his heart. "You are indeed, Claire."

For some inane reason his admission made her heart flip and every nerve ending sizzle. She shifted her legs apart until they bumped the inside of his spread knees and he sat back on his legs.

"That's so sweet, Coll," she said, pulling a leg up and moving it to the outside of his hip. She drew it up the sheet until she was half opened to his view, silently begging him to touch her. He didn't disappoint.

He stroked one finger down her belly, over her clit and buried it deep in her cunt with an urgency that startled her but not nearly as much as when he pulled the finger out and sucked it into his mouth to lick it clean.

"Now *that's* sweet." He ran the finger between her folds and Claire pressed against him. "Want a taste, darlin'?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head no. He rolled to his side and pressed his finger a fraction of an inch into her wetness. "C'mon, sugar. It's sweet, sweet, sweet."

He leaned his head forward and brushed her lips until they parted. The minute she opened her mouth he plunged his finger deep into her cunt. She sucked his essence-covered tongue and broke away with a moan.

"Isn't that good, Claire?"

"Oh my god." She didn't know which he was referring to. He pulled slowly out and then eased a second finger in, fucking her in short, leisurely strokes. The light friction seemed to ignite tiny pulses of heat from her breasts to the hard little bead he apparently wasn't in a hurry to touch. She knew his thumb was down there, it bumped teasingly against her pussy lips but when she tilted her hips downward he pulled it out of the way.

"Is there somethin' you want, sugar?" His voice was smoother than honey. "What is it you hot little Yankees like? Tell me."

"Touch me."

"I am touchin' you," he said, twisting into her.

"Not there," she moaned.

"Then where?" He covered his teeth with his lips and rolled the tip of her nipple back and forth until she was gasping.

"You know...where."

"Say it, Claire," he demanded.

"My clit," she pleaded, turning her head to the side. "Touch me there."

"Like this," he asked, rubbing the smoothness of his thumbnail along one side.

"Yes," she hissed.

"Or is this better?" He rotated his thumb to the knotted area above the throbbing nub and tapped rapidly.

"Oh god." A sudden warmth began seeping outward from her chest then down her arms. The heat radiated down her torso, to her legs and she curled her toes and arched her back as the tension between her thighs built.

"Relax, sugar," he whispered in her ear before kissing her temple. "We've got all day."

No we don't! He quit stroking and a cry escaped her lips.

"I think that little rise has had enough exploration for a while."

"No," she moaned. *He's not serious. He'll touch you and you'll explode.*

"Yes. For now. How can I win the battle if I don't employ all my weaponry?"

"Fuck your weaponry," she cried, thrusting her hips only to have him place his other hand on her abdomen and hold her still.

"We'll get to that. Eventually."

He eased back into her cunt, stroking her gently with the same two fingers. He stoked her to the point that she actually had tears in her eyes and her body roared like a furnace. And then, with the tiniest turn of his wrist he began rubbing against the front wall of her vagina in a slow circular motion. Her little exhalations quickly turned into sobs. Claire turned her head toward him, expecting to see his lips twisted in pure male satisfaction. His blue eyes glimmered, his expression was focused...serious.

"You feel so damn good, Claire. I could stay like this for hours. Just stroking your softness, baskin' in all that heat."

But he wasn't stroking her. He was doing a little internal massage that seemed to draw all the blood in her body to the very spot he was caressing. His fingers applied a bit more pressure and she jumped as an unfamiliar sensation of delight rocked her.

"Mmmm. There it is, darlin'."

The geode rolled onto the bed as her hands came free and she clutched at the pillow.

"Colllll?" She was suddenly unsure and gripped the hand he held against her belly.

"That's right, Claire."

"Oh god...Coll." She was too full. The usual gradual heat of an oncoming orgasm had turned molten, the sensation intensifying to a point that was almost frightening. She truly felt as if she were going to explode. "Coll...stop." A wave of sensation crashed against her and she bolted upright and grabbed his wrist.

"Come on, Claire. Let it happen, sugar. Ride it."

Ride it. She knew that's exactly what she was supposed to do, be happy he'd found the magical spot that had eluded others, push past the fear. She'd just never been brought to the point of testing that theory before.

"Christ," he looked quickly up at her and she noticed the tiny beads of moisture on his upper lip. "You're clenching like a vise."

"Fuck me," she cried, tugging uselessly at the hand he had cemented between her quivering thighs.

"Come for me first." He moved his fingers away for a second then pressed hard against the inflamed flesh and she closed her eyes, threw her head back one second and then doubled over the next. Her keening cry filled the room as her orgasm resonated outward and a gush of liquid bathed his fingers. She rocketed over an edge of hot white light and pure sensation that wouldn't stop. She flung herself backward, dug her heels into the mattress and rocked against his fingers as rolls of delight continued to ripple through her over and over.

"Claire? Sugar..." His voice drifted far, far away and she heaved a deep breath, fighting for control. "Darlin', are you all right? That was —"

She reached out and wound her fingers in his hair and yanked his head up until they were at eye level.

"Fuck me. Fuck me right now."

Claire's urgency took him by surprise but not as much as the feral look in her darkened eyes. His fingers were still buried in her, soaked with her juices and he would have been content to leave them there and tease her a little more except her other hand had found his dick. Her thumb was spreading his pre-cum around the swollen tip like a hot balm in a rough manner that had him growing unbelievably hard.

He eased his fingers out of her pussy, pulled her stroking hand away and lubed his cock with her juices.

"Now," she demanded once again and he reached for the drawer.

"Let me grab a —"

"You don't need it. I want you in me. Skin on skin, Coll. I want to feel every ridge of your cock, every long, thick inch stretching me."

Her words lulled him into pressing the tip of his dick into her pussy before some hidden voice of reason brought him up short. He looked at the drawer and started to move away but she grabbed his ass and rocked into his erection.

"Shiiiiit," he groaned, shoulders heaving as he fought to do the right thing.

"I've got us covered, honey." Her voice was short and raspy. "Honest."

He chose to believe her. He trusted her. And it was all he needed to hear.

He thrust until he was deeply seated and his aching balls were tight against her ass. He thought about how she'd contemplated letting him take her there and his dick jumped. That would be enough to blow his head right off his damn shoulders.

Claire's hips were rolling against him and he felt the hard contractions pulsing around his dick intensify. There was no doubt she was going to milk every last drop out of him and it was going to be as wild a ride as she wanted. He rested his elbows on the bed and smoothed her damp hair away from her flushed face and she gave him a shaky smile.

"I want to make this last, sugar. Wrap those pretty legs around me, Claire." She hitched them over the small of his back and he started pumping, knowing he could set a quicker pace since she was well past ready. If he had sunk bare into her inviting heat at the get-go, he wouldn't have been able to hold back. She was smooth and slick and he knew without a doubt he'd never be able to let her go.

"Coll," she whispered apologetically as her legs slid down his side. "I can't keep them up there. They're shaking too much."

He bent down and captured her lips until she was begging him once more. He pulled one leg up and nipped at the inside of her knee before he hooked it over his shoulder.

"How's that? Better?" he asked and thrust quickly into her pussy.

"Shit," she swore. "You're deep. It feels so good."

If he wasn't nearing the end of his control he'd show her just how much better it could be. Next time. *Buck up, Collyer. Don't wait. Show her.* Her inner muscles were clutching at him and her little mewling sounds were driving him directly to the edge. *No time like the present to rock her world, son.*

He grabbed her other knee and pushed it up and over his shoulder. "Can you take it a little deeper, darlin'?" They were nose to nose and he could see how big her pupils had become. The short little breaths teased his lips. He nearly cried aloud when she finally nodded her head.

Coll slid his legs flat against the mattress, gritted his teeth and rocked slowly until she fitted herself around his dick. Despite the fact that she was drenched and ready he would not pound into her like some randy sixteen-year-old. *At least not until she's screaming your name.* Her tiny moan pushed that thought to the forefront.

"Coll." She rocked her head and dug her nails into his back. "Oh my god. Quit retreatin' and plant that fucking flag."

He groaned as he pulled out to his tip and tormented her with one long, slow thrust. And then he was pistoning into her warmth like a madman, sweat rolling off his back and down his face. She leaned in and licked a drop from his cheek and he buried his face in her neck, licking her own dampness in response. The sound of flesh slapping

flesh echoed through the room, the frantic rhythm keeping time with his accelerating heart. When her teeth clamped down on his shoulder he thrust upward and she screamed his name and came again.

"Claire, Claire, Claire." He followed her into the haze of completion, chanting her name.

"Mmmmm," she sighed a short time later and he opened one eye and returned her smile. "I am well and truly pleased, suh," she said and he chuckled into the pillow.

"That damn near killed me, Claire." He rolled onto his back and pulled her into his embrace, smiling when she wiggled against his side. "But on behalf of all my ancestors I'd have died a happy death."

"Awwww." She hummed against his chest, trailing her hand down his stomach and swirling it through his pubic hair. "Thank heavens it didn't come to that but you did good, son." She patted his dick gently with her palm and whispered in his ear. "Ya done Old Hickory proud."

Chapter Eight

"It was unbelievable." Claire stood on the big deck looking out over the expanse of green and switched the phone to her other ear. She'd been talking to Tawny for nearly twenty minutes."

"You actually *squirted*?"

Claire squinted against the high-pitched noise in her ear. She heard a masculine mumble in the background and then Tawny's no-nonsense voice.

"Look, Joey. If you didn't want me talking and working at the same time you wouldn't have bought me the ear bud. You could have said 'I prefer you don't answer the phone until you're done with the ink'. Chester here isn't minding my conversation one bit, are you, sweetie? If he was, he wouldn't be pitching a tent big enough to house a family of four. Sorry, Claire."

"I'd better let you go." She turned and looked through the sliding glass door to where Coll lounged in an oversized chair, her portfolio on his towel-covered lap. His hair was slicked back and his bare chest rippled with muscle. *Yeah. Gotta go.*

"No. What happened next, you little slut?"

Claire laughed and cut the story short. "He fucked me witless, we fell asleep, got up and showered and now he's waiting for me in the living room, wrapped in a big fluffy towel and nothing else."

"How big's his cock?" Tawny whispered and then in a louder voice, "Take a pill, Joseph. Holy shit. A girl can't live vicariously through her best friend anymore. *Fuck.*"

"I'm hanging up now," Claire laughed.

"If you must," Tawny said, sighing heavily. Then more seriously she asked, "What are you going to do, Claire?"

"I don't know," she truthfully replied.

"There's a reason you ended up in Mayberry, sweetie." She'd told her friend about the Lovers card and that was all Tawny had needed to hear.

"Maybe you're right."

"Screw maybe, Claire. You think long and hard, pun definitely intended, on whatever's wrapped in that towel and the man it's attached to. You've told me more than you'll ever realize without telling me a damn thing."

That was the Tawny logic Claire had come to know and love. "I'll give you a call when my car's fixed and I'm on my way home."

"At the *end* of the week, right?"

Claire let the question hang in the air between them. She wanted to do it. She wanted to stay until the last possible moment. Wanted to be wrapped in Coll's arms and listen to his sisters bicker and have another piece of Molly's coconut cream pie.

"Right."

"You won't regret it, sweetie."

"I hope you're right, Tawn. Bye." She clicked the phone off and took one more look over the railing. Three deer had walked through the tree line for an evening graze. She smiled as she watched the littlest one kick its back legs and run after the others. She hoped Tawny was right. Claire closed her eyes and prayed that by the end of the week she wouldn't have an ounce of regret. She took one last look at the deer and went inside.

Coll had moved to the couch and turned on a lamp. She was shocked that he hadn't made it the entire way through her portfolio.

"You're amazing," he said, patting the leather next to him. "I didn't realize you do more than just the girly ones. This one set of flames..." he flipped backward until he found the design he was looking for. "They're so realistic you'd think you'd get burned just touchin' them."

"Thank you," she said. She loved when people recognized her skill, appreciated her talent. She scooted next to him and watched as he turned back to where he'd been looking. His big hand rested at the top of a page and she studied the crescent-shaped scar at the base of his thumb. She'd asked about it when they'd been in the shower and he was soaping her breasts. She placed her hand against his wrist and rubbed the smooth, pale skin. "I never thought fishing could be so dangerous."

He laughed and turned another page. "Getting hooked isn't dangerous. It's just part of life."

For a second she wondered if they were still talking fishing.

"What made you want to do this as a career?" he asked.

"When we were growing up, my best friend and I used to doodle all the time. The other girls would be playing with dolls, we'd be coloring. We were lucky enough to have a junior high art teacher who told our parents we had potential. They enrolled us in some youth classes in Indianapolis and when we graduated we went on to design school there. That's where we both realized we loved the airbrushing."

"So your friend does this too? Is she in Jacksonville?" He turned the page and looked at one of her most recent designs and snorted. It was a hunk of a man with long flowing blond hair and piercing green eyes. He was lounging back on his palms, one leg bent to offer a tantalizing view of a nicely defined jean-covered bulge.

"Hey. There're tons of women bikers out there. I've done more than a few of those over the years. And my friend's name is Landry. She lives in Pittsburgh and only does helmets."

"Helmets? No tanks, no cars? How's she survive?"

"She's done over half the goalie masks in the NHL, each better than the last. It's obscene what those things go for. Plus those hockey players are so superstitious, they'll have her do a second or third one just to add some little item that may or may not have something to do with a winning or losing streak. Trust me. She's not forced to sit in the dark eating SpaghettiOs."

He shut the book and tapped the cover. "So what's the deal with the folks who want to buy these?"

"Opportunity of a lifetime, they tell me." He set the portfolio on the ottoman and draped an arm around her shoulders. Unlike him, she'd opted to put clothes on but she shivered nonetheless when he ran his thumb against the side of her T-shirt-clad breast.

"And what do you think?"

"I'm trying to decide." *Choices, choices, Claire.* "If I accept their offer, I could easily sock that money away and live off the interest. Do some really specialized custom work. Be a little more particular in whose bikes or cars I work on. Not feel like I'm just an airbrush-wielding whore...plying my trade to the highest bidder."

"But they'll own your designs."

"They'll license them. I still own them but they get full control of how they're used. I get the big money payoff and then a percentage of each piece that's reproduced."

"So, are they yours or not?"

Claire stared out the door at the twilight sky and sighed. "Not really. That's the part I'm trying to come to terms with."

"What if you don't take their offer?" He brought his hand to her forehead and brushed her hair back softly.

"I continue to get comfortably by. Work ten hours a day. Thank my stars I have a helper or it would be twelve or fourteen hours. Pay my lease. Make my rent. Meet Tawny for drinks every Friday. Spend Saturday cleaning and doing laundry. Maybe a movie. Sundays are for cruising around on someone's boat. Dream about owning my own place somewhere other than on a crowded street. Somewhere people wouldn't mind making the trek to my door because they know they're going to end up with a kick-ass design that's theirs and theirs alone."

They sat and watched the pink and blue hues of the dying sunset turn into muted shades of violet.

"Are you happy, Claire?" His jaw moved against her temple and his voice was soft.

"I'm pretty happy," she admitted.

"I'm glad," he said, tilting her chin toward him with a finger. He looked down into her eyes and smiled. "Everyone should be happy, sugar. How 'bout I cook us some burgers then we go dancin'?"

"Dancing?" Claire stared at him as if he'd just admitted he tormented small animals just to hear them squeal.

"Don't you like to dance?"

Claire watched as he hauled himself out of the cushy leather and stood before her with his hands on his hips.

"I love to dance," she said, still puzzled. "But that's not something men usually –"

"I don't know about those tight-assed city boys you're used to, darlin'. But around here we're not afraid to shake our moneymakers every now and again."

He rocked his hips from side to side then did a little bump and grind twirl until Claire covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

"Just watch. I've got moves you haven't seen before."

He turned toward the window and shook his ass and Claire couldn't resist. She grabbed the back of his towel and pulled it off his hips.

He turned around and gave her a full frontal view of just how ready to dance he was.

* * * * *

Whose brilliant idea was it to go dancing? Usually he was the one standing at the bar with a hard-on, flanked by a row of single guys in a similar state as they watched the couples shimmying against each other on the worn wood dance floor.

Tonight he was the one in the middle of the dance floor with a hard-on *and* a temper on edge as every guy at the bar watched Claire wiggle and shake. He pulled her up against him and gave her a deep kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and purred, not at all put off by his show of possessiveness.

"You're a great dancer. Kiss me again." She puckered her lips and when he didn't immediately kiss her she opened and closed them like a little guppy gasping in the air.

He laughed and crossed his arms over the top of her ass. "How many Blow Jobs have you had?" he asked. She turned around and ground her ass in little circles against his crotch, earning more than a few hoots and a loud rebel yell from Trish who was across the room, dancing with the youngest Patterson kid. "How many?" he whispered in her ear, nipping her lobe just for fun.

"How many Blow Jobs?" she asked, over the music, and the couples around them turned, waiting for her response. "Not countin' the one I shared with you this afternoon?" Coll heard their laughter and shook his head. She was a hoot.

"Four...no...five countin' –"

"The one she shared with you this afternoon," a chorus of voices said.

The music died down and he pulled her over to the side of the dance floor and cradled her jaw in his hands. "If I tell you I think you've had enough will you get pissed?"

She stared up at him, her blue eyes twinkling and offered a crooked grin.

"No more blowjobs? Are you sure?" Her hand snaked down to his waistband and she had the edge of his shirt untucked and was teasing his navel before he realized what had happened. "No more?"

He looked into her eyes and gave up. "How about two more. One of the alcoholic variety here...and the other on the way home." He laughed when her eyebrows shot upward and then Trish was at her side.

"The DJ does have that song you like. He'll get it on directly."

"Will you two behave yourselves while I run to the men's room?" Coll asked.

They both nodded quickly and when he hesitated Claire whipped her right hand up in a scout's salute. Trish followed suit. With the wrong hand. He left them both dissolving in fits of laughter.

When he walked back into the bar minutes later he found Claire, both his sisters and Della at the bar throwing back the coffee-flavored shots to a round of applause. "All done, sugar?" he asked, placing his hand on Claire's waist.

"All done, darlin'," she replied with a wink. "For now."

And just like that, his dick grew another inch. He was definitely going to have to work on his control. He'd kept it on a tight leash the entire time he'd been licking his wounds over Becca leaving. Now that it had some freedom, it seemed to have a mind of its own.

"How long you stayin' in town, Claire?" For once, Coll didn't mind Josie's blatancy and he turned his head and pretended he was part of the conversation to his left. Claire's response nearly had him dropping to his knees and thanking Jesus.

"'Til the end of next week. For sure."

"Then you need to come to Mama's for dinner on Sunday."

"Gee, I don't know?"

He sensed her looking up at him and he kept his attention diverted a few moments longer then looked down and said, "What's that?"

"Josie invited me to your mom's for Sunday dinner. What do you think?"

He pulled her into his arms, back to chest, rested his chin on her shoulder and gave his sister a wink. "I think that'd be just fine, darlin'. Just fine."

A sharp whistle from the DJ echoed through the room and the entire bar quieted. Then they heard the distinct valley girl accent over the audio system.

"Oh...my...gawd, Becky. Look at her butt."

Feminine yells went through the room and Coll watched in disbelief as Claire grabbed Josie and pulled her toward the dance floor. Nearly ever female there swarmed forward as the beginning strains of the old school rap song made its inaugural debut at The Hairy Buzzard. He crossed his arms over his chest, wondering how well that bouncing bass was going to go over with the Skynyrd and Haggard crowd.

The thumping beat shook the room as the women proceeded to gyrate. One by one a few brave men got up and joined them. Coll felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder and turned to find Jimmy staring, dumbfounded.

"What the *hell* is that noise?" he finally asked.

"Sir Mix-A-Lot, brother," Bobby Dells said on his way by, holding his beer high as he waded into the sea of bodies.

"Baby got back," Billy Patterson said, stopping to hold his hands around imaginary hips and thrusting forward in the international pantomime for fucking before he worked his way into the crowd.

"Remind me to beat the shit out of him later," Coll said, rising on his toes as he lost sight of Claire.

"Is that *Josie*?" Jimmy asked, the shock clear in his voice.

"Where?"

"Right there," he pointed.

"Holy fuck." Coll watched his sister shake her body downward into a crouch until she was level with some guy's zipper. "Is that *Dirk*?"

"C'mon, boys." Claire was suddenly in front of them, crooking her fingers in their direction. When neither moved, she danced up and grabbed their hands.

"No way," Jimmy said, trying to hang back. "I don't like to dance. Let alone to that shit."

She was bopping sideways to the beat and Coll couldn't help running his palm over one denim-clad cheek. She looked over her shoulder at him and grinned then turned her attention back to Jimmy.

"You don't have to dance, James. All you have to do is...listen," she said, raising her arms and pointing her fingers left and right to the words.

"*Shake it! Shake it. Shake it! Shake it. Shake that healthy butt!*"

She bounced up close to Jimmy's side and Coll heard her yell "Please". Jimmy's eyes widened and then she led them into the crowd. The men bumped shoulders and Jimmy whispered, "Your girlfriend just grabbed my ass back there."

Coll turned his head and laughed. "She's not officially my girlfriend."

"Well, goddamn, son. Can I have her then?"

Coll didn't get a chance to answer. Claire had the three of them circling each other, shaking their butts and a whole lot more. He thought Jimmy's eyes might have actually glazed over when Claire and Josie sandwiched him between their wiggling bodies. When Claire twirled around and pressed against him, he gave up worrying about propriety. He grabbed two handfuls of lush ass and raised her to her toes. "Let's go, Claire."

She brushed his hair back off his forehead and gave him a quick kiss. "Let's."

The final notes of the song died down and he caught Jimmy's eye. "Make sure they get home?" he called over a few heads, glancing at his siblings. Jimmy gave him a brief nod then threw his head back and yelled when the first six notes of "Gimme Three Steps" blared through the room.

They got to his truck and Coll opened the door and waited for Claire to climb in. When she just sat there and closed her eyes, he reached across and hooked her buckle. By the time he got behind the wheel she had pulled the strap out as far as possible and plopped down on her side.

"You all right, sugar?"

"Mmmmmhhhhh." She reached over and put her hand on his thigh. It wasn't teasing or seductive. It was purely comforting. "I owe you...a blowjob." Her words were garbled and he started the vehicle and pulled onto the road.

"It's okay." He tucked her hair behind her ear and rubbed a silky strand between his fingers. "I'll take a rain check."

Her voice was soft and taking on that faraway quality. "You're so...under...standing. That's what...I love... 'bout you, Coll."

He nearly drove off the road.

"Claire?"

Once his racing heart slowed and the pounding in his ears died down, he heard her gentle, even breathing and knew she was gone. Which was perfectly acceptable. Because so was he.

* * * * *

"Do *not* come in here," Claire moaned, resting her head against the side of the wall when Coll tapped against the bathroom door. *Nice, Claire. Real mature.* It was his fault. He's the one who wanted to dance. *He didn't slam those shooters down your throat.* "Oh shit." Just the thought of the lethal combo had her heaving, although there was nothing left in her stomach to hurl.

"I made you some toast and tea, darlin'. It's right outside the door. I'm goin' out on the deck for a while. Call if you need me."

A tightening in her chest joined the ache in her head and the clenching in her belly. *If she needed him? What a freakin' joke!* She scooted across the tile floor and eased the door open. A small wicker tray held the food and drink, along with a paper napkin folded in a triangle. Lying on top of it was a small wild violet. She pulled the tray inside, blinking back the wetness that was forming at the corners of her eyes. One more tender gesture and she was likely to roll into the fetal position and bawl like a baby. Hangovers always made her melancholy. *Right, Claire. You keep telling yourself that.*

She tentatively nibbled at the bread and contemplated how he had gotten her out of the car, into the house and actually dressed for bed without her knowing it. She must have given new meaning to the term shit-faced. The fact that he'd put her in one of his

T-shirts and a pair of lounge pants was baffling. It was as if he knew she'd wake up and seek the serenity of the bathroom floor. The garments were lightweight enough to let the cool comfort seep through while protecting those parts of her not touching the tile from freezing in the night. And she'd been in there a good portion of it.

Once her stomach seemed settled she turned on the shower and crawled in. Twenty minutes later she brushed her teeth, picked up the tray and made her way to the kitchen before walking out onto the deck. The sun was blinding and she covered her eyes and cringed. She heard his light chuckle from the end of the deck.

"How you doin', sugar?" He was lying on a double chaise lounge that hadn't been there the day before, and was wearing a pair of low-slung sweatpants, a Cabelas ball cap and nothing else. His hands were stacked under his head and every ripped muscle in his upper body was displayed to perfection. It was a crime to look that good when she was totally incapable of taking advantage of all that hunkiness.

"Just spiffy...in an 'I'm embarrassed beyond all believability' kind of way." She shuffled over to his side and plopped down on the edge of the chaise. "Where'd this come from?"

"It's been in the garage. I haven't had a chance to dig it out for the summer. Thought you might like sittin' in the sun for a while." He reached out and ran his thumb across the knuckles of her hands where they lay limp in her lap.

She bent at the waist and sank down onto his solid chest. "I'm sorry. Especially if I made a spectacle of myself."

His laughter was a deep rumble under her ear. He placed his hand on the middle of her back and kissed the top of her head. "No more of a spectacle than everyone else in the place."

"Except you," she said, sighing as the sun and his big body warmed every inch of her.

"I've had my share of nights like that and mornings like yours, sugar. Someone had to drive our great big ol' shakin' butts home."

His humor did little to lift her mood. "I wasted a whole night. Passed out. When you and I could have been..."

"There'll be other nights, Claire." His voice was soft and soothing but it didn't help.

"But not that many," she said and the ache in her chest blossomed. *Can the melancholy, you stupid bitch.* Was that Tawny's voice?

"There'll be as many as you want."

She didn't know what to say to that and when the silence stretched he shifted his body to the far side of the cushion and urged her to climb up and stretch out.

"How 'bout we just lie here until you're feeling a bit better. Then you can tell me what you want to do today." He pulled his cap off and stuck it on her head, tapping her nose with his finger.

"Sounds good," she said, giving him a halfhearted smile. All she wanted to do was wrap around him and never leave. She placed her hand over his heart and closed her eyes. There'd be plenty of time later for a reality check.

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Claire stood knee-high in the middle of the stream and let the cool water roll gently around her legs. She looked to her right and waved at Coll, who was stretched out on the patchwork quilt like a satiated Greek god.

"Come on in, Coll, the water's divine."

"No, sugar. You come to me." Claire watched him run a hand down his chest to his erection, which had mysteriously grown in the blink of her eye. "The water's gettin' too rough."

Claire looked down at the swirls of white as the current picked up momentum. "Coll?"

"Come on, darlin'." He stood and walked quickly to the edge of the bank and reached out a hand. "You can make it."

Claire felt along the rocky bottom with her toes until she found a foothold that seemed secure. She slowly moved her leg in his direction when a loud voice commanded she stop.

She hadn't seen the man on the other bank. "Come this way, Claire. It's not as far."

"Who are you?" she asked, unable to shield her eyes from the bright hot sun for fear she'd lose her balance in the rising water. Waves slapped against her thighs, their crests becoming more frequent.

"This way is easier, Claire," he said, ignoring her question. "Give us your hand and we'll help you survive."

"Claire, don't listen," Coll's voice was firm, demanding. "Everything you need is right here, sugar. Everything."

"He can't give you what we can." The sound of the rushing water intensified until Claire's ears were humming. The man waded into the frothing water and walked effortlessly toward her and she recognized the CEO of Forestt Choppers. A band of bikers roared up and down the bank behind him, eyes glowing red in their skeleton heads, their gnarled, bony fingers waving for her to join them. Each of their sleek motorcycles was emblazoned with her designs. Handcrafted metallic flames suddenly ignited into real fires. Curvaceous beauties opened their lush lips and snarled at her, long trails of saliva dripping off their sharp incisors.

Claire backed up quickly in Coll's direction, trying to scream as she fell to her hands and knees. Gushing black water filled her nose and mouth and as the drifting darkness overtook her. She reached for Coll's strong hand and slipped. But then his fingers curved around her upper arm and he pulled her into the light...

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"Claire?" He shook her hard and she opened her eyes with a start. "Damn, woman. What the hell were you dreaming?"

His eyes were filled with concern. She looked down, feeling the heavy weight of his muscular thigh pressing her legs into the cushion. She shifted and he immediately let up.

"You came precariously close to rackin' my balls."

"I'm sorry. I had a nightmare," she said, reaching down and running her hand along his hip.

"You know the best thing to get rid of a bad dream, don't you?"

She shook her head and could tell by the light that invaded his blue eyes that she was going to like the answer.

"A good reality, darlin'." He pulled his hat off her head and leaned down, palming her breast and kissing her until she was breathless. He plumped her flesh then lazily brought his thumb across her nipple. "You wide awake now?"

"I'm not sure," she said, arching her back and then rolling away from him onto her side. "I might still be in that hazy little in-between place. Not sure what's real and what's still a dream." She closed her eyes and pressed her ass against his cock, hoping he'd play along.

"A wet dream?" he asked, running a single finger around her nipple before moving away from her.

Moisture pooled between her thighs at his brief touch. *Definitely a wet dream.*

"Maybe," she said quietly, shifting against the dampness.

"So you're still asleep. Dreamin' 'bout all your fantasy guys." She heard his voice drift toward the bottom of the chair and a moment later he sat down and pulled her feet into his lap. Slowly and methodically he worked his thumbs in delicious little circles over the balls of her feet. "Who would have been the first, I wonder?"

He moved one hand under her pants leg and rubbed up her calf before swooping around to the front of her leg and running his fingers over her inner thigh. Claire sucked in a breath when he barely brushed her pussy. "I'm not telling," she said, liking the game already.

"Probably the contractor dude. The one with the tool belt filled with all sorts of things but nothing remotely useful for renovating." He teased each side of her clit with two slightly spread fingers and she ground her ass into him. "Not a damn thing useful," he whispered, his warm breath teasing her ear and Claire shivered.

"His belt's filled with all kinds of toys—dildos, vibrators, all the things hot horny women just love and you can't wait to pick one and have him press it between your thighs." His big hand moved until it hovered over her mound and throbbing pussy lips. "The thought of his big strong arms thrusting a fake dick into you has to make you wet."

It did. And if he'd just press his hand a little tighter, he'd know. Claire thought about the vibrating egg in the bottom of her overnight bag and wondered what Coll's reaction to it would be. Would he take the place of the imaginary construction stud and ply the little toy against her clit while he slid in from behind and buried his cock deep inside her? He'd probably be more than accommodating and the thought sent a rush of wetness down her folds.

"*Shit*. Just the thought makes you gush." He pulled his hand away and out of her pants only to grab the waistband and drag them over her hips. Claire thought she heard him curse then he cleared his throat.

"You can't stand it. The anticipation. You shimmy and kick and push until your pajamas are at the bottom of the bed and your legs," he said as he pulled the pants over her toes, "are free."

Claire started to roll to her back but he grabbed her ankles, indicating she remain on her side, not free at all.

"You're so hot. You're ready for him. Slick and moist. And he's ready to slide something hard and cool inside your heat but you don't want that."

"I don't," Claire blurted, covering her mouth.

"No," he said and she heard the smile in his voice. "You want something a little more real. Something he can't give you. You start searchin' the recesses of your fantasy bank for someone else who might be able to ease the thrummin'."

How the hell does he know about your fantasies? Who the hell cares as long as he doesn't stop?

He let go of her ankles and Claire heard the boards of the deck creak as he moved around to her side. She opened her eyes a crack and saw him stroke his cock through the thin fabric of his pants.

"How about the sexy fisherman with the huge rod?" she asked and smiled. He looked up and she quickly snapped her eyes shut.

"Not quite yet." She felt him kneel and his hands closed over her shoulders and pressed just her upper body flat. "He's still adrift on the water. But he'll be back. Soon," he promised. "Who can you find to help you out 'til he gets home?"

He nuzzled the valley between her T-shirt-clad breasts and she ran a hand through his hair. "No one. I'll wait for him."

He pulled her hand away and kissed her palm before placing her arm wide.

"Oh no. There's gotta be someone else. Someone who can bring you right to the edge." He grabbed her breasts and pushed them tightly together and ran the tips of his fingers around her puckered nipples. "Maybe someone who's looking for an elusive treasure chest filled with unspeakable delights." He tweaked her rock-hard buds and she almost cried out. His hot mouth clamped down, dampening the fabric as he laved first one painful peak and then the other until her chest was heaving.

He relaxed his hands and her breasts drifted outward. "Oh god. Don't stop."

Claire's heart started drumming in her chest when he took each distended nub lightly between his fingers and did nothing more.

"Was that an order?" he finally asked, his voice low and dangerous. Behind the shield of her eyelids she could envision him decked out in a billowy white shirt and skintight trousers. He applied the tiniest amount of pressure and her cunt clenched.

"Yes...no." What to say to make him do it again?

"Which is it?" He twisted his fingers another degree and she greedily arched forward. "A pirate lord doesn't take orders."

"Yes," she panted. "It's a fucking order, you scurvy —"

His mouth came down on hers so hard they hit teeth. He plunged his tongue deep and rolled her nipples so hard she clutched his back and cried into his mouth. When he lessened the pressure she opened her eyes and saw his undeniable desire reflected back at her. "Close your eyes." He groaned and dropped his head to his chest. "*Christ*. I'm ready to come just from you lookin' at me."

"Then fuc —"

He placed his palm over her mouth and pressed down and her eyes went wide. "Not another word, Claire. I mean it. Close your eyes." He pulled his hand away and stroked the column of her neck. She could feel his fingers shaking. His breath was ragged and it drifted over her chin in little bursts.

She did as he ordered but a little smile drifted across her bruised lips as she thought of him fighting for control.

"Oh darlin'. If your words weren't enough to warrant a punishment, that shit-eatin' grin sure as hell does."

Said grin disappeared a second later when he trailed his fingers slowly down her sides and pushed against her raised hip until she was flat on her back.

His nose traced a path straight down her belly. He reached her navel and nipped and sucked and ran his tongue inside the little indentation until she opened her legs and squirmed. He returned to his downward exploration, inhaling deeply when he got to the base of her curls.

"Look at you. Not a drop of apprehension oozing out of your pretty pussy, spread open so I can see each little drop of desire. That won't do, Claire. You're supposed to be fearful of your torture. Not welcoming it with open legs."

Claire swallowed hard. He was going to make her come just talking to her. The heat was already rolling through her abdomen. He traced the sensitive crease of skin between her thighs and hips and then forcefully yanked her legs closed. Claire jumped as the throbbing in her cunt increased and she bit her lip and tried not to grind her hips in the air.

He ran his thumbs down the puffy flesh of her labia then back again, the pads rubbing the outer flesh while his smooth nails teased the sensitive, thin inner folds.

"Coll, please."

"Mmmm. Beggin' for release already?" He pulled her slick skin apart with excruciatingly slow fingers. Hidden flesh was exposed to the overhead sun and a tiny shudder rocked through her.

"How many lashes, Claire? How many to bring you right to the brink but not over, without me buried deep inside you?"

"I don't know," Claire said, feeling his breath against her. "Four?"

He chuckled and she bucked beneath him when he placed a soft kiss on her slit.

"We'll go with fifty. How's that sound?"

She groaned...and made it through fifteen before her legs started shaking. He offered another ten before the straight, hard licks turned into slanted, openmouthed caresses. Five more and they were in a battle over her trying to open her legs, which he soundly defeated. At thirty-two his thumb joined the torment. When he reached forty she cried, "I'm not going to make it."

He dished out the last ten in rapid succession against her clit and she crested as he pushed his pants down to his knees, opened her legs and sank into her spasming cunt. Cries and moans filled the air and he kept pumping against her long after she felt his hot cum shoot deep inside her.

"Oh, Claire." He pushed her hair away from her face and trailed tiny kisses from her temple to her ear. "I'm sorry."

Sorry? Was he serious? Sorry was for premature expulsions or the occasional "My cock has fallen and he can't get up".

"We didn't make it all the way through your fantasy, darlin'." She'd be a complete idiot not to admit that he was staring at her with a look of unadorned devotion.

For the absolute first time in her life she returned that look with one of similar affection. She smiled and pulled his lips to hers and simply said, "Oh yes we did."

Chapter Nine

"Coll," Claire called from the bedroom. "I can't find my underwear."

He shook the water out of his eyes and slicked his hair back, then shut the shower off and grabbed a towel. "There's a pile on the corner of the dresser."

"Those are all thongs. I'm not wearing a thong to dinner with your mother."

He rubbed the steam off the mirror and looked at his reflection. If he hadn't already felt it deep in his heart, it was clear in the face looking back at him. He was so freakin' happy he couldn't stand it. "My mother isn't going to do a panty check, darlin'."

"I don't care. Crap. I've got to call the resort before we leave."

"Claire," he said patiently, opening the bathroom door to find the bedroom empty and an array of clothes spread out on his bed. Who knew she had that much stuff in one little bag? And that didn't count the clothes she had thrown in with his load of laundry the other day.

He dried off quickly and pulled a pair of worn jeans and a stone-washed button-down shirt from the closet. He got dressed and went to the living room to grab a pair of socks from the pile of their clean laundry sitting next to his chair. Claire's peach-colored panties were lying on the rug next to the basket and he picked them up and stuffed them in his back pocket. He followed the sound of her soft voice and found her in the kitchen.

She was canceling her remaining reservation at the posh resort to spend the rest of the week with him. Coll propped his shoulder against the doorway and smiled. She had her phone to her ear and was pacing back and forth between the dishwasher and the far corner of the island, the only place in the house she could get cell reception. She was wearing a sleeveless, white cotton button-up top and nothing else and he tried to tell his dick there was no time for fun in the sun...or the bed...or the lazy chair in the living room.

"I'm well aware there's a strict cancellation policy, Mr. Hastings, but I did call on Thursday when I had that accident and let you know."

He watched her stop and place one hand on her hip. Uh-oh.

"Well, I can't control my plans changing. I would hope you'd be a little more understanding."

Coll crossed his arms and then laughed aloud when she flipped the unknowing Mr. Hastings the bird. She heard him and turned, the frown on her face breaking into a big smile and he returned her grin.

"What?" The smile was gone and she was paying close attention to the man on the other end of the phone. "Oh...yes. Well, I'm thrilled that you're familiar with my work...really?"

He walked up behind her and ran his hand over her ass. She turned, narrowed her eyes in warning and scooted around the counter.

"It would be fairly simple. All you need do is switch out the tank."

He watched her come back in his direction, wearing a feline grin on her face.

"I suppose I could fit that into my schedule but you'd have to sign a waiver releasing me from liability if damage occurs during reinstallation."

He groaned when she did a little victory ass shake to the right...to the left...to the right-right.

"You've got my number. A week from tomorrow would be great. I'll speak with you then."

She clicked her phone shut, stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss.

"You got him to drop the cancellation fee, huh?"

"Sure did," she said, smoothing the fabric along his shoulders. He'd never realized how good that little gesture could feel.

"And he's got a gas tank you're going to be doing?"

"Yep. For a reduced cost."

"So you're not above bartering to get what you want?"

"I'll barter in a minute, honey. It's what made free enterprise all it is today."

"What'll you give me in return for these?" He pulled the panties out of his back pocket and twirled them around on one finger.

She made a grab for them and he raised them over her head.

"I'll give you a kiss."

"Not good enough," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her against him to plunder her lips. "I can get that whenever I want it."

"Don't be so sure." She buried her face in his neck. "You smell goooooood."

"Don't change the subject, sugar."

"We're going to be late. Just quit beating around the bush and tell me what you want."

He picked her up with one arm, set her down on the countertop and stepped between her legs. "Maybe all I want is to beat around your bush."

She rolled her eyes and moaned. "Deal. Give me the panties."

"Uh-uh-uh. I said *maybe*." He stuck his hand between her thighs and rubbed the silky fabric against her.

"Oh, Coll," she groaned and met his caress. "We don't have time. And I don't want to show up on your mother's doorstep smelling like I've just taken part in a week-long fuck-a-thon."

"It's only been four days. And you smell great."

"I won't if you keep doing that."

"Miz Claire. You ruin all my fun." He kissed her forehead and stuck the panties in her hand.

"That's not what you said yesterday. When you were screamin' my name."

Coll laughed and put her back on the floor. He loved her sense of humor. *Shit, son. You love her.*

"Tell me what you want for finding my undies, honey."

I want you to stay. I want to wake up with you every morning. I want you to keep calling me honey in that sexy voice. I want to make love to you every night. "Let me think on that," he said, hugging her to him. "I'll let you know when we get home."

* * * * *

Claire set her utensils across her plate and looked around the table. She assumed dinner would consist of Coll's family and her. When they'd walked into the kitchen earlier and she had seen the vast amount of food, she had assumed his mother tended to cook like she was feeding an army. Claire had never expected they would be dining with a small regiment of friends and neighbors. But she was enjoying herself immensely.

The Patterson kid, as Coll continued to refer to him, put his arm along the back of Trish's chair for the third time and Coll cleared his throat. For the third time. Trish glared at her brother. Coll ignored her but Billy removed his arm.

Josie was in a political debate with Pam and Jimmy. Every so often Bradley would put his head next to Coll's and say something that had both men laughing. The Misses Jennie and Molly were chatting about Friday's episode of *Paula's Home Cookin'*. If the mood hadn't been so festive the din would have been deafening.

"What say you, girl? Want to get a breath of fresh air?"

Claire looked at Coll's mother. It was clear it wasn't really a question but more of a demand.

"Mama," Coll warned.

"Good lord, son. Can't an old woman go for a walk with her guest?" She pushed her chair away from the table and the men got to their feet. "It's not like I'm apt to roll her in pitch and set her on fire."

Claire felt Coll's hand on the back of her chair as he pulled out her seat. "It'll be fine," she whispered in his ear.

"Y'all clean up," his mother said over her shoulder. "We'll be back directly."

Claire followed her through the living room and onto the front porch. The woman sat down on the porch swing and Claire took a wicker chair next to her.

"Don't you like to sit and swing?"

"I can't say that I ever have, Mrs. Evans," Claire said.

"Well, come give it a try. And call me Delia."

Claire got up and moved to the swing. "Thank you...Miss Delia."

The woman chuckled and pushed them into motion. "You're fittin' in nicely, child."

Claire didn't know how to respond, so she said nothing.

"When you headin' back to the city?"

"I'm leaving at the end of the week." Claire turned her head but Coll's mother was staring at the large rhododendron in front of the railing.

"Coll likes you, you know?"

"Yes ma'am. I like him too." Claire closed her eyes. The whole conversation was becoming surreal.

The swing came to an abrupt halt and Claire opened her eyes and faced Delia Evans. The protectiveness shining in her pale blue eyes was a little scary. "He tell you about Rebecca?"

"He did."

"You got some sort of baggage you're totin' round with you?"

"Not at all. I haven't had much time for...baggage."

Again the silence stretched.

"I don't want to see him hurt like before."

"I'll do my best not to let that happen."

She nodded her head and the swing started moving again.

"Thank you for dinner," Claire said.

"You didn't eat hardly a bite."

"Are you kidding?" Claire laughed. "I ate more here than I did the last week. It was delicious."

"Sounds like Coll's holdin' you prisoner out at his place."

Claire felt her cheeks flush and heard the older woman laugh.

"So it's like that, is it? Lordamercy, he is so like his daddy. There were times I couldn't walk straight for days."

Claire blushed to the roots of her hair and was searching for a reply when the screen door opened and Coll stepped onto the porch.

"Hey, Mama? Instead of interrogating Claire why don't you head inside and tell that little shit to stop sniffin' 'round your youngest daughter?" He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and Claire concentrated on looking at his face. "Claire? You all right, darlin'?"

"Claire's fine. Just a little overheated. And your sister can take care of herself. She could do a lot worse than Billy Patterson. Word is the boy's some sort of marketing genius. Top in his class at Tulane."

"Well, that explains a lot. Livin' less than five miles from Bourbon Street? Every weekend's probably a drunken orgy. Just the kind of man you want your daughter hanging out with."

"Let it go, Collyer. They're just havin' a little summer fun, not slappin' down a deposit at the Elks club."

"When the hell did you get so lax, woman?"

"My two older children wore me down." She got up from the seat and went to give him a big hug.

"We need to get goin', Mama. Got a lot to do tonight."

"I'm sure you do, son."

Claire met her eyes, shocked when the woman gave her a quick wink.

"I've got charters the next four days."

"Good to have steady work. What are you doin' while Coll's out fishin', Claire?"

She looked at him and he gave her a little shrug.

"I'm not sure."

"Well, you give a call if you want to come into town. One of the girls can come out and pick you up 'til Jimmy gets your car fixed."

Claire looked into her eyes and smiled. "I'll do that, Miss Delia."

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"I finally figured out what I want in return for findin' your panties."

"It's been three days, I thought you forgot." And what a three days it had been.

"Are you kidding? It's so wild it took me this long to think of it."

Claire stretched against the warm sheets and opened her eyes. "I hope it doesn't involve me getting out of this bed." Her limbs felt like melting Jell-O and she wondered if he was a natural-born sex machine or if it was something he'd refined over the years. Her gut twisted with a surprising pang of jealousy and she pushed the thought aside.

"Not right now," he said, placing his hand loosely against her abdomen.

"Good. 'Cause I can't move a single muscle."

He chuckled and ran his hand lower, over her damp pubic hair until he cupped her sex. "I think you have a few muscles that are still operable."

He eased his middle finger into her cunt and rubbed against her still-trembling walls.

She grabbed his wrist and pulled his finger away but guided the slick digit to her clit. *You're a total slut, Claire.* Guilty as charged. She couldn't get enough of him.

"Lord! You're so responsive, sugar."

"Only for you," she whispered, bringing his finger to her lips and sucking it up to the second knuckle.

He moaned, then gave her a quick French kiss. "You wouldn't have done that a few days ago."

"You have me doing all sorts of things I never thought I'd do." It was the truth. And not only as it pertained to their bedroom antics. While he was out catching and releasing on the river she was getting a crash course in the pros and cons of laid-back, small-town life.

Tawny would have fallen over in a dead heap if she'd seen her gathering eggs straight from Miss Nellie's henhouse and helping Coll's mother pickle beets. There had been that small mishap when she'd visited Mr. Dells to see his beehives and the leader of his herd of sadistic goats—the same ones who had forced her off the road—cornered her against her newly repaired car and wouldn't let her move. She'd done the only thing she could think of, loyal Discovery Channel watcher that she was. She'd pretended the menace was a circling shark and poked it in the eye. It scared the crap out of him...literally. She was left with the odiferous smell of goat poop and a stern warning from the old man.

She wasn't sure she could handle being away from the city. Didn't know how she'd keep her business thriving. Wasn't sure she could do a weekends-only relationship or if that was even feasible with Coll's work. She wasn't certain of any of it but she was considering it all because when she'd spent those quiet moments on the deck, waiting for him to get home and wrap her in his arms, she'd realized those were the moments she was truly happy.

"So what is it you want?" she asked, rolling onto her side and easing a leg between his thighs, careful not to hit his inert cock. She took it in her palm and moved it to his left and then cupped his balls. "There can't be any more sexcapades we haven't already tried."

"Come on, darlin'." He rubbed his hand over the swell of her ass then dipped his finger playfully into the cleft. "There's a million things we still have to try."

"A million?" she laughed.

"All right. A hundred. How's that?"

"Not quite as daunting a task. So if it's not sex-related, what is it?"

His chest rose beneath her head as he took a deep breath. "I want you to go back to Jacksonville on Friday."

Claire's heart stopped then plummeted straight to her stomach.

"I know you were going to wait until Sunday but I asked Brad to take my runs for the weekend."

Holy crap. The tension eased from her chest in small degrees.

"I want to follow you in. See your shop. Spend the weekend doing what you like to do. I know being stuck out here wasn't what you —"

Claire interrupted him because she just couldn't keep quite. "It's been a hell on earth, let me tell you. No perks whatsoever."

He didn't laugh but she heard the humor in his voice.

"No. Not for me either. But I'm serious about this. That's what I want."

"Are you sure?" Lying next to him, hearing nothing but the sound of their breathing, she couldn't imagine him in her bedroom with an air conditioner that sounded like the engines of a DC-10 turning over when it kicked on. Or the *thump-thump-thump* of running toddler feet on the floor above.

"I'm just dyin' to head into the big city, Miz Claire. Please tell me I can go." He laid on the accent thick and heavy and Claire let go of his balls and swatted his chest.

"If that's what you really want."

"I think it's what we really need, Claire." All joking was gone.

"I like that 'we' part," she said, snuggling against him.

"Me too," he replied pulling the covers over their cooling bodies. "Sweet dreams, darlin'."

"How could they be anything but?"

The nightmare came again, each frame exactly as it had been until Claire got to the part where the demon bikers rode toward her and she lost her footing...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The bikers materialized behind Forestt's CEO, their devil eyes were wide with shock. Claire looked over her shoulder and saw what struck fear into them. Coll was still at the stream's edge, still gloriously naked but the serene picnic site was filled with familiar faces.

Claire saw the three Evans women surrounded in darkness, much like Goya's famous rendition of the Fates but without the haglike qualities. They linked arms and waded effortlessly toward her. Instead of the traditional spool, thread and a pair of scissors associated with the trio Trish held up an oversized tarot card of The Lovers. Josie wielded a rat-tail comb and Delia a giant flyswatter. Claire had no idea what that represented but the skull men apparently did. They turned their Harleys uphill and vanished in a cloud of dust. The women surrounded her, raised her in their arms as if she were as light as an infant and deposited her on the quilt at Coll's feet before they turned their focus back to the man.

Trish held the card before her like a talisman and chanted the word "choice" over and over. Josie moved behind the CEO and twisted his long black hair in the teeth of her comb. She yanked hard, forcing his head back and urged, "Do it, Mama. He's an insect. A parasite preying on the hopes of others. We can't let him get Claire."

Delia took the salmon-colored swatter and gripped it with two hands. She rotated her wrists and swung it around as if it were a Louisville Slugger. "I'm truly sorry, mister. My baby's right. We can't let you take Claire."

The woman brought the plastic mesh across the man's throat and a stream of something that resembled midnight blue metallic paint shot out from his severed neck. Josie held his head high like a modern-day Boudicca as Claire's designs poured out of the gaping hole in his neck. They flew outward, swirling around her until she was wrapped in a tight cocoon composed solely of her artwork.

"Claire?" Coll called her name and she felt him tugging at her protective shell but she could no longer see him. "Claire!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

She bolted upright, suddenly wide awake and then slid unceremoniously off the bed and onto the floor. The comforter was twisted tightly around her body. The lamp flicked on and Coll's handsome but worried face peered down at her.

He rolled off the bed and helped her to her feet then tried to untangle her.

Claire laughed hysterically until tears were running down her cheeks. "Oh my god. Hurry up before I wet myself." He pulled the comforter free and she darted to the bathroom. When she walked out a short time later he was propped up in bed with his arms over his chest.

"What the hell was that?"

"Another dream," she said, picking up the comforter and flinging it up and onto the bed before she crawled under the sheets and joined him.

"Another nightmare?"

"No. This one ended pretty well."

"So everything's all right?"

She stretched out on top of his body and rubbed her hands against his stubbled jaw. "It is now," she said and proceeded to show him just how right things were going to be.

Chapter Ten

Coll drove behind Claire's car, relieved when she stuck her arm out the window and motioned for him to park on the street. She made a quick left turn in front of an oncoming dump truck then disappeared into the alley. Coll waited for the truck to pass and did a u-turn. When he shut his engine off Claire was already peering in the passenger-side window. He wondered how she had become ten times more beautiful than a week ago when she had looked into his window in just the same way.

"You can leave your windows down. We won't be long."

"You drive like a maniac, woman," he scolded. "Give me a second to kiss the ground and I'll be right behind you."

She totally ignored his comment. "Wait 'til you meet Quent. I called Tawny and she should be here any second now."

"You were on your damn cell nonstop. You know it's totally unsafe to pass a piggyback semi going eighty-five while driving with your knees."

"I was not driving with my knees," she said, taking his hand and leading him to the door.

"You had the phone in one hand and you were messin' with your hair with the other, Claire."

"Uh-oh. No *darlin'*? Is this our first fight, Coll?" She looked up at him with beagle eyes but he held his ground. And then held her.

"No more crazy-ass drivin'. I mean it, Claire. You scared me."

"I'm sorry." She wrapped her arms around his waist and gave him a big hug.

"Hey, boss lady! Welcome home."

Coll looked at the overalls-clad young man in the doorway. Claire went to hug him and he put his hands up. "Shadow gray base coat. Still tacky."

"Coll, this is Quentin." Coll offered his hand and the man gave it a firm shake.

"Coll. Nice to meet you, man. I've heard so much about you."

"From who?" Claire asked, surprised.

"Who do you think?" Quentin said with a pained grin. "Mistress of the bitches. Since your cell wasn't working she had to talk to someone for hours on end."

"Be nice," Claire laughed. "How's everything going?"

"Gee, if you were really interested you probably would have called sometime before yesterday."

"My cell was messed up, Quent."

"And they didn't have any landlines in Hooterville?"

"I'm sorry. I was a little preoccupied."

"Yeah," he laughed, "I heard all about that too." He nudged Coll's shoulder and groaned. "Here she comes."

Coll watched the slim figure park her Harley Sportster behind his truck and kill the engine. Claire all but ran to the curb and the minute Tawny pulled her helmet off the two were hugging each other like they'd been gone for months, not days.

"That can't be her real hair color," Coll muttered, looking at the jet black mane that nearly touched the bike's seat.

"Trust me, dude. It's not." Coll looked at him but Quentin's eyes were still focused on the woman in black.

Claire's friend shook off her jacket and placed it over the sissy bar then turned and opened her arms.

"Shit. You think just once she might put a freakin' bra on," Quentin said in a low voice.

"She does make quite an entrance," Coll said, as he watched Tawny walk his way. "Is that show for you?"

Quentin snorted and whispered, "Me, you, the guy across the street who started jerkin' off at his window when he heard those pipes coming a block away."

Coll wasn't fooled by her welcoming gesture. He knew from experience the power of the female opinion. Josie and Trish had been great teachers. She was going to test him. Maybe not right away but she would. He offered his sweetest smile as she came closer and he was able to read the bright white writing on her black baby doll top. *Ain't Nothing Like An 800 Pound Vibrator*. He couldn't help but laugh.

"Claire. Please," Tawny said, violet eyes roaming over him until he felt more than a little uncomfortable. "Just once, sweetie."

"No way," Claire laughed and pushed her friend off the sidewalk. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "He's all mine."

Coll stood there grinning like an idiot long after the women had walked through the front door.

"Ah, shit," Quentin said. "She's not back here for good, is she?"

"I sure as hell hope not," Coll said, meeting the man's eyes.

"Come on, then. I'll give you the tour before I start typing my resume."

* * * * *

"What are you thinking?" Claire asked, rubbing an imaginary figure eight around his tiny nipple.

"I'm thinking this bed is ridiculously small."

She looked down at his feet hanging over the edge and laughed.

"It's not so bad for more compact positions." She rolled over, got on her hands and knees and wiggled her ass in his direction and looked toward the window. "Plus we'd both have a great view of the bay if I open the blinds."

"I've got a great view right here," he said, sliding his hand between her legs and lightly grinding the heel of his thumb against her clit. She eased back and a minute later he was gripping her hips and running his tongue over her. She'd never had anyone who could make her ready in record-breaking time. In fact, she walked around in a perpetual state of arousal when he was near and she never wanted that to end.

She drew on every ounce of willpower she possessed and moved away from his lips.

"Are you turning into a tease like someone else I now know?"

Claire laughed and spun around. She pulled at his hands until he sat up.

"No. No teasing. Nothing but the truth." She looked into his deep blue eyes and took a steady breath. *Shit. This is scary. You can do it.*

"Do you remember what you said to me that first day?"

"Before or after I came in my hand, like a schoolboy?"

"Before," she laughed, appreciating that he tried to lighten the mood.

"I can't say that I do." He took her hands and wove their fingers together.

"You told me I always have a choice."

"You do, Claire. Everyone does."

"But don't you ever feel like there's something other than free will at play?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, have you felt that way lately?" Her heart increased its rhythm until she felt it pounding in her temples. *Just tell him, for fuck's sake.* "Oooo. Tawny!" Claire chastised the voice in her head.

"Tawny?" Coll asked in a puzzled voice.

"Not Tawny. Oh, crap." She brought their entwined hands to his cheeks and grabbed his face as best she could. "I love you. I don't want you to go home but I know you have to. I want to go with you but I know I can't. I've got orders to fill and there's going to be hell to pay when I tell the guys at Forestt I'm not signing the contract. Maybe we can do this long-distance thing for a while. An hour and a half isn't really that long of a drive but I know I'm not going to be happy with that for any length of time. And I can't just walk away from everything it's taken me my entire life to build. I have to work. I get bored easily."

She stopped for breath and Coll pulled their fingers apart, pushed her down against the mattress and kissed her until he felt her tension subside.

"Can I speak?" he asked, rising up on his elbows when she nodded her head. "If I was givin' that speech, I'd have saved a lot of breath and upset and stopped right after

that I love you part. And I do love you, Claire. With every fiber of my soul. Probably from the very moment I saw you."

She bit her lip and he leaned forward and ran his tongue along her teeth until she let go and he was able to meld their lips together in a silent promise.

"You've got all of me, darlin'. For as long as you want. And I promise you won't have to choose between your work and us. We'll figure it out, Claire."

The smile she gave him knocked the breath from his lungs. There was no way he could live without her by his side. If that meant them being apart for a while, so be it. But he'd damn well make sure they made every minute of their time together count.

He rolled out of the bed, walked to the window and pulled up the blind. "What do you say, sugar? Let's check out that view."

Chapter Eleven

Coll walked slowly from one edge of the new blacktop to the other and back again. Seventy-two steps. He pushed his hair off his forehead and ran his hand across the back of his neck, not at all surprised when it came away damp. He was nervous as hell and strings of tension wound a little tighter with each car he heard approach and then pass.

"Shit," he muttered, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He leaned his back against the vinyl-sided building, unable to believe the moment had arrived. Six months of calling in favors, taking every available charter there was to be found when he wasn't with Claire and nearly depleting his savings account had led to this—sweat pouring down his back on a cool, late December afternoon and a knot in his stomach the size of a basketball.

The sound of a heavy engine grew near and he didn't bother moving. Too big to be Claire's convertible. He pulled a hand free, ready to wave as Jimmy's tow truck rolled slowly by.

"Hey, Coll. If you piss her off and she tells you to go fuck yourself, let her know I'm still available, son."

Coll reconsidered the wave and flipped his friend the bird. Jimmy's laughter drifted on the breeze as he drove away, the sound forcing Coll to smile. He never thought he'd be able to pull the whole thing off. Not with a town full of good-hearted busybodies. But they all had taken their oaths of silence to heart and not uttered a word. Oh, there were the sidelong glances and occasional winks, but Claire seemed to chalk those up to rural eccentricities. Lord knew they abounded in Haisville.

It hadn't taken him long to consider how to persuade Claire they needed to be together...full time. *It's called forever, Collyer.* He couldn't stand it when they were apart and it was clear she felt the same way. Their every-other-weekend meetings had lasted a few months before one of them wound up driving to meet the other on a weekly basis. There were times when he'd kissed Claire goodbye and saw the shimmer of tears. They washed the bright blue straight out of her eyes and it drove him mad.

He heard the soft purr of a car decelerating and swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat. *You've taken a hell of a gamble, son.* No doubt. He was about to find out if there would be a jackpot payout or if the world as he knew it was about to go bust.

Claire had been antsy the entire drive out. There was no denying Coll had his moments of mystery. She had stopped questioning because that usually ended with them entwined, screaming each other's names. She loved surprises and he never failed

her on that front. Whether his gestures shocked her, scared her or had her laughing her ass off she was absolutely certain they were ideas born from his huge, Southern heart.

She turned into the parking lot of the building that had been constructed in record-breaking time and turned off the engine. Coll opened her door and pulled her into his strong embrace before she could even say hello.

"Lord, darlin'. I've missed you so much." His lips covered hers in a hungry kiss and Claire twined her fingers through his wavy locks and kissed him back with equal fervor.

She smiled when they finally broke apart. "Since there aren't a bunch of cars around I'm guessing we're not the grand opening entertainment."

"Now there's a thought," Coll said with the seductive grin. The one that usually guaranteed Claire would be pantiless in a matter of minutes.

He pushed her windblown hair behind her ears and she turned her cheek into his warm palm and gave him a sidelong glance. "Josie told me she thought this was going to be a new video store. Think they'll have a backroom full of pornos?"

"Probably not, but good suggestion, sugar. Maybe you can bring that to the owner's attention. I've arranged for you to have a private tour, knowing how curious you've been since the day the first cinder block was set."

"Me and everyone else in town. How a business can go in and your mom and Miss Molly, not to mention Mr. Dells, can't figure out who owns it and what it's going to be is beyond bizarre."

The building was twice as long as it was wide. Along the side was a wide driveway that led around to the back. Six tall windows graced the front of the façade and Claire couldn't help but think how much natural light would stream in. Coll took her hand and led her toward the glass front door. She peeked inside. The space to her right was obviously a waiting room.

"Spill it, junior," she said squeezing his hand. "Whose place is this?" She noticed the sheen that broke out on his forehead and looked into his deep blue eyes. "Coll?"

With his free hand Coll pulled a small ring with two brass keys out of his shirt pocket and offered them to her. "It's yours, Claire."

Claire stared at the keys dangling between them and then slowly looked up into Coll's expectant gaze. A rush of heat surged to her head and she pushed the darkness threatening her peripheral vision away. *You will not faint.* Her heart started hammering in her chest. *Oh my god.*

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. His eyes searched hers imploringly and all she could do was shake her head. She watched him look away, clench his jaw tightly and swallow.

"Too much too soon, I suppose," he said softly. His voice echoed with raw hurt and it was enough to snap Claire out of her stupor.

"Coll." Her voice squeaked and she cleared her throat. Her eyes burned and she felt a trail of warm wetness roll down her cheek. Her hand was shaking but she brought his fingers to her lips and gently kissed the knuckle of his ring finger. "Never," she whispered.

He snapped his head around and Claire thought her heart might actually burst from the undisguised love she saw reflected in his ocean-blue gaze. She knew exactly what the building was, what it would mean to open the door and step inside. He was offering her a chance to fulfill her dreams. All of them. The professional and the personal. She gave a little tug and pulled the keys off his finger.

"Claire," he said, reaching for her. She backed quickly away.

"If you touch me now, I swear I'll dissolve into a blubbing heap," she said in a shaky voice, holding up her palms to ward him off. "Then my makeup will be ruined and I'll have to sit across from Attila at dinner and have her tell me I look like a rabid raccoon."

Coll chuckled and took a step back. "Josie would kick anyone's ass who dared to call you names, darlin'. You've wormed your way into her heart."

Joy filled her as she watched his tightened features relax into the same handsome face that had stolen her breath the minute she had looked in his truck window months before.

"Sort of like a weevil?" she asked, putting the key in the lock.

"Yeah. But without the protruding snout and spurs on your legs," he teased.

Claire jiggled the key until it finally turned. She looked over her shoulder and wiggled her brows. "Spurs, huh?"

His eyes darkened and she pushed the door open and stepped inside. All thoughts of playing cowgirl suddenly vanished when she took in the huge space. "Coll!"

True Southern gentleman that he was, her heart-stoppingly gorgeous lover offered his arm and started the tour. He led her room to room, the excitement in his voice evident. The layout had been well thought out and precisely executed. She couldn't have asked for a more perfect place if she had designed it.

They stood in the middle of one of the spraying rooms, the state-of-the-art exhaust system humming a great deal quieter than she would ever have imagined. She wrapped her arms around Coll's neck and placed a soft kiss at the base of his throat. "I'm overwhelmed."

"I thought you weren't going to touch me?" He rested his arms loosely across her lower back, one thumb brushing over the exact spot of Claire's fairy tattoo. "Not blubbery anymore?"

She hooked a leg over his hip and ground against him. Denim to denim. "What I'm feelin' is far from blubbery, honey."

"Mmmm, I do love how you feel," he whispered against her ear and Claire shivered with delight. "C'mon, darlin'. Let me show you the rest of Quent's genius."

"Quent?" She lowered her leg and let him pull her through the hallway to the rear of the building.

"You didn't think I came up with all this on my own, did you?" They stopped at the bottom of a set of steep stairs and Claire gave him a curious look. "I wouldn't have had the first clue as to what the perfect graphics workspace would require. Thanks to your assistant, covert email addresses, home and cell numbers and his favorite wines—vintner and year—are forever embedded in my memory. I couldn't have done this without him."

"When did he have time to help you?" Claire asked, her gaze sweeping panoramically from the oversized garage door at the back of the building to the open space that would allow her to work on something as big as a tractor-trailer cab.

"Most nights. After you'd worked his ass off all day long he'd spend the evening on the phone with me." He laughed. "I don't have to tell you the guy's a ball of energy. He came out and looked over things every weekend that I drove into Jacksonville to see you."

"I can't believe it," she said softly.

Coll motioned her up the stairs and when she got to the top she found the wooden door was locked.

"It's the other key," he said.

Claire unlocked the door and stepped into a small tile-lined foyer.

"Off with your shoes, darlin'. Wait 'til you feel that carpet. Freshly laid and soft as cotton balls."

Claire bent over and untied her sneakers. "I'm likin' the sound of 'freshly laid'," she whispered.

"I knew you would," Coll said, running his palms over the curve of her ass. Just like that, her body heated.

"I hope this is one of those tours with a free sample at the end," she said, toeing off her shoes before placing her hands on her knees and brazenly sticking her ass out farther.

"Could be," Coll said, running two fingers down the center back seam of her jeans until he reached her crotch and unerringly found the exact location of her pulsing clit and rubbed gently.

Claire moaned and shifted her legs. God, a week without him touching her was far too long. She pressed against his fingers and a little pre-orgasmic wave rolled through her.

He snaked his hand around her hip then low over her belly and hauled her back against his hips. She felt the solid bulge of his erection against her ass and rose. His lips lightly brushed the shell of her ear and she closed her eyes and sighed. She couldn't wait for him to get on with the torment. When his hand shifted to the button of her jeans she actually smiled.

She leaned her back into his chest as he pulled her zipper down and admitted in a husky voice, "I've missed you so much."

Long fingers slipped under the band of her panties and toyed with the thin strip of damp curls. "So I see." His voice was low and deep with a hint of pride. "*Damn*. You're always so wet for me, sugar. It's all I can do not to bury myself into you at first sight."

Claire rubbed her ass against his cock in a silent plea. His fingers hovered over her clit just long enough to have her consider begging. And then he was touching her. Everywhere she wanted to be caressed. Cool lips brushed the side of her neck, his palm covered her breast and one fingertip eased the hood away from her throbbing clitoris.

Her heart started drumming in her ears, drowning out the sound of his short breaths. Teeth nipped and then his hot mouth closed over her skin and sucked hard. She groaned and rocked her hips and then groaned louder when he tweaked the nipple that was uncomfortably confined beneath the lace of her bra and tight shirt.

"Harder," she gasped just as his damp fingers began buffing her clit.

"Here?" he asked, applying a bit more pressure to the little nub pulsing at her core. "Or here?" He rolled her nipple between his fingers and she lost her breath.

"Oh...Coll." She covered the hand between her thighs with her own and let him take her straight over the edge.

"Jesus," he gasped, his breath hot against her neck. "I had this whole scenario planned out and getting you off five steps through the door wasn't part of it. You're so fuckin' hot you make me forget my own damn name."

Claire's nether regions were still thrumming when she turned in his arms. "It's Mr. Considerate." She rose up on her toes and kissed him soundly, thrilled that he was so attuned to what her body craved. "Thank you, Collyer. Now let's see what I can do for you."

"Unh-uh, missy. We're finishin' the tour before you finish me." The corner of his eyes crinkled and Claire knew without looking his sexy-as-hell-grin was firmly in place. "Take off your clothes."

Claire watched as he unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the floor. His white T-shirt followed. He was down to the third button on his jeans when she kicked it in gear and followed his lead. She had no idea what he was up to, other than eight gorgeously lickable inches when he pushed his jeans off his hips, but where Coll was concerned she had learned to be adventurous.

Chapter Twelve

"I've never taken a nude tour," Claire said as he took her hand and pulled her into a room that ran the length of the building. There were skylights in the roof at regular intervals that let in a massive amount of light. "I love this," she said.

"This way." He led her through a square archway to a serviceable kitchen and dining area.

"Not a whole lot of room for entertaining, but cute." She would have allowed a bit more counter space.

"I don't think we'll be using this for entertaining, darlin'."

"No?"

"No," he said. "We can do all that at home."

Home. Claire felt the tension in her chest dissolve. She had a few moments of worry that he, for whatever reason, thought she should live above the shop. That was the last thing she wanted. Really, there was only one thing she wanted. And he had just opened the door to the most unexpected sight.

"Good lord," Claire gasped, taking in the luxurious surroundings. The bathroom walls were tiled three-fourths of the way to the ceiling with tumbled marble. The paint above was a tranquil shade of pale blue.

"I know how much you love the spa stuff. I thought I'd use this as practice. If you like how everything is set up here, we'll see about redoing our master bath."

Claire met his gaze in the huge mirror attached to the wall above the sink. She wasn't sure when things had turned from being "mine" into "ours" and she didn't care. "It's incredible, Coll. You've thought of everything."

He spun her into his embrace and she wiggled against his erection. His eyes drifted closed for a second before he tipped her chin up with one finger and arched a brow. "Even towels, sugar. Want to see what four strategically placed showerheads can do?"

He opened the glass shower door and turned on the water. Claire giggled when he stepped in and then hopped quickly out.

"Goddamn, that's cold. Come here and warm me up, darlin'."

She went into his arms and allowed him to kiss her senseless. "I love you," she said when he pulled his lips away.

His smile was blinding. He pulled her forward, tested the water and in his sexy, Southern drawl said, "Show me how much."

"With pleasure," she said, rubbing her hands together before he rotated one of the showerheads. Hot water sluiced over her breasts and her stomach tightened when she

saw Coll reach for the soap. She slapped his hand away and grabbed the aqua-colored bar. "My turn."

She worked the soap into an overflowing lather and thought of all the delightful places to start. She looked down at his cock, the tip dark and taut.

"Anywhere but there, sugar," he said harshly. "The only thing I want wrapped around my dick is your sweet little cunt."

Shocked at his words, Claire's gaze shot to his face. The fierceness of raw, male desire filled his deep blue eyes and she found her body responding. Liquid warmth spread through her and she wrapped her soapy hands around each of his biceps.

"I love driving into you that first time after we've been apart." He stared down at her, his warm breath caressing the tip of her nose.

"And all the other times?" she managed to get out once her brain cut through the sexual haze. She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his wet, muscled chest then brushed her thumbs over his tiny nipples and watched them harden.

"*Shit...* I love those even more. But that first time...your pussy's always so tight."

She pinched the hard caramel-colored bead of flesh and was rewarded with his loud groan and his hands digging into the softness of her ass to pull her flush against him.

"So now we're back to 'pussy'," she teased, trailing her fingers lightly over the outside of his ribs, forcing his hips to move against her. She passed her sudsy hands over his butt and sank her nails into the tight flesh and urged his hips into a slow rhythm. "I thought we were taking a step or two onto the wild side. I figured phone sex was next on the agenda."

"*Jesus, lord,*" he swore, reaching behind his back to grab her hands. "Darlin', we can go there anytime you want but not now. Stop. Before I come all over you."

"But I like when you come all over me." She smiled when he closed his eyes. She thought he might actually be praying. "You know, I could park my fanny on that little ledge in the corner and be the perfect height for sucking you off." She squealed when he grabbed the back of her thighs and picked her up until they were nose to nose. He slowly opened his eyes and every nerve that had been pleasantly stretched by their banter tightened.

"No more talkin' dirty. And you can park your fanny right here," he said, spinning her around and plopping her onto a smooth, wide surface in the opposite corner that she had assumed was a ledge for shampoo and body products. He pushed her thighs wide and she grabbed his shoulders. "It's the perfect height for making love to you."

Claire looked down and watched Coll stroke his cock with one hand and part her silky folds with the other. He was absolutely correct. The ledge was the perfect height.

He eased the tip of his cock into her and she exhaled. There had never been anything that felt as good as his hard length deep inside her and she waited for the sheer delight of him filling her. He gave his hips an almost imperceptible roll.

"Do you like it, darlin'?"

Claire pulled her gaze away from their joining and looked into his eyes. She knew exactly what he was asking.

"I love it," she replied, raising a hand to his forehead and brushing back one wet curl.

"And you'll stay?" The corner of his mouth twitched just a little and she knew he was trying not to grin. "Here with me? Forever?"

"As if I ever had a choice," she admitted, smiling when his hips moved a little bit more. "What a story for the grandbabies. Both of us blindsided by the same three-by-five tarot card!" She threaded her fingers behind his neck.

"I do love you, sugar," he said with a wicked grin.

Claire pulled his head down and gave him a hot, tongue-swirling kiss. "Then show me how much."

About the Author

M.A. Ellis began writing erotic romance out of logistic necessity. She resides in northwest Pennsylvania where temperatures rival those of Ice Station Zebra a good portion of the year and any opportunity to have a few sparks ignite an inferno is heartily welcomed.

When not caressing the keyboard she hones her master baking skills, eagerly focusing on the realms of cheesecake and chocolate which, along with her husband and twenty-something twins, make her world revolve in an oh-so-pleasant manner.

She is a longtime member of Romance Writers of America and has previously published poetry in literary magazines. She welcomes feedback and would enjoy hearing from Ellora's Cave readers.

M.A. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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