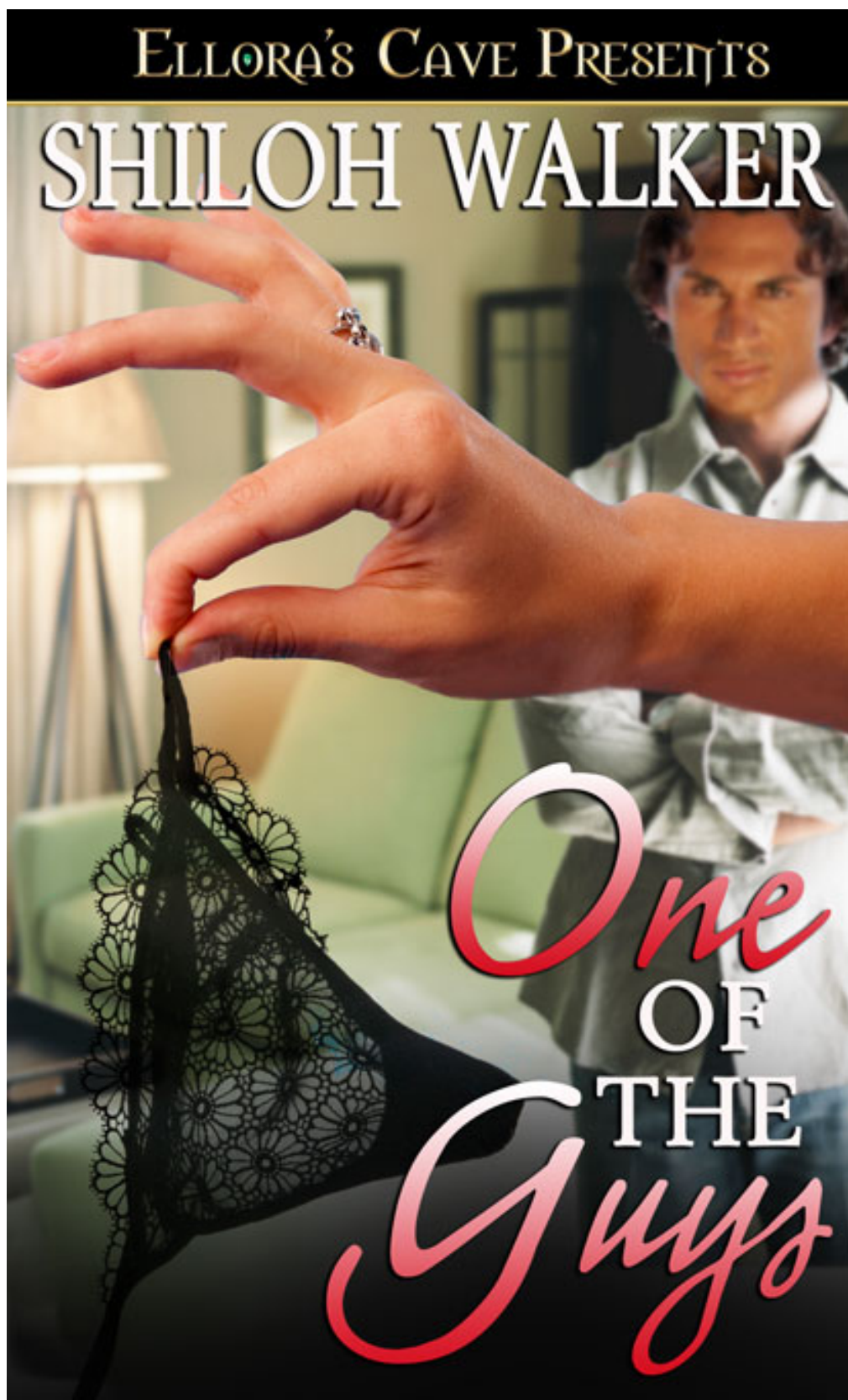


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

SHILOH WALKER



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

One of the Guys

ISBN 9781419913617

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

One of the Guys Copyright © 2007 Shiloh Walker

Edited by Pamela Campbell.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication December 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>)

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

ONE OF THE GUYS

Shiloh Walker

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

GQ: Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.

Häagen-Dazs: HDIP, Inc.

Jack Daniels: Jack Daniel's Properties, Inc.

Pocket Rocket: Health Devices Corporation

Prologue

“Now that is one nice-looking ass.”

With a smirk, Dean Albridge eyed his girlfriend as she stood on the other side of the room talking to a friend. Even though the apartment was packed with college students, Jaynie stood out. He’d had no trouble pointing his fiancée out to Landon.

She’d actually made half an attempt to look decent, and, though he couldn’t call the plain white shorts and red tank top party attire, at least she wasn’t wearing the worn-out tees and shorts she preferred to wear when she wasn’t working.

Next to him, Landon Mouser cupped his hands and pantomimed squeezing said ass. “So you think she’ll go for it?” Landon asked. He looked as if he was about ready to drool just thinking about it.

Dean smiled, confident. “Yeah. She will. Jaynie will do pretty much anything I ask her.” It was one of her nicer attributes, well, aside from her ass. And her hair, shit, he loved that hair. And her tits—okay, all of her physical attributes. He just wished she wouldn’t spend so much time dressing like the tomboy she’d been when they had hooked.

Licking his lips in anticipation, he put his beer down and glanced at Landon. “Give me a few.”

Landon, still focused on Jaynie’s ass, just nodded.

“Exactly how drunk are you?” Jaynie asked and then she shook her head. “Never mind. Don’t answer that. Give me the keys. I’m ready to go home and you definitely need to go home.”

Dean grabbed her wrist and jerked her up against him, bending down to kiss her. "Not drunk, baby. Come on, live a little."

Live a little?

She rolled her eyes as he bent over and pressed his mouth to her neck. "I do live a little. Where in hell is this coming from anyway?"

He palmed her ass and rubbed up against her. Even though his touch was enough to have her skin humming, Jaynie wasn't about to do a bump and grind while they were surrounded by people.

By no means was she shy, but she preferred to keep certain things private and sex was one of them. Shoving her hands between them, she forced a little bit of air between them. "Not here, baby. Come on, let's go home." She leaned and whispered in his ear, adding a promise that under normal circumstances would have Dean all but panting behind her as she led him away.

Not this time. He caught her face in his hands and once more pressed his mouth to hers. "We can go upstairs, find an empty room...then you can do that. To both of us."

A little repulsed, Jaynie turned her face aside. "Both of you? I don't think so."

Finally it seemed as if her sincerity penetrated Dean's thick skull and he lifted his head and glared at her. "I don't see what the big deal is. You read about this shit all the time."

"Yeah, and that's fiction. I read fiction for entertainment. It doesn't mean I want to do a three-way. For that matter, it doesn't mean I want to get bitten by a vamp and hunt down some psycho that kills kids." Jackass—he would find a way to bring her reading choices into this. "Look, Dean, I'm not interested in have a ménage with some drinking buddy."

He bent close once more and she planted her hands against his shoulders, this time pushing him as hard as she could. It was hard enough to make him stumble back a step or two and she took advantage of that to lengthen the distance between them. "I'm

done," she said, her voice rising. "Give me the keys so I can leave. You can find your own way home."

Dean's lip curled in an ugly sneer. "You find your own way home, baby." He looked her over from head to toe, an odd smile on his face. "You came here wanting to party, Jaynie. Remember that."

Then he turned and disappeared into the writhing mass of bodies. Jaynie was surrounded by noise, by bodies, by people she either didn't know well—or at all. Her gut twisted into a series of nasty knots as she searched for a familiar face, half desperate to get home.

She felt as if she wanted to scream or hit something. What the hell—she was in the mood to do both.

But first, she had to get out of there.

After fifteen minutes of trying to find the classmate she'd been talking to earlier, Jaynie gave up and searched for a phone. All she needed to do was get hold of Katie. Katie would come and get her.

Except Katie either didn't have her phone with her or she wasn't answering. Finding a semi-empty spot in the hallway, she leaned back against the wall and folded her arms against her middle.

She should have stayed at the small apartment she shared with Dean and just studied. But noooooo. When Dean had come in and pulled her away from her books, she'd been a little relieved. Finals were still a ways off, but Jaynie was determined to get "A"s in all of her courses, which meant nearly nonstop studying. On top of the class load she had this semester, it was killing her.

But what she wouldn't give to be back in the apartment, curled up on the chair with her books and a glass of wine spread around her.

Well, she could at least have one of those things. The frat boys throwing the party were more into beer or the harder stuff, but she'd seen some empty chardonnay bottles earlier. Surely there was some left.

After hiding in the hallway for ten minutes, she finally headed toward the kitchen. Halfway there, she discovered that there was at least a little bit of wine left. She ended up wearing some of it on her shirt as a pretty, petite blonde crashed into her.

"Sorry!"

Her shirt drenched and clinging to her, Jaynie forced a very fake smile. Through her teeth, she said, "No problem." Not that she needed to bother. The girl was already gone.

"Jaynie."

Dean's voice was the *last* thing she wanted to hear just then. Plucking her damp shirt away from her chest, she didn't look at him. "I'm going home, Dean. Just leave me the hell alone or you'll regret it when you wake up bald tomorrow."

A warm hand curved over her shoulder, he bent and pressed his lips to her brow. "Come on, baby. I'm trying to apologize here. Won't you look at me?"

She did, and she saw that he had a glass of wine in his hand. Not quite ready to forgive him for being such a jerk, she didn't grab the wine. She wanted to, though. Instead, she looked at his face and said, "I'm tired. It's been a long-ass day and I want to go home."

He dipped his head. Jaynie averted her face so that he ended up kissing her cheek but he didn't seem to mind. Dean wrapped an arm around her waist and gently pulled her closer. "I know, Jaynie. I'm sorry. Come on, let's go sit down for a while so I can sober up and then I'll drive you home." He pushed the wine glass into her hand and said, "This is for you."

Jaynie almost pushed it away. Almost pushed him away. But then he nuzzled her neck and murmured, "I'm sorry, darling."

And like a moron, she forgave him.

They ended up on a small section of couch, Dean in the corner with Jaynie on his lap while she drank the wine. He stroked her back up and down, watching her through

heavy-lidded eyes. She almost told him he was wasting his time, looking at her like that. She was still pissed at him.

She opened her mouth to tell him but then forgot what she was going to say. She took another drink of wine and then looked back at Dean. Only she saw two of him.

Her gut churned and little black dots danced in front of her eyes.

"Oh shit," she mumbled. "My head." She pressed a hand to her head and then somebody walking past the couch tripped. And for the second time, Jaynie ended up wearing a drink.

This time it was an ice-cold margarita, so cold that, for a minute her mind cleared and she realized she was nauseated. Seriously nauseated. "Oh shit," she said again. Her tongue felt thick, her throat felt weird and her belly was roiling.

Her reflexes slowed, she pushed at Dean's hand, lurched to her feet and stumbled away. Bathroom. Needed to get to the bathroom.

Behind her, Dean grinned and pushed up off the couch. He met the gaze of somebody standing near the couch and as one, they fell into step behind Jaynie.

She didn't make it to the hallway and the elusive bathroom. She didn't remember how far she made it because shortly after she shoved away from the couch, Jaynie's memory of that night was little more than a surreal blur.

But Brian Lasher wasn't likely to ever forget.

The last thing he'd felt like doing was hitting some frat party when he needed to be home studying for the boards. Eight years of schooling were hopefully about ready to pay off and he could start working at the clinic back home.

He was going blind over study notes and mock board exams and his first instinct when a friend called him about the party has been a fat *no*. But he'd said yes.

He still wasn't sure why.

Right now, though, he was damn glad he had. He stared at Jaynie Holmes and swore. He'd seen her a few minutes ago sitting on Dean the Dick's lap and she'd looked fine.

Now? Well, Brian's patients weren't going to be the two-legged kind, but he knew what a drugged woman looked like. Her pupils were huge and her eyes were so glassy, he doubted she saw him. Doubtful she recognized him when he closed his arms over her upper arms and shook her.

He called her name but the music was so loud, he barely heard himself. She swayed on her feet and cursing, Brian caught her and lifted her in his arms.

Dean caught up with him on his way out the door.

"Hey, Brian. Where in hell are you going?"

He barely glanced at Dean. "To the hospital. She's been drugged."

Dean laughed. "No, she hasn't. She had a few too many glasses of wine. Said she wanted to go the bathroom before I take her home." He moved to take Jaynie and Brian tightened his arms protectively.

He could see her eyes, wide and dark in her pale face, and she shivered, rubbing her cheek against his chest. "She isn't drunk. She's drugged. If you can't tell the difference, you're a bigger idiot than I thought."

Without sparing Dean another glance, he headed for his car.

Chapter One

Sick with humiliation.

Suddenly, the phrase made perfect sense to Jaynie Holmes. Bile churned in the back of her throat and she wasn't sure if she would make it through the next sixty seconds without puking, but she couldn't tear herself away.

It was Dean Albridge, her supposed fiancé, and Landon Mouser, a friend of Dean's that she'd always hated, and they were busy doing the dirty with Kit Austin. Kit Austin. *Kit Austin*. All three of them.

Pretty, perfect and blonde, Kit had moved in across the street from them two months back. She had immediately starting putting the moves on Dean, but Jaynie hadn't worried about it.

After all, Dean loved her. They'd been together since high school, they were planning a wedding – sort of, and he'd never messed around on her. Jaynie trusted him. Jaynie loved him.

Yeah, she knew that Dean had threesome fantasies. After all, that's what had gotten them into a couple of fights in college, but since that night – her brain automatically shied away from the night back in college when somebody had slipped her a roofie. Although she hadn't been hurt, she'd never gotten past the fear she'd felt when she woke up in the ER.

It seemed as though that night had scared Dean as much as it scared her and he'd never mentioned his ménage fantasies again. She thought maybe he'd outgrown them. But now, staring at her bed while Dean and Landon tag-teamed Kit, she thought, *Obviously not*.

Jaynie felt like a damn fool.

Kit squealed—a kittenish little sound that suited her nickname—and arched up against Dean’s tanned, muscled chest. Landon reached around from his position behind Kit and grabbed her too-perfect tits, squeezing.

Jaynie couldn’t take another second. She dropped the pizza box she was holding and reached over to flip on the light. Part of her just wanted to run away and hide, but her pride demanded a little more. Scalping the bitch, and the two pricks, would have suited her fine but she wasn’t sure she could trust herself not to kill somebody.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asked, smiling brittlely as the threesome looked her way.

Kit gasped and her eyes widened dramatically. Jaynie saw through it, though. The deceptive little bitch had been planning this. She’d been hot for Dean since day one. *Fine, he’s all yours, sugar*, Jaynie thought, misery and rage swamping her.

Landon hardly reacted at all. He flicked Jaynie a look but kept right on pumping away in Kit’s ass, his hips slapping against her, muttering under his breath and grunting—sounds that reminded Jaynie of a pig rooting for food.

Jaynie stood there, her face flushed with anger. Bone tired from an early emergency, Jaynie had been looking forward to a long hot soak and a glass of wine. When Brian had offered to cover the rest of her shift for her, she’d been so grateful she could have kissed him.

Exhausted, she’d wanted nothing more than to cuddle against Dean, eat some pizza and get to bed early. But now that weariness was forgotten, burned away in the heat of anger.

The scrubs she had on were clean but no amount of washing could get rid of the bloodstains. Her feet were bare. The clothes didn’t matter though. Even in worn, messy clothes and bare feet, her hair tangled, she was still an amazingly beautiful woman. And always, Jaynie was completely unaware of how she looked, her face flushed with emotion and her green eyes glittering.

Dean gaped at her and snapped his jaw closed. Jaynie could all but see the wheels spinning in his head as he scrambled for something to say. Through clenched teeth, she snapped, "Save it, pal."

She spun on her heel and stalked away, her feet all but soundless on the carpet.

Tears burned her eyes as she stormed away from Dean's house, but she blinked them back. She blinked them back as she climbed into her car, as she started it and as she drove off with a squeal of her tires. She held them back all the way through town, even though they burned in her eyes like alcohol thrown on an open wound.

It wasn't until she pulled into the driveway to her best friend's house that she finally let the tears fall.

* * * * *

The door flew open just as Brian Lasher was on his way out. He ended up with his arms full of a teary-eyed Jaynie. That in itself was enough of an oddity to have him forget what he was doing. He tightened his hands on her arms when she tried to pull back. "Hey, kid, what's wrong?"

Jaynie jerked against him and muttered, "Leave me alone. Where is Kate?"

At the mention of her name, Kate came floating through the arched doorway that led to the living room. His sister looked like a Barbie doll, wearing a pink dress that, in Brian's opinion, was about four inches too short and even though it was a Wednesday night and she had no plans, she had her hair and makeup done to a T.

She had a smile on her face but it faded when she saw Jaynie. "What's wrong?"

A sob escaped Jaynie's lips and Brian looked helplessly at his sister. "I don't know."

Jaynie pulled away and rushed for Kate. Kate gave him a dismissing look. "Come on, sweetie..."

He started to follow but heard a familiar little tune and glanced outside the open front door. Jaynie's cell phone was lying on the porch. She must have dropped it. The

little light was flashing and the phone was playing “Hotel California”. He stooped and picked it up. He didn’t know the number displayed, though he recognized the name.

Dean Albridge.

Jaynie’s fiancé. Brian grimaced but flipped the phone open. “Hello?”

There was a pause and then Dean asked, “Brian?”

“Yeah.”

“Ahhh...is Jaynie over there?”

Brian wasn’t sure why he did it, but instead of telling the truth, he lied. “No. She was over earlier with Kate and must have forgotten her phone here. You tried her house or the office?”

The office was the small veterinarian clinic located on Highway 59 a little north of Gulf Shores. She’d started working there in high school and had continued to work there during the summers after Brian bought it from the previous owner. Three years ago she had bought into the small practice and now she was Brian’s partner instead of his employee.

Jaynie was a damn good vet. She spent most of her time with the animals, which was how she liked it. Jaynie had little use for most people, so Brian couldn’t understand why she was still so crazy over somebody like Dean Albridge. He’d been the stereotypical high school jock, with the exception of having Jaynie as his girlfriend instead of the prom queen.

It was the man’s only redeeming quality, in Brian’s opinion.

“Yeah, checked both places. No answer at home and nobody answered when I called the private line at the office.”

From the living room, he could hear Kate’s voice rising and he edged a little farther outside and shut the door. “Can’t help you, man. If I see her, you want me to tell her you’re looking for her?”

“No—wait. Yeah, tell her I’m looking for her. I really need to speak with her. It’s important.”

The line went dead and Brian looked at the phone and then turned it off. Whatever was going on with Jaynie had something to do with Dean. Brian didn’t know what, and frankly, he didn’t give a damn. But the bastard had made Jaynie cry and Brian could count on one hand how often he’d seen that.

He started to go back inside, but instead, he left. Whatever had Jaynie so upset was something Kate could handle. The two girls had been best friends practically from the crib. Kate could handle crying.

Brian, though—crying made him feel pretty useless. Especially coming from Jaynie. She was Kate’s best friend, but she was Brian’s friend too. They had spent plenty of weekends fishing out on Wolf Bay and diving out in the Gulf. She was practically one of the guys and Brian was pretty sure that he’d be equally as uncomfortable if one of the guys had shown up at his doorstep crying.

Granted, he wasn’t so sure he’d be tempted to punch somebody’s lights out for making one of them cry.

* * * * *

A pint of Häagen-Dazs and two margaritas later, Jaynie fell asleep on Kate’s couch. The doorbell probably wouldn’t have fazed her if her bladder hadn’t started to intrude on her alcohol-induced sleep. She had to pee, though, and she was about ready to roll off the couch to do it when she heard him.

Dean’s voice. Kate’s voice intruded and Jaynie had to grin despite herself when Kate said, “If you take so much as one more step into my house, Dean Albridge, I will call the police. Do you understand me?”

Both of them had been born in Alabama but Jaynie couldn’t quite manage the genteel Southern lady act. It was second nature to Kate, though. Under that soft

feminine exterior, Kate was made of pure steel and Jaynie knew she wasn't just bluffing about calling the cops.

"Look, Kathryn, I just need to speak with her."

"No," Kate replied icily. "You don't. If she wants to speak to you and I can't manage to talk her out of it, then Jaynie knows where to find you. But you are not talking to her here, and not tonight."

Dean's voice got a little edgy. "You don't even want to hear my side."

Side? Jaynie thought, a little astounded. Her dismay was echoed by Kate as her friend demanded, "You have a side? She walked in on you and that jerk-off friend having a threesome with the bitch across the street. What side? You two have been together since high school. What in hell were you thinking?"

Then Dean responded and Jaynie wished she could just disappear into the ground and never be seen or heard from again. "I was thinking I needed something a little different. Needed some fun. At least Kit isn't afraid to be a woman. Shit, I hardly know what it's like being with somebody who knows how to do something with her hair besides shove inside a hat or wear it in a ponytail. Somebody who realized that just because you work with animals all day doesn't mean you have to walk around looking like you fell asleep with them."

The knife of pain pierced her heart and the sob escaped her before she could stop it. It was drowned out by the sound of Kate slapping Dean.

Dean snarled, "You little bitch—"

Jaynie rolled off the couch and knuckled her tears away before she stormed out of the living room. "Call her a bitch again, Dean. See what happens." She shoved the pain away in favor of the anger. Anger was so much easier to handle.

Dean looked at her and relief crossed his features, as though he hadn't thought he'd actually see her. Then he flushed red and she knew he was wondering just how much she'd heard. "Jaynie—"

She curled her lip at him. "Get the hell out of here, Dean. I don't want to talk to you."

In a frustrated voice, Dean said, "I'm not leaving until we talk."

Kate gave him a sugar-sweet smile. "Yes, you are, unless you want to see if I'm joking about calling the police."

He rounded on Kate and snarled, "Would you shut the fuck up? This doesn't concern you."

Jaynie held up a hand when Kate would have responded. "No, Katie. This is mine. Don't talk to my best friend like that. Ever. And don't think it doesn't concern her. I came here, didn't I?"

Dean started toward her and Kate glanced at the phone on the small table in the hallway. A small smile curled her lips and the look on her face was familiar to Jaynie. *Come on—just give me a reason.* He gave Kate an ugly look.

Jaynie didn't know why she hadn't seen it sooner. But she saw it then. Dean didn't like Kate. At all. Kate wasn't overly fond of Dean but Jaynie hadn't realized it was a two-way street. It was obvious that he wanted to come farther inside. Very obvious, but he stayed where he was. He might not like Kate but he knew she meant what she said.

He pointedly looked away from Kate and focused on Jaynie, giving her that boyish grin she'd always loved. "Jaynie, we need to talk."

Jaynie shrugged. "I don't see why." She glanced down then and realized she was still wearing his ring. The princess-cut diamond was a full carat. It had seemed a little big to her but she only took it off for surgeries in the clinic and when she was showering. Slowly she tugged it off. There was a narrow strip of paler skin and Jaynie wiggled her fingers, disturbed at how light, how strange her hand felt. "Except this. Here's your ring back, Dean. Now get the hell out."

She hurled it at him and he caught it just before it would have hit him in the face. She should have thrown it a little harder—maybe she could have put his eye out with the damn thing.

"Jaynie..." Dean said, his voice husky and soft. He did it on purpose. Dean knew how much she loved his voice, how much she loved for him to say her name just like that. Most of the time, when he said her name that way, she was ready to strip to the skin and do pretty much whatever he wanted.

Well, almost everything.

Now though, all she wanted to do was hit him. In a cool voice she said, "It's time for you to go, Dean."

Whatever tenuous control he had on his temper snapped and he glared at her, his face flushed and his eyes glinting with fury. "The only time you know how to be a woman is when you're naked in my bed. Did it ever once occur to you that I'd like somebody who could be a woman out of bed as well as in it?"

Jaynie glanced down at her chest and then up at him. "I didn't realize I took my tits off when I got out of bed, Dean. I *am* a woman. I never acted otherwise."

His derisive snort cut almost as deeply as his words. No, Jaynie wasn't big on messing with her hair and she had better things to do than put on makeup when she'd sweat it off within an hour. But she was a woman. She liked pretty things, she liked being female and she'd thought he loved her the way she was.

"Jaynie, you wouldn't know how to be a real woman if your life depended on it. Shit, ever since college, you're so uptight, it's amazing you can fuck without freezing up."

Oh. Oh shit. Now that *hurt*. Was she a little messed up from what could have happened? *Would* have happened if Brian and Dean hadn't been there?

Blinking back the tears, she stared at him, absolutely miserable. Kate looked at her, and distantly Jaynie saw how pissed Kate was on her behalf. She only wished she could be pissed as well, instead of hurt.

"You son of a bitch," Kate snarled. "You arrogant ass."

"Stay out of this, bitch," Dean snapped.

Jaynie crossed the distance between them in two long strides. She was reeling from the pain and when he turned on Kate again, the anger swelled inside her like a lifesaver. She grabbed on to it as though it would keep her from drowning. Striking out, Jaynie caught him square on the jaw. Pain jolted up from her hand and she relished every second of it. "I warned you, Dean."

"Now, Jaynie, why in the hell did you go and do that?" Brian's deep voice interrupted them and they turned as one to watch as he stepped through the open door. "I wanted to do it."

Brian Lasher stood there, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He had on a worn T-shirt with a faded *Lulu's* logo emblazoned on it. The muscles in his wide chest strained against the thin cotton and barely visible under the neckline was a leather cord. There was a shark tooth on it. He'd found it the last time he'd gone to the beach with his folks before his dad was killed when he was eight. He didn't much look like a knight in shining armor with his too-long hair, threadbare clothes and a mean, nasty smile on his rugged face.

But there was little doubt in anybody's mind that Brian would just punch Dean. No, he'd knock the other man on the ground and enjoy every second of it. Jaynie smirked as the fantasy played out in her mind – Dean lying bloody and bruised on the ground. But Jaynie would enjoy it more if she was the one laying him out.

Dean rubbed his jaw and she saw, with pride, that his cheek was already a deep purplish-red. He was going to bruise. Mr. GQ was going to love that.

"Can I hit him once?" Brian asked. His voice had a playful little lilt to it and he had a smile on his face, as if the whole tableau was highly entertaining, but the look of icy rage in his eyes was anything but amused.

Kate moved to hook her arm through Jaynie's. "I don't know, Bri. Should my big brother punch him for us? Maybe twice. One for you and one for calling me a bitch."

Suddenly, Jaynie was exhausted. She wished she could find some pleasure at the nervous look in Dean's eyes but she just couldn't. She was too damn tired. "I don't care what Brian does. I just want to get some rest."

Immediately, Kate turned into a mother hen, stroking Jaynie's arm and murmuring to her. "Of course you do," Kate murmured. "Poor baby. Come on, I'm going to put you to bed in the guestroom."

It was too much temptation to resist, finding oblivion in a soft bed in a dark room where she could pull the blankets over her head and just sleep.

Chapter Two

You wouldn't know how to be a real woman if your life depended on it.

Those hateful words were still circling through her head a week later. The first few days, Dean had called several times. She wasn't sure why he might be calling. At least not until a delivery guy showed up at the office and tried to deliver flowers.

Although the messages were full of apologies and "I love yous", she was pretty much convinced he didn't even understand the concept of love. What Dean liked was consistency. Jaynie had been a constant in his life and for all Dean's spouting off about needing something different, Jaynie suspected he'd miss having a woman in the house more than anything.

Today marked one week since she had walked in on her fiancé and the memories were still so painfully vivid that Jaynie wished she could just burn them out of her brain.

She stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at her reflection. Jaynie had been wearing a 34C bra in seventh grade. By high school, she'd been in a D cup which had been a tomboy's worst nightmare. If it hadn't been for some seriously good sport bras, she never would have been able to play basketball or run track.

Jaynie still ran two or three miles almost every day. Between the running and her Tae Kwon Do classes, her legs were still as sleekly muscled and lean as they had been in high school. All the weekends she spent swimming or fishing had left her hair sun-streaked and her skin a soft golden tan.

She didn't look bad. Granted, Jaynie generally paid her body very little attention. She was strong, she was healthy and that was about all she cared about. She'd never seen a reason to care beyond that. Kate tortured herself to stay sexy, slender and sleek, getting bikini waxes, eyebrow waxes, highlight jobs and she went broke shopping.

Granted, Kate enjoyed the shopping and all the girly crap, there was no doubt about it. But it all seemed useless to Jaynie. She'd had a man who loved her, right? Why bother?

But the past seven days had been an eye-opening experience as she had relived every last moment of watching Dean in bed with another woman, and relived the words he'd spoken to her that night.

You wouldn't know how to be a real woman if your life depended on it.

You're so uptight, it's amazing you can fuck without freezing up.

She wasn't sure which hurt more.

"I'm not uptight," she murmured to her reflection, and, though she wanted to believe that, and a few days ago, she never would have believed it, right now, she was all but drowning in self doubt.

She still liked sex. Hell, she loved it. And it wasn't that she didn't like playing around. Granted, Dean hadn't seemed too interested in playing much of anything lately.

Of course, that obviously had something to do with *her*.

You wouldn't know how to be a real woman if your life depended on it.

Staring at her reflection, she swore softly. "Damn it." Damn *Dean*. Straight to hell.

Slowly, Jaynie gathered all of her hair in her hand and started to twist it, pulling it up off her neck. She was still staying with Kate and Brian. She hadn't even started to look for her own place. Brian and Kate had gone with her three days ago to help her pack up all of her things. Every last box, every last book, was stowed down in the Lashers' basement.

The guest bathroom, like nearly every other room in the house, held a ton of Kate's stuff. Hairclips, dangly earrings, little bottles of lotion and perfume. Opening the drawer, she dug out a clip and secured it in her hair. It took three tries before she finally got to where it didn't feel like it would fall down the first time she shook her head.

It looked a little different, she supposed. Some of her hair was spilling out and it had a softer look than it did when she wore it in a ponytail. Curious, she looked into the drawer and saw a couple of spare tubes of lipstick, mascara, blush and all the other stuff she never messed with. Jaynie could count on one hand how many times she'd willingly put on makeup and every single time it had been for some goofy formal dance, either in high school or in college.

She opened one tube of lipstick and the bright fuchsia color had her shaking her head. Kate could wear that color and wear it well, but Jaynie wasn't even going to try. The next one was a little more doable. It was a soft peachy-coral color and though it looked pretty going on, Jaynie stood there staring at her mouth and feeling...

Fake.

Makeup wasn't her. Fiddling with her hair and stressing over what to wear—it just wasn't her.

The door opened and, as a rush of cool air flooded the room, Jaynie turned, startled. A blush stained her face a painful red as she looked at Brian. She stood there frozen and he stood there looking dazed. His weird turquoise eyes darkened and his gaze slid down from her face to her chest and then, farther down. She could practically feel the path his gaze took as he looked her over from head to toe. The dazed look faded, replaced quickly by heat and that hungry look was enough to unfreeze her. She grabbed a towel from the hook by the shower.

Her hands shook as she wrapped it around her body, shook so badly she couldn't tuck the end tight enough to hold the towel in place. In the end, she just stood there clutching it to her chest. "Brian, can you leave?" she asked. Her voice squeaked a little on the last word.

His eyes slid back up, a slow leisurely journey that shook her to the core. He shook his head and muttered, "Damn, Jaynie."

Then he turned, grabbed the door and shut it behind him. Hard.

* * * * *

Damn, Jaynie.

More than an hour had passed and Brian's husky, rough voice still echoed through her mind. She lay naked on the guest bed. She had long since kicked the covers away and the sheet lay in a tangle around her hips. Shivers raced over her flesh as she recalled the look in his eyes. That heat—it had surprised her. More, she was surprised by how she'd reacted to it. Like she hadn't ever seen hunger in a man's gaze before.

She had, but for some reason Jaynie couldn't remember it affecting her quite like this. Dean had been her first lover, and her only one. She liked it that way and didn't particularly care if it seemed a little old-fashioned.

She liked sex with him—it was hot, it was intense, or so she had thought. Jaynie hadn't ever worried about their sex life and it wasn't something they ever really talked about. At least, not since college.

The sex had always seemed good to her and he hadn't ever voiced any complaints. Until this past week, she hadn't ever really doubted herself as a woman.

Until this past week. Logically, Jaynie knew that was why Dean had said those things. He'd wanted to hurt her, though she didn't really understand why. He was the one who'd screwed around. And damn, had he ever screwed around. She had a bad feeling that this wasn't a new thing for him so how in hell could he act like she had betrayed him?

Not that it mattered. He had done it and his words had done more damage than Jaynie could have imagined. She was miserable, insecure, aching, scared and heartbroken. Under the weight of those emotions, the anger had flickered out like a fire deprived of oxygen. She wanted the anger back. She'd take the heat of anger over the chill of misery and loneliness any day.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find that anger. She couldn't find that heat. Even though it was the dead of summer, she walked through the days frozen to the core.

Then Brian had inadvertently opened the bathroom door and the heat she'd seen in his eyes had melted some the ice inside her. But the anger hadn't blazed back to life inside her. Oh, there was heat, but it wasn't the fire of anger. It was every bit as potent as rage, and every bit of heady.

Jaynie didn't think about what she was doing as she climbed out of bed and wrapped the sheet around her. If she thought about what she was getting ready to do, she would panic and run. She didn't want to do either.

Kate was out on a date and she had waggled her fingers at them on her way out and said, "Don't wait up." Moving through the house in a daze, she paused by Kate's bedroom at the foot of the stairs and stepped inside. As always, the light was on, and as always, the room looked like a tornado had swept through it. Lacy bras, panties and flirty little skirts were tossed haphazardly here and there. On the bed was a shopping bag and Jaynie peeked inside. The robe was nearly the same color of peach as the lipstick had been. It still had the tags on it and Jaynie used her teeth to pull them free, all the while staring straight ahead.

If she stopped to think about what she was doing, she'd freeze again. Jaynie was damn tired of being cold. She paused at the mirror and stared at her reflection. The peach silk lay against her tanned skin, clung to the stiff peaks of her nipples. She tied the belt tightly and then slid her hands under her hair, pulling it free from the robe. It tumbled down her back, the thick gold-streaked strands razor straight.

For a second, she hesitated, staring at her reflection. She closed her eyes and when she did, she saw Brian's intense turquoise stare, hot and focused. If she started to panic or think, all she needed was that memory and she knew she'd feel steady enough to go through with this.

He wasn't in his room. She turned and stared back down the staircase, uncertain of where he might be. He hadn't gone out. She would have heard his truck if he'd left the house.

She headed back downstairs, made her way into the kitchen and from there she heard the muffled sounds of his breathing, strained and harsh. She heard metal clank as she opened the basement door. It was dim down there. Her feet were soundless on the carpeted steps as she descended.

Jaynie's breath hitched a little as she stared at Brian. He was lying on the weight bench, his gaze on the ceiling, his features blank as he lifted the heavy bar up and slowly lowered it back down. He didn't make any of the annoying grunts and groans that Dean liked to make when he worked out. The only sounds she heard were his heavy breathing. He did ten reps as she watched.

She waited until he put the bar down and sat up before she moved. She didn't make a sound, she knew she hadn't, but his head turned and for a brief moment there was a fiery heat burning in the depths of his gaze. Then he blinked and when he looked at her, his expression was shuttered.

That blank look cracked as she lowered her hands to the robe's belt. She didn't say anything at first, just opened the robe and stood there as he looked at her. He stared at her breasts and she shuddered a little when he licked his lips. His big hands clenched into fists and under the thin cotton shorts, she could see the swelling of his cock. His gaze moved down her body. Jaynie had to fight not to jerk the robe closed when his gaze fastened on her sex. A muscle jerked in his jaw and Jaynie felt an answering throb deep inside.

He wanted her. The relief that flooded her was unreal. It didn't matter that he was probably just reacting to the physical stimulus of a woman standing naked in front of him. It was a basic, honest human reaction—a man wanting a woman. That was all she needed, to know that she hadn't totally failed and that she could react. Men could want her and she could feel heat—she hadn't frozen up.

"I need you to touch me," Jaynie said softly when he finally looked up at her face.

"Jaynie—"

She knew what he was going to say and before he could form any words to try to talk sense into her, she shrugged her shoulders and sent the robe to the floor in a puddle of peach silk. "I don't want anything more than you touching me, your hands on me. I'm not looking to find a replacement for Dean and you don't need to feel anything more than what you're already feeling. I need to be touched, Brian, and I want you to do it."

His voice was hoarse when he rasped, "And when you wake up tomorrow, then what? You're Kate's best friend. You're my friend and we work together."

"None of that will change, Brian. You don't need to lie to me and tell me that you love me. You don't have to worry that I'm using you as a rebound guy after Dean," she said softly. She took a step toward him. He took a deep, ragged breath and started to reach for her. When he would have dropped his hand, she took another step and caught it, brought it up and pressed it to her breast. His hand cupped her and he used his thumb to trace a slow circle around her nipple. "But I need this. Please."

Brian figured he had every man's fantasy standing right before him. A beautiful, sexy woman offering a night of sex, no strings attached. If it wasn't Jaynie, he would have already been on her, but it was Jaynie. Jaynie with long legs, tanned, smooth skin and hair that fell nearly to her very nice butt, but nonetheless, it was Jaynie. He'd known her all her life.

She stared at him with stark eyes brimming with an emotion he couldn't quite decipher and it made his chest feel strangely tight. *I need this*. Shit. Slowly, he stood up. Brian hooked a hand over the back of her neck and pulled her against him. She fit, he realized inanely. She fit against him as perfectly as if she had been made for him, her breasts pressing flat against his chest, the soft curve of her belly cuddling the ridge of his cock. Her hands came up and curled around his biceps.

"You sure about this?" Brian murmured. He dipped his head and pressed his mouth to hers. Earlier, her mouth had been slicked with some shiny peachy-pink

lipstick. Her lips were naked now but they were warm, soft and sweet under his mouth and the taste of her went straight to his head.

"I don't do things I'm not sure of," Jaynie whispered.

He glanced down. "I need a shower."

Jaynie shook her head and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his chest. "No, you don't." Her tongue came out and licked his flesh.

His laugh sounded a little forced. "Uh, yeah, I kinda do." He glanced back over his shoulder at the weights and then looked back at Jaynie. "I was hoping to wear myself out enough that I could sleep. I was lying in bed and I kept seeing you. It made me so damn hard, I hurt."

A soft blush painted her cheeks pink and Jaynie looked away from him, suddenly shy. Brian stroked his hands down her torso, resting them on the curves of her hips. "You're certain about this?" he murmured one more time.

She nodded, eyes still averted. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. It was a gesture he'd seen from her before, one she did when she was preoccupied, upset or nervous. But this was the first time that he'd ever felt moved to bend over and catch that soft, plump lip in his mouth. He almost did just that but he held himself back. Once he started kissing her, Brian knew he wasn't going to stop and he hadn't come downstairs expecting to have sex.

He bent his knees and wrapped an arm around her hips. Slowly, he straightened and as he stood upright, the wet heat of her sex pressed against him, scorching him through the thin layer of his shorts. "Upstairs," he murmured, pressing his lips to her throat. Her legs came up, wrapped around his hips and Brian groaned, scared that he might come in that very second like some teenage boy.

Each step was an excruciating pleasure. It hovered between paradise and torment and by the time he made it up the two flights of stairs to his room, he was ready to press her against a wall and come inside her—right then, right there. He didn't want to wait long enough to find a condom and please, please let there be one in his room.

"What are you doing?" Jaynie asked in a bemused voice as he set her down and grabbed his discarded jeans from the floor. He generally didn't keep a condom in his wallet, but he wasn't really sure where he might have one.

"Looking for a rubber," he muttered. But there wasn't one there and he dropped it on the floor and strode over to his dresser. The top was cluttered with change, a couple of lottery tickets, and a half dozen prescription pads from work. But no rubber. None in the top drawer either.

He heard a squeak and looked behind him to see Jaynie pulling a foil strip out of the bedside table drawer. She held it up for him and he counted them as he crossed over to her. There were five of them. As much as he hurt right now, it was possible he'd need every last one. He tried to take them from Jaynie but she tugged them out of his reach. "I'll do it," she murmured. She tore one off and tossed the rest onto his bed. But when she started to tear the packet open, Brian saw that her hands were shaking. She slid him a sidelong look.

She was nervous. More than nervous, Brian realized. He knew what this was about. That dickhead had done Jaynie some serious damage and Brian was just now realizing that it went pretty damn deep. Brian acted as if he didn't see her shaky hands or the nerves in her eyes as he stepped around behind her. He cupped his hands over her hips and pulled her back against him so that the warm, round curves of her ass were nestled against the hard ridge of his cock.

"You'd better hurry," he murmured against her neck. He rolled his hips once. "I'm dying here."

"Can't have that." She got it open and turned in the circle of his arms. Steadier, she met his smile with a wide one of her own and glanced down. "You're overdressed, Brian."

"Not for long." He shoved his shorts down and reached for the rubber but she pulled it away, smacking his hands.

She unrolled the condom down over his thick, aching length and each brush of her fingers—cool and slick with the condom’s lubricant—was another pleasure-filled pain. She took his hand when she was done and started to pull him to the bed but he pulled her up against him and turned, pressing her against the wall. “Here,” he muttered. He dipped his head, bit one nipple lightly, then stroked with his tongue. “Right here, right now.”

Somehow, Brian knew that slow and gentle wasn’t what Jaynie needed right then. She needed hard, fast and hungry. She needed to feel desired and craved and damn if he wasn’t up for that. He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist, arched into him. Their gazes locked and held as he pushed inside. No preliminaries, he took her completely—one hard, unrelenting stroke that buried his cock completely inside the snug, wet sheath of her pussy.

Her eyes went wide and her hips jerked. She tensed up a little and, though that involuntary tightening of her muscles felt like sheer bliss to Brian, he had a feeling it wasn’t helping her. She was so damn tight, so snug. Brian lifted her hips and pulled her in tight against him so he could rub against her clit with each stroke. He changed the angle of his thrusts and then he watched her eyes widen in reaction. Her pupils flared, her breathing hitched in her throat and the hands clutching his shoulders tightened. Her nails dug into his skin.

Jaynie licked her lips and Brian tracked the motion with his eyes. A groan rumbled out of him and he dipped his head, taking her mouth with his. She whimpered into his mouth. Brian captured the sound with his lips. The taste of her went straight to his head, exploding through his system like the fiery burn of whiskey. Just as potent too. In an attempt at self-preservation, he pulled his mouth from hers and then pressed it to her neck. Her skin was silken, soft.

Her nipples stabbed into his chest and he wanted to taste them. Brian wanted to pull out of her and go down on her, nuzzle the soft, wispy curls and then take her with his mouth until she screamed herself hoarse. Her body was an endless surprise—long

legs, a tight ass, her big breasts topped with dark pink nipples. He could take all night discovering her body and finding out what made her sigh, what made her scream.

But his cock wasn't going to let him take the time to do any of that. Brian couldn't pull out if his life depended on it and he couldn't take his time either. All he could do was take her hard and fast, thrusting into the hot, wet silk of her pussy and listen to her beg and plead. He worked a hand between them, sought out the stiff nub of her clit and stroked her there—quick, firm strokes that made her arch against him. Icy-hot shivers raced down his spine.

He had to come. His cock felt like it was going to explode.

But damn it, she had to come with him. He caught her chin in his hand and lifted her mouth to his. She moaned against his lips. Brian pushed his tongue inside her mouth and she met him, kissing him with the same burning hunger that had taken control of Brian. He skimmed his hands down her back. She shivered. When he cupped the silken flesh of her butt in his hands, he could have sworn her body temperature shot up fifteen degrees.

Damn, the heat of her.

Brian's control snapped and he drove inside her, deep and hard and fast, as fast as he could. The sounds of them coming together filled the air—flesh slapping against flesh, their labored breathing, Jaynie's harsh, ragged moans that rose into a hoarse scream as she started to come.

She climaxed around him in a series of convulsive little caresses that milked his dick like a silky fist. He couldn't hold back anymore. He shouted her name and came so hard, he thought the top of his cock just might blow off.

His orgasm seemed to draw itself out, his sheathed cock jerking inside her sex and she kept clenching around him, those milking little convulsions emptying him, draining him completely.

It took a good five minutes before Brian could move. He pushed away from the wall, cradling Jaynie's limp body against his. His legs felt weak and he had to lock his

knees to keep from collapsing as he carried her over to the bed. He half turned before he fell back, keeping Jaynie locked against him.

Brian might have dozed off but the loss of her body heat as she tried to pull away roused him out of his half slumber. He let her roll away while he dealt with the condom, disposing of it in the small trash can by the bed. Jaynie was still sitting on the edge of the bed and he watched with a pleased grin as she pushed herself up to stand on wobbly legs. But before she could take a step away, he reached up and wrapped his fingers around her wrist and jerked her back so that she tumbled into his lap. "We're not done," he muttered as he fisted a hand in the tangled silk of her hair and tugged her head back. He took her mouth, a little slower, a little more gently.

Gentle – this time was going to be gentle.

* * * * *

Jaynie moaned as another orgasm rolled through her. Brian lay sprawled between her thighs and this time when she said, "I can't take any more," he lifted his head and stared at her. The intense turquoise of his eyes burned into hers.

"I'm not done," he muttered and the whisper of air as he spoke caressed her exposed, sensitized folds. He lowered his head and traced his tongue around her clit, circling it with teasing strokes before he moved lower and stabbed it inside her.

If he kept this up, Jaynie didn't know what would give out first, her heart or her stamina. Exhaustion pulled at her but the swells of pleasure were so intense she couldn't help but crave more. She fisted her hands in his thick chestnut curls and pulled. "Brian..."

He came this time, covering her body with his and taking her mouth hungrily. She tried to turn away but his hands cupped her head and held her still. Blood stained her cheeks red. She could taste herself on his mouth. She hadn't ever liked to be kissed after Dean went down on her, but she couldn't turn away from Brian's kiss and within a

couple of seconds, she didn't want to. She wanted his tongue in her mouth and she wanted him to kiss her and keep kissing her.

He started to push inside her and then he stiffened, pulling away from her mouth, from her hands, from her body so he could crouch between her spread thighs. "Shit. Condom." He found the last one buried in the tangle of sheets and Jaynie watched with heavy lids as he tore it open and unrolled it over his thick cock. The plum-shaped head was ruddy. Jaynie reached out and wrapped her hand around his width and stroked up, down. Through the thin layer of latex, she could feel his heat. She passed her thumb over the head and then stroked him again, tightening her hand as she neared the base of his cock.

He hissed out a harsh breath between his teeth and swore. Brian caught her hand in his and when she would have reached with her free hand, he caught it too. He forced her back down to the bed under the weight of his body, pinning her wrists and holding them up by her head. "Watch me," he muttered. "I want to watch you and I want you to watch me."

Their gazes held as he entered her. She was sore and sensitive and he felt so damn big inside her, bruising her. She loved it. She rocked her hips up, taking him deeper and moaning his name.

He responded by lowering his head and murmuring, "Your pussy is so snug, so hot and you taste so damn good. I could spend hours lying between your legs and tasting you, licking you and feeling you come against my mouth."

How could she get any more turned on? Jaynie didn't think it was possible but he went and proved her wrong. He laughed a little when she shivered. "You like dirty talk," he teased. "If I tell you that I want to fuck you until neither of us can walk and then I want start it all over again, would you like that?"

She whimpered and rocked against him, her hands clutching his sweat-slicked shoulders. "What else do you like, pretty girl?" he murmured. "Would you like it if I

pulled out and then rolled you over, came into you from behind? You've got a pretty little ass but I haven't been able to admire it that much."

A hot fist of need wrapped itself around her belly. She said nothing but Brian saw the answer somewhere on her face. Or maybe felt it in her body as she bucked underneath him. Brian pulled away and rolled her onto her belly. Jaynie tried to push onto her knees, but he held her still with a hand pressed to the base of her spine. She couldn't see him and when he bent low and brushed a kiss against her spine, a shiver racked her body from head to toe.

Then he smoothed his hands over her rump, squeezing and kneading the flesh. The weight of his body pressed her into the tangled sheets as he covered her. His hands sought her wrists again, holding her in place as he lifted his upper body. He shifted a little and used his knee to spread her thighs. For some reason, that action seemed damn erotic. "You like being held down, Jaynie?" he murmured. "We haven't had enough time to play. What kind of games do you like, baby girl?"

What kind of games? Hell, Jaynie didn't know. It had been too damn long since she'd played at anything. Yeah, dirty talk did her in every time, but she'd had no idea that Brian's playful domination could get her that hot.

"Damn it, Brian. I want you inside me."

He shifted his grip so that he held both wrists in one hand, pinning them to the mattress over her head. Then he slid his free hand between her thighs and pushed a thick finger inside her. "Like this?"

"No," she groaned, frustrated. She tried to lift up for him, but he wouldn't let her. He leaned back over her, using his big body to keep hers immobile. She couldn't reach for him, either because he still held her wrists in one hand, stretching her arms high over her head.

The inability to move was almost as erotic as the feel of his body pressing against hers. He moved between her thighs and she tried to push up onto her knees, but he didn't let her. He kept her pinned to the mattress and pushed into her with her lying

facedown. He didn't penetrate as deep but it didn't matter. She was primed and ready to come and if he would just —

"Brian!" she screamed his name into the mattress as he rolled his hips against hers. He bit her shoulder lightly and then whispered against her ear, "When you come, your pussy gets so tight, it feels like you'll squeeze my dick off. I love it. I'm going to make you come again. And again. And again."

She believed it. Jaynie realized that later she might be embarrassed about it, but Brian had figured out her secret. Hot, dirty pillow talk was enough to have her burning and ready — a little roughness went a long way for her and dirty talk could just about beat foreplay.

That part of her had been neglected lately and it was as if she was starving for it. Starving for more than just physical contact, and for more than just sex.

Him.

It leaped unbidden to her mind that she had been starving for him.

Brian's idea of foreplay, the way he cupped her breasts and rubbed his thumbs over her nipples, the way he kissed his way down her spine and bit the taut flesh of her rump, the way he pushed two fingers inside her and scissored them while he circled his thumb around her clit.

He let go of her hands and Jaynie whimpered in disappointment but then she gasped, her breath hitching in her throat when he fisted a hand in her hair and used it to turn her head. He angled his around so that he could kiss her. His hips slammed forward, slapping against the curve of her ass as he shafted her. He kissed her until she was breathless and before he pulled away, he bit her lower lip. "You've got the prettiest damn mouth. I never noticed it before. But it's so damn pretty." His voice took on a teasing lilt and he whispered into her ear, "I bet it would look damn pretty wrapped around my cock."

She came. Just that easily. He teased her about giving him a blowjob, but the way he said it, the words he used and his rough, sexy, growling voice, combined with the slow, thorough way he shafted her was all it took to send her screaming into orgasm.

As though he had been waiting for just that, Brian wrapped his hands around her wrists again and slammed into her, using all the strength of his back and lower body to fuck her until he stiffened over her, coming in a rush and moaning her name against her shoulder.

Chapter Three

That one night had left a mark on him. Brian couldn't see Jaynie without his dick getting hard. Even right now, as she left surgery, her scrubs stained liberally with blood from the dog she had operated on. He already knew that she'd been forced to amputate the Golden Retriever's left hind leg and he knew when she was done talking to the dog's owners, she'd retreat to her office and cry for a minute.

He'd always known she was a good vet, and normally, he would have followed her into her office and offered his shoulder while she cried. He'd done it before and never thought twice about. But that was under normal circumstances and nothing had been normal for him for the past four months.

Jaynie, though, carried on as usual. She acted as though the night had never happened and it irritated the hell out of him. He wanted some kind of reaction when she saw him. He wanted to catch her staring at him. He wanted to see her blush when she realized he was staring at her. He wanted to see her nipples stiffen under the plain cotton scrubs.

More than anything, he wanted her naked and under him again as he rode her hard and made her scream. He dipped his head as she walked by, hoping she wouldn't notice the heat in his eyes.

She'd promised him a night of sex, no strings attached. But she hadn't come through with that promise, because Brian still felt plenty of strings, all on his end and all drawing him toward her.

It wouldn't be so damn bad if he didn't have to see her every day. Brian, at least, wanted to think that. He wasn't so sure though. Because he dreamed about her every night. Not always the sex though.

If it had just been the sex, he might have been okay. After all, a lot of healthy men had a sexual obsession, right?

But he also had dreams about the way she'd looked that night when he'd come home and found Dean standing there, saying things that brought tears to Jaynie's big hazel-green eyes. He had dreams about the way Jaynie had looked a month ago when they'd all gone out on Wolf Bay to fish. Kate had spent the afternoon working on her tan while Jaynie, Brian and Kate's now-ex-boyfriend fished. Jaynie had worn a simple tank suit—black, cut high on the thigh and designed to flatten her breasts, more than enhance them. Brian had spent the entire afternoon trying to hide his hard-on. Even a dip into the bay hadn't done anything to ease the ache.

She passed by him and he closed his eyes, breathing deep to drag the scent of her inside. His hands closed into fists. He wanted to turn around and grab her, grab the long sun-streaked blonde braid and pull her back against him, strip her naked, spread her thighs and push inside.

Instead, he disappeared into his office and locked the door behind him.

Wouldn't do to have one of the clinic's employees walk in while he was jerking off.

* * * * *

As far as days went, Jaynie guessed it could have been worse. It was Friday, she'd managed to save that pretty golden's life, if not her leg, and she had the weekend off. Brian was down to cover the emergencies and she had plans to spend tomorrow out on Wolf Bay. She climbed out of the car, grabbed the takeout bag and the two cloth bags of groceries. She bumped the door with her hip to shut it and then climbed the stairs to the apartment. Juggling the bags, she managed to open the door and she stepped inside with a relieved sigh. The cool air wrapped around her and she realized how hot and sticky she'd gotten. Nothing like September in Alabama.

Four months ago when she'd moved out of the little bungalow she had shared with Dean, she hadn't been able to find any place of her own. Well, that was a lie. There was

that big, gorgeous house on Highway 180. She loved it and if she had totally wiped out her savings, she could have afforded it.

But she was a single woman and it looked like she was going to stay that way for a while. She'd be lost in a four-bedroom, two-story house. She barely had enough stuff to fill the little apartment she was renting from Brian and Kate.

The apartment was over their three-car garage. Both Brian and Kate had taken turns living in the garage until their mom remarried and moved to live with her new husband in Baton Rouge. She'd sold the house to them and said when one of them was ready to get married, they could fight it out.

The garage apartment had been sitting empty and after a month of trailing around after Jaynie on her endless house search, Kate breezed into the guest bedroom one evening and dropped the keys into her hand. "Rent is six hundred a month. But since you're my best friend, I'll let you have it for four-fifty. Just stop dragging me around looking at all these houses and apartments and condos—you're driving me crazy. And promise me you'll cook once in a while."

So Jaynie was living in a nice little apartment that cost less than half of what she had been paying when she lived with Dean. She was banking the rest of it but if she stayed here much longer she was going to need to buy something else besides a bed. The old couch was left over from when Brian had lived up here and the card table was something they'd found down in the basement.

The table was rickety and she doubted it would hold anything much heavier than a pizza. She usually ate on the couch or with Kate and Brian. Not that Brian was around much anymore. They worked together but sometimes they hardly saw each other. She'd catch a glimpse of him in the hallway or they'd pass each other in the break room.

She frowned a little. Usually when he was on his way out. She heard a car door slam and walked to the window to watch as Brian climbed out of his truck. He glanced up at the apartment. She lifted a hand to wave and started to open the window to see if

he wanted to come up to eat some of the Chinese she'd picked up but he turned away and headed inside the house.

"He *is* avoiding me," she muttered. She'd suspected it for a while, but lately he didn't even want to be in the same room as her. Oh, he wasn't doing anything to make her uncomfortable and he never said anything about it. But he didn't want to be around her. It made her belly knot thinking about it. She hadn't thought things through that night before she went to him, and even if she had, Jaynie doubted she would have done it any differently.

She'd needed something and Brian had given it to her.

But she realized it had messed up their friendship. Heaving a sigh, she turned to stare at the white takeout bag. Her belly revolted at the thought of eating anything and she grabbed the bag and stuffed it inside the refrigerator. Jaynie wasn't hungry anymore.

Her mail from the past few days was in a messy pile on the counter. She shuffled through catalogs, credit card offers and other junk and dumped them all in the garbage can. It thinned the stack out by half. There was a letter from her mom, some coupons for pizza and tanning beds, a credit card bill and an envelope made from thick, heavyweight paper that had that linen feel to it.

An invitation.

She recognized the return address, though the handwriting was a sweeping feminine script that wasn't at all familiar. The knot in her gut got worse. Her eyes started to burn. By the time she'd torn it open, she felt like she was going to puke. The envelope had shiny foil lining under the flap, done in a soft pastel pink. Her hands were shaking as she pulled the invitation out and by the time she finished reading it, she was glad she hadn't eaten.

Puking up Chinese was disgusting.

Blood roared in her ears as she read the invitation to Dean's wedding.

Dean's *wedding*. To Kit, aka Kirsten Dawn Austin. In less than two weeks. It had only been four months since she had found the two of them together and they were getting married? Jaynie had worn Dean's ring for two years and they hadn't done much more than argue about a formal church wedding versus a more casual beach wedding.

It looked like Dean was going to get that formal wedding.

Feeling a little catty, she muttered, "I wonder if Landon's going to be part of the wedding party."

Jaynie sat there with her legs drawn to her chest, staring blankly at the wall in front of her without really seeing it. As if it had just happened yesterday, Jaynie could hear Dean's voice again.

Jaynie, you wouldn't know how to be a real woman if your life depended on it.

It's amazing you can fuck without freezing up.

She crumpled the invitation in her hand, though she could still see the shiny pink script. It seemed as if the words had been burned on the inside of her eyelids and she didn't know if she could stop seeing them even if she wanted to. "You son of a bitch," she whispered. She surged up from the ground and stomped into the small bathroom. She stared at her reflection and then she reached up and jerked at the thick band that held her hair. Jaynie pulled it out and used her fingers to comb through the tangles in her hair. She needed a comb – no, not a comb.

Scissors. She left the bathroom and dug through the drawers in the kitchen until she found the scissors. She didn't even bother going back into the bathroom until she started cutting her hair.

Dean had always loved her hair.

She kept it long for him, not because she liked it. It was hot. It was heavy. It was a pain in the ass to wash and it took forever to dry.

Ten minutes later she was surrounded by long strands of hair. She felt a good ten pounds lighter.

You wouldn't know how to be a woman...

In order to drown out his hated voice, Jaynie grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge. She didn't even bother with a glass, just popped the cork and settled down on the floor, surrounded by the shorn strands of hair.

"Congratulations, darling," she purred, spying the crumpled invitation from the corner of her eye. "I hope the two of you have a long, miserable life together."

* * * * *

"Damn."

Jaynie heard the door shut and she turned her face away, burying it in the couch. "Go away," she mumbled.

"I take it you received the invitation," Kate said quietly.

"Go. Away."

"Geez, Jaynie, do you have any hair left? What were you thinking?"

Grouchy, she turned her head and slitted one eye open so she could see Kate making her way through the piles of hair. "I was thinking that hair was hot, heavy and I only kept it that long because Dean liked it. Why mess with it now? I'm tired. I'm hung over and I want some sleep."

"So you get an invitation to the wedding from hell and instead of crying or calling me or overdosing on Häagen-Dazs, or all three, you drink an entire bottle of expensive wine and cut your hair."

Jaynie turned away from Kate and muttered, "It was a gift from Dean. Supposed to be for our anniversary. Seemed appropriate. And FYI, I cut my hair *before* I drank the wine."

Kate was quiet for a while and Jaynie hoped maybe she'd quietly sneaked outside. But no such luck. With a sigh, she rolled onto her side and saw Kate sitting on the floor by the beat-up couch. "So you cut your hair—because Dean liked it. Did I get that right?"

Jaynie squinted. "Seemed to make sense at the time."

Kate's smile came slowly but it grew until it lit up her whole face. She rolled onto her knees and propped her elbows on the couch so that she was just inches away from Jaynie's face. "So let's go all the way."

"All the way?" Jaynie reached up to touch her hair and winced as she realized how very little there was left. Some strands were longer than others, but if she was lucky, it might be a few inches past her shoulders when she got it fixed.

And it badly needed fixing, she suspected. Now that the anger had dulled a little, she was having some second thoughts about the impromptu haircut. Too late now, though. For more than ten years, her hair had been long enough that she could almost sit on it and now, without that weight, she almost felt naked. "What, you think I should go bald? Sinead O'Conner pulled that look off. I can't."

Kate poked Jaynie in the ribs. "Not talking about your hair. I'm talking a do-over. I'm talking about you ditching those ratty clothes you wear and taking you for a real haircut, and baby, you *need* one. I'm talking we do you up like Cinderella on the night of the ball and you go to that wedding looking like a million bucks." She inspected the butcher job on Jaynie's head then leaned down and pressed her cheek to Jaynie's. "I love you, no matter what. And I know you don't like to mess with hair, makeup or any of that girly-crap. But come on, don't you want to make him sorry for what he did? What he said? You don't have to turn into a diva or anything. You can still do your jeans and you don't have to start fiddling with makeup, though, honestly, once you get used to it, it's not much trouble. I'm talking a shopping trip for some new clothes. I'm talking one day where you go all out and you show him what he lost."

Her voice pithy, Jaynie said, "All he lost was a frigid bitch too scared to experiment, Kate."

"You are *not* frigid," Kate snapped. She poked Jaynie in the arm and those nails didn't feel good. "So you didn't want to do a three-way. Hell, neither would I."

Interesting fantasy, but that's all it is—a fantasy. Not wanting it doesn't make you frigid."

Logically, Jaynie knew that. Honestly, she did. But still... Groaning, she turned her face away from Kate. "Kate, this is ridiculous."

"The hell it is. Just listen—don't say no. Think about it, okay? Hell, what can it hurt? You spend a few hundred dollars on clothes and we'll go to the wedding and watch him squirm."

* * * * *

A few...hundred. Yeah. Right.

Jaynie stood in her bedroom and stared at the bags littering the floor, the bed, her dresser. She had a little bit of makeup on, courtesy of the cosmetics counter at Dillard's and it felt like she'd visited every clothing store in Spanish Fort. The clothes she wore now had also come from Dillard's—a short blue skirt that would require extreme caution if she bent over and two skinny-strapped tank tops, a blue one layered over a white one which had lace around the neckline. The lace on the white tank matched the cute little thong panties and front-clasp bra.

One thing that Jaynie had liked buying was lingerie. She'd always liked buying it and that part had been relatively painless. She hadn't even needed much prodding from Kate. Unlike all the clothes. She'd needed a lot of prodding with the clothes. And the makeup. Jaynie imagined if she hadn't done the butcher job on her hair, Kate would have had to coax her to the salon too. But Jaynie had been more than happy to hit the salon.

Her hair had been trimmed and now it fell around her face and shoulders in layers. "You got good hair. Shouldn't take much more than some mousse in the morning, though if you want it to flip at the ends like this, you will have to blow-dry it," the stylist had told Jaynie. "But next time you need a change, come see me instead of trying to do it yourself."

Mousse. She could handle that. Although she doubted she could make it look the way the lady at the salon had. Nor did she want to try. She had hopes that she could convince Kate to help her with it when it mattered.

Like in two weeks. Dean's wedding.

She even had the perfect outfit. She waded through the bags and boxes on the floor and grabbed the bag that Kate had draped over the end. Kate had dared Jaynie to buy a white dress, but Jaynie wasn't going to the wedding to try to outshine Kat. She didn't give a damn about that part.

She was going to prove something to Dean...and to herself.

The dress was a soft peach color. The first thing that Jaynie had thought when she'd seen it was that it was nearly the same shade of the robe she'd been wearing that night with Brian. She had never been much for soft feminine colors but she really liked the way this peach color seemed to glow against her skin. It had two skinny straps and a neckline lower than Jaynie was used to. It followed her curves closely, skimming them like a lover's caress. It wasn't quite floor-length, but the skirt was long. There was a slit on either side that went up past her knee and Kate had helped her pick out a pair of shoes that were both pretty and relatively comfortable.

So to speak. The sandals had a nearly flat sole and thin, sparkly straps. Kate had said she needed a pedicure and Jaynie had resigned herself to having her feet messed with.

"A pedicure and a date, and you'll be good to go."

Kate had told her that while they'd lugged up all the bags and boxes and when Jaynie had insisted she didn't want a date, Kate had disagreed. "You're going to go in there looking phenomenal and you're going to have a good-looking man at your side who hangs on to your every word."

"Great," Jaynie had replied sourly. "Where do I find one?"

* * * * *

"Find somebody else," Brian said from inside the refrigerator. He stood up, a beer in one hand and a box of takeout in the other.

Kate grabbed the takeout box and tossed it in the trash. "You don't want to eat that. I've been forgetting to throw it away for the past two weeks."

Brian scowled and looked toward what would have been his first meal in nearly twenty-four hours. There was next to nothing else in the refrigerator. Both he and Kate sucked at grocery shopping. A glance into the freezer revealed a couple of steaks with freezer burn and a package of ground beef that looked like it had gone past freezer burn and into the final throes of frostbite.

Kate shouldered him aside and shoved the freezer closed. She gave him her most charming smile and said, "Tell me that you'll take Jaynie to the wedding and you'll have a meal fit for a king."

Brian gave the steaks a grim look. "I said no. And last I checked, you weren't a magician. There's nothing here to cook and I'm not waiting for you to go the store. Why in hell is Jaynie going to that jerk's wedding anyway? After what he did —"

Kate's smile faded. "That's the whole reason she's going, Bri. He hurt her. He didn't just break her heart, he did something to her confidence." She glanced back over her shoulder, as though she had to make sure Jaynie wasn't there.

"Look, you don't know the whole story." She nibbled on her lower lip and fiddled with an earring for a minute.

Wary, Brian asked, "What whole story? Dean fucked around on her. She caught him."

"No—she caught them. Them as in...three." Kate's face flushed red as she explained that Jaynie hadn't just walked in Kit and Dean. She'd walked in on Kit and Dean, plus one.

"It's something he tried to talk her in to trying back in college and she wasn't interested. After all of this happened, he had her thinking she was frigid and a poor excuse for a woman. It's not just what he did, but what he said to her, Brian. He hurt

her and she's dealt with that. But she needs to look him in the eye and show him that he hasn't broken her."

"Shit." Brian closed his eyes and wished he had hit Dean that night. Repeatedly. He heaved out a heavy sigh and scrubbed a hand over his face before looking at Kate. "Katie, I..." *Can't*. The word was there on his tongue, but he couldn't force it out. It seemed lodged there. He kept seeing Jaynie's face, how she had looked that night when he'd walked in the door and seen Dean tearing into her as if she had been the one out slumming. He saw how she looked that night she'd come down to the basement, her hands shaking, her voice uncertain and her eyes so full of need as she'd said, "I need this."

Yeah, Dean had screwed up Jaynie's confidence and Brian just now was getting an inkling of how badly Dean had shaken her.

Jaynie had seemed as if she had gotten some of it back after that night they were together. Brian knew it had little to do with him personally and everything to do with the fact that he was a man who had obviously wanted her and the fact that she sure as hell wasn't frigid. Damn, even that thought was laughable. Jaynie was about as frigid as the beach was in August.

But one night of hot sweaty sex wasn't going to undo the damage that bastard had done to her.

Still, Brian wasn't so certain he was the man for this particular job. He couldn't stand close to her without wanting to grab her. He had an ugly feeling that this obsession of his was growing into something serious, something he hadn't planned on and something he wasn't ready for. And even if he had been ready for it, Jaynie had no interest in him. She'd made that damn clear.

A woman couldn't behave as she had the past four months, acting so casual and normal, if she had feelings for a man, right? He took a deep breath and braced himself. He couldn't do this. It would be like throwing a lit match into a barrel of gunpowder. He opened his mouth to say it.

But instead of *no*, he heard himself saying, “Fine. Whatever, Katie.”

She beamed at him and then glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, and what do you know? The chef is here.”

The door opened and Brian’s stomach seemed to sink. Shit. Slowly, he turned and saw Jaynie come through, juggling two bags. She gave him a casual smile and then she looked at Katie. “I said I’d do lasagna but you promised me a pitcher of margaritas while I cooked.”

She dropped the bags down on the counter and Brian started to retreat, hoping he could get to his room and get the door locked. But he had to pass the kitchen island to do it and the second he did, Jaynie turned and dropped a mesh bag into his hands. It was full of fat, red tomatoes. “Can you cut these?”

Jaynie turned away and continued unpacking the bags and that was when he noticed what she was wearing. The short skirt wasn’t exactly indecent but it left entirely too much leg bare for his peace of mind. Long, golden, tanned legs. Her hair was floating around her shoulders, inches shorter than he’d ever seen it. “You cut your hair,” he said, his voice rusty.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, a smile flirting with the corners of her lips. “Yeah. I...uh...well, I tried to trim it a little myself and did a crappy job of it.”

The skirt and the shorter hair weren’t the only difference. She had on a pair of strappy sandals, a dusky blue tank top and something white and lacy underneath that played peekaboo at the neckline. The top closely hugged the full curves of her breasts. He edged around the counter under the pretense of washing the tomatoes and, as he did, he stole a look at her face.

She was wearing makeup. Some shimmery stuff on her eyes. Something along her cheekbones that added to the warm, sun-kissed glow of her skin. And her mouth was strawberry pink. He wanted to grab her and lift her up onto the island and kiss that lipstick away. Then strip away her clothes, hold her down, fuck her hard—fuck her until she screamed out his name. Until she stopped treating him so indifferently.

Instead, he focused on the tomatoes, washing each one carefully before he unearthed the rarely used chopping board and a serrated knife. Both he and Katie could cook. It had been something his mother had seen to, but neither of them cared to mess with it much.

He diced the tomatoes, trying to keep his focus on that task, but it was damn hard. He kept smelling the soft, summery scent of her skin. She brushed against him when she got out a pan for the sauce. She leaned over the island to drop some onions by the chopping block and he found himself staring at the full, ripe swells of her breasts framed by white lace.

"Right, Brian?"

He jerked his eyes away from her breasts and found his sister standing next to him, chattering on obliviously. "Huh?"

She poked him in the ribs on her way to the sink. "You need a date for Dean's wedding, right? I mean, we all want to go and pay our respects to the happy couple." Her voice took on a hard edge with that last part and Brian had to smother a grin.

He forced himself to give Jaynie a nonchalant smile. "Wouldn't miss it."

Jaynie flicked him a glance and then focused her attention on Kate. Kate was busy washing a head of lettuce and paying a lot more attention to the task than it really needed. She gave Jaynie a bright, sunny smile. "You know what would be funny? If he got drunk at the wedding and puked all over Kit."

But Jaynie didn't take the bait. "I don't need a date for the wedding, Kate. We already talked about that."

Katie shrugged. It was a habitual gesture for her, one that said, *yeah, we talked but I decided this would be better*. She'd been doing it since childhood and Brian knew she'd be doing it until the day she died. Knowing that Jaynie would likely butt heads with Kate over it, Brian interrupted. He didn't know exactly why. If Jaynie argued with Kate and convinced Kate she didn't need a date, he was off the hook. He wouldn't have to spend several hours sitting next to Jaynie, standing next to her, dancing with her...

"I'm going anyway, J. We might as well go together. It will get Katie off our backs," he said. He didn't look up as he spoke, focusing instead on the tomatoes, but he could feel her gaze on him, knew she was watching him. He forced himself to glance up at her—one quick glance. He could do that without showing that she had him tied up in knots on the inside.

But that one quick glance into her hazel-green eyes had him remembering how she had looked four months ago, those eyes fogged with desire, her hair tangled around his hands and her mouth swollen from his. It had him remembering how she had cuddled into his body after they'd made love, and the soft, sexy little sounds she'd made while she slept. It had him remembering the night she'd come racing to the house, tears glittering in her eyes.

His voice was tight, rusty when he finally spoke. "You don't really want to go to that asshole's wedding alone, do you, Jaynie?"

She stared at him for a minute, silent and somber. Finally, she gave a jerky little nod. "Okay. Yeah. Whatever." She looked like she wanted to say something else, but instead, she moved to the stove and started working on dinner.

If Katie noticed the strained silence in the kitchen, she made no mention of it. She chattered on about the new guy she was seeing, some rich investor who was putting up condos on the stretch of beach between Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. She mentioned that he'd invited all of them to spend a weekend out on an island he owned a little farther south. She kept up an unending string of chatter while they all worked on dinner and Jaynie couldn't have been more thankful.

It gave her some time to think.

Brian was right. Katie was right. She didn't want to go to Dean's wedding alone. Showing up with Brian was actually the perfect solution. She didn't know if he would exactly hang on to her every word the way Katie had talked about earlier, but he was a nice guy and from what Jaynie had seen, he was very attentive to his dates. Just as he'd been that night— *Whoa, time-out.*

That wasn't a date. They'd had sex. A mind-boggling, breath-stealing, heart-pounding night of sex, but it hadn't been a date. Jaynie hadn't been looking for any kind of romance that night and Brian knew that.

Still, the man did take his time, didn't he?

Some grease from the frying pan splattered her hand when she stirred the browning sausage. Hissing under her breath, she turned away from the stove and went to the sink, shoving it under the flow of cold water.

When Brian spoke right in her ear, she jumped. "You okay?" he murmured, reaching around her and catching her wrist, bringing it out of the water so he could inspect the small red blotch forming on the sensitive skin between her thumb and forefinger.

Nonchalantly, she tried to draw her hand away but he kept his fingers manacled firmly around her wrist. "I'm fine," she said. Man, was that her voice? All throaty and raspy. She winced and dipped her head, hoped he couldn't see the sudden rush of blood to her cheeks. "Just daydreaming instead of paying attention."

Brian made a noncommittal *hmmm* under his breath and then he pushed her hand back under the water. He shifted away and she breathed a sigh of relief when his body was no longer pressed against hers. Her system was abuzz from that light contact, though, and Jaynie was left wondering, *What the hell is this?* There had been nothing remotely seductive or sensual about that touch, but suddenly she was remembering a night four months ago when he had held her wrists, one in each hand, as he'd pressed her into his mattress and pushed inside her.

Jaynie's breath squeezed out of her in a wheeze. Her lashes drooped low. Her heartbeat kicked up a few notches and she was acutely aware of the way the air in the room suddenly seemed to caress her bared skin. She was aware of the way the lace on her bra cupped her breasts and that her nipples were suddenly hard, stiff little points that pressed into her bra.

Shit. Shitshitshit. Jaynie jerked her hand out of the water and turned the faucet off. She needed to get out of the kitchen for a minute. Get outside and clear her head. Or maybe run up to her apartment and jump into the shower for a minute, the cold water going full blast.

What the hell is wrong with me? she thought. She grabbed a towel from beside the sink and dried her hands, ignoring the sharp little pain when she rubbed the burn too roughly. She was going outside for a minute. She couldn't disappear long enough for that cold shower, at least not yet. But if she could clear her head, she could finish this up and while the lasagna was baking, she could grab that shower.

But she never made it even two steps from the sink. Brian came striding back into the room and when she would have ducked around him, he caught her wrist and brought it up, inspecting the small red mark. "It's no big deal, Brian. I burn myself worse all the time."

He just grunted under his breath and tightened his grasp when she tried to pull away. She finally relented and held still, watching as he unscrewed a small tube and used a cotton swab to dab some of the ointment on it. Immediately, the slight pain receded but he didn't let go right away. His thumb stroked over the inside of her wrist as he murmured, "You need to be more careful."

Then slowly, he let go. The second her hand was free, she took off, disappearing outside. The screen door slammed shut with a bang as she walked away from the door, out of view of the kitchen and then she turned and pressed her back to the rough brick wall.

"Damn."

The screen door slammed shut behind Jaynie and Brian watched her until she disappeared from sight, a faint smile curling his lips. She wasn't oblivious. He hadn't meant to touch her. He'd seen her flinch and heard the little hiss of pain when the

grease splattered on her hand and he honestly had just meant to make sure she hadn't been burned badly.

But then he'd touched her, moving up behind and catching her wrist, his front cuddled up against her back. She'd reacted. He'd felt that reaction clear down to the soles of his feet and for a moment, he'd been too dumbfounded to think.

The past four months, she had treated him the same way she had always treated him on the rare occasions he let himself stay in the same room with her for longer than five seconds. He'd seen no physical signs that she even remembered that hot, long night. He, on the other hand, had suffered through so many hot, sweaty dreams that it seemed as though he was going through puberty again. Brian had lost count of how many times he'd woken up so damn hard and aching that he'd had to come or die from it. But the touch of his hand on his cock had been almost as painful as doing nothing at all. He'd wanted *her* hand on him. Her hands, her mouth, her body.

It had been agony made so much worse by her indifference.

Except Jaynie wasn't indifferent.

Her breathing had hitched, her face had flushed and when she had turned away from the sink, he'd seen the hard nubs of her nipples stabbing into the thin cotton of her shirt.

If Kate hadn't still been in the kitchen, Brian had a feeling he would have grabbed her and lifted her onto the kitchen island and stripped that shirt away so he could lick her nipples, bite them gently and fist his hands in the shorter, silky strands of her hair.

Hot satisfaction rolled through him as he moved over to the stove to check the sausage. It was pretty much done so he turned the heat off and moved to drain it. He left it sitting in the sink and then he headed outside.

Brian had to see her. Had to make sure he hadn't been imagining what he'd seen in her eyes.

Jaynie heard the slow, purposeful steps moving in her direction and for one brief moment she was tempted to run. Never mind the food inside the house, or the lasagna dinner she'd promised Kate. Never mind the fact that this was *Brian*, the guy she'd known all her life. For the longest time she'd thought of him as the brother she'd never had.

Yeah, there had been a brief period in high school when she had entertained sappy, romantic thoughts about her best friend's cute older brother. But that had been years ago, back before she and Dean had hooked up.

He came around the corner and she pushed away from the wall and forced a smile that felt terribly fake. "Hot inside," she said lamely.

Brian didn't respond, just stared at her with a focused, intense stare that went straight to her knees, turning them to water. She recognized the look on his face but before she could prepare herself, he reached out, hooked his hand in the low neckline of her shirt and pulled her close to him. His other hand caught her chin and angled her mouth up for his. He crushed his mouth to hers, swallowing her startled moan. He pressed his tongue against her lips and Jaynie opened for him.

A low, harsh growl escaped him. He pressed her back, crowding her against the brick wall behind her and then he slid his hands down her sides and under the hem of her brief skirt. The feel of his hands on her butt—big, warm and calloused—was so damn erotic. He shoved the skirt up, impatient, then he used his knee to spread her thighs, stepped between them and lifted her up. Brian lifted his head long enough to mutter in her ear, "Wrap your legs around me."

Helpless to resist, she did and Brian rewarded her by rubbing the thick length of his cock against her. The worn, faded denim abraded the sensitive folds between her legs and the thin fabric of her panties slid wetly over her as he settled into a slow, rocking rhythm.

Jaynie had no idea how far they might have gone if they hadn't heard a car pull into the driveway. They were on the far side of the house, out of view unless somebody

came into the backyard looking for them so Brian took his time pulling away. His lips lingered on hers, the rough, greedy kiss changing to something slower, something gentler but every bit as devastating.

Even when he stopped kissing her, he didn't pull away. Instead he skimmed his lips over her cheek and up to her ear. "I wake up thinking about you," he murmured. His fingers closed around one wrist and Jaynie shuddered when he brought it down and pressed it against the heavy length of his cock. Automatically, she closed her fingers around him, hating the jeans that kept her from touching him more completely. "I wake up like this, hard as a rock. I've been dying to touch you again for the past four months."

Her voice shook a little as she asked, "Then why haven't you?"

Brian nuzzled her neck. "You only wanted one night. The next time I saw you, you treated me like Katie's big brother again. The guy you work with, not the guy who fucked you five times and held you while you slept."

"Brian..."

He shook his head, pressed his lips to her mouth to keep her from speaking. "I'm not going back into whatever box you had pushed me into, Jaynie. You had me compartmentalized and you had me thinking that one night hadn't meant anything." He slid his hand inside her panties and cupped his hand over the mound of her sex. As he slowly pushed a finger inside her, Brian stared into her eyes. "But now I have to wonder." He added a second finger and circled his thumb around her clit.

They both heard the voices, but Brian didn't stop. Jaynie reached down and tugged on his wrist, shaking her head. Panicked, she glanced toward the corner and then she looked back up at him. "Brian," she whispered.

But he kept going. He shifted his stance so that he stood between her and anybody who might look around the corner, but he didn't stop touching her. He pumped his fingers in and out of her sex, fast and deep, never once slowing. Jaynie tried to close her thighs against his touch but, if anything, that only made her more aware of each deep,

thorough stroke. "I'm going to fuck you again. And again. Hard and rough," he muttered in her ear. "I'm going to hear you scream my name when you come. Then I'm going to take my time, go soft and slow. I'll make love to you for hours, Jaynie."

She whimpered low in her throat and Brian smothered the sound with his lips. Against her mouth, he muttered, "Quiet...you have to be quiet. Even when you come, *this time*, you can't scream."

The voices were getting louder and Brian heard Katie call him. Common sense told him he needed to quit. But common sense was drowned out by a lust that went so deep, it felt like it might consume him. Drowned out by a need that he'd lived with every day and night since he'd come out of the shower and found Jaynie had left.

She'd wanted the one night. He'd given it to her and now it was his turn. He needed something and Jaynie was the only one who could give it to him. So he didn't pull away. He kept sliding his fingers in and out of her hot little pussy, gritting his teeth as she clenched tighter and tighter around him. He felt it when the orgasm started and when she opened her mouth to scream, he covered her lips with his, swallowing the harsh, rough sound.

Slowly, her body relaxed against the wall and Brian lifted his head to stare down at her. Her eyes were closed but slowly her lashes lifted. Her gaze locked with his and he held it as he lifted his hand and slid his fingers into his mouth, licking them clean. Then he dipped his head and pressed his lips to her ear as he murmured, "I'm coming over tonight."

Slowly, he straightened and pulled away.

Just as he rounded the corner, he saw a guy who looked only faintly familiar. Kate's new guy. Kate came jogging down the steps that led to Jaynie's apartment and she glanced back over Brian's shoulder. "Where did Jaynie disappear to?"

Chapter Four

I'm coming over tonight.

His words kept replaying themselves in her head. Part of her wanted to gape at his arrogance. Part of her wanted to cringe as she realized how close it had been, him touching her like that while Kate and her boyfriend were not even fifteen feet away.

She might like to play, but she'd always considered sex something that needed to be done in private. Jaynie had never had problems keeping Dean from getting too hot and heavy, but with Brian, after those first couple of seconds, she hadn't cared.

Still didn't. That small part of her brain that clung to embarrassment was still ranting at her. But the rest of her?

The rest of her burned with anticipation.

One thing was certain—Jaynie sure as hell didn't feel frigid. She lay on her bed, still wearing the double-layered tank tops from earlier and her panties. She'd taken off the brief excuse for a skirt and she really needed to get up and change. Change into what, though? Yeah, she had bought some sexy undies but that was so—predictable. She wasn't convinced she wanted Brian thinking she was dressing up, or down, just for him, though the allure was undeniable.

But try as she might, she couldn't get her limbs to move for anything. Not even when she heard the door unlock nearly a half hour later, and not even when she heard him moving through the apartment. He appeared in the doorway and still, she lay there.

Her heart pounded hard and fast inside her chest, racing as though she had just run the New York Marathon and her breathing came in harsh, shallow breaths that had her breasts rising and falling in a quick rhythm. His gaze lingered on her breasts and then

moved lower to stare at the juncture of her thighs. "Take your panties off," he said softly.

She shook her head. Tried to say, "I can't seem to move." But of their own violation, her hands went to her panties. She *could* move. Jaynie lifted her hips up to push the lacy scrap out of the way.

"Leave them there," he said when she had pushed them to her knees. "Pull your shirt up but don't take it off." He crossed over to her and as he did, he reached for the hem of his shirt, jerking it up and off in one quick, harsh movement.

"You're bossy," she muttered as she pulled the layered shirts up. She lifted her torso to take it all the way off and he stopped her when she had the shirts halfway over her head. The lower half of her face was uncovered but the two layered tanks were still over the top half, effectively blindfolding her. He shoved her arms down to the bed, the shirts still in a tangle.

"You like it when I'm bossy," he said, his voice calm and confident. She shifted her head and tried to move free from the shirts but he tightened his grip. "Be still, Jaynie. Do you remember that night when I told you I wondered how your pretty mouth would look wrapped around my cock?"

She felt the mattress dip beneath his weight. She shivered, unable to stop, when he bent his head and murmured in her ear, "I'm getting ready to find out."

Jaynie had been in an aroused state ever since that brief event in the backyard and she wasn't certain she could get any more turned on. But apparently, she was wrong. As she understood just what Brian was getting ready to do, she had to press her knees together to ease the ache there.

"Can't have that," Brian murmured and then he reached down, gripped her knees and parted her legs as far as the panties she still had halfway on would allow. "I like seeing you like that."

"You'll have a hard time seeing me like this if you plan on seeing me with your cock in my mouth," she said. She shifted again, tugged on her arms.

"Use your imagination, Jaynie," he whispered suggestively. She heard the rasp of a zipper, felt the mattress shift beneath her as he once more left the bed. She instinctively closed her legs and Brian sighed – a weary sound. "Jaynie, I said don't do that. I want to see that pretty pink pussy just like that."

She whimpered.

Brian laughed softly, touched her, pressing his fingers against her core. She was dripping wet and when he touched her, she rose to press herself against his hand. "All slick and wet, just for me," he muttered. Then he pulled away. "Don't move again," he ordered and this time, his voice was hard, commanding.

Unable to do otherwise, she held still, keeping her legs slightly spread and her arms over her head, the shirts still blindfolding her. When he returned, she felt the brush of his naked body against her own then she felt him crouch beside her. A hand slid down, fisted in her hair and he turned her head, guiding it just a little forward until the hard, rounded head of his cock pressed against her lips. "Do it, Jaynie," he ordered roughly. "Suck on me. I want to see it if your mouth looks as good on my cock as I think it will."

She opened her lips and he pushed inside, feeding her one slow inch at a time until she flinched. "That's good..." he crooned. "You don't have to take any more...yet..." He guided her in a slow, compelling rhythm, using his hand to support her head but it was awkward with her arms pinned as they were by the clothes. She pulled away and said, "Let me move my arms, Brian."

"Why?"

She groaned in frustration. "So I can move better."

"Better how? Better why? So you can take my cock better?"

"Yes!"

"Say it. Tell me you want them off so you can take my cock better."

How can that bossy attitude make me so damn hot? Jaynie wondered. She wasn't going to say it, though. If he wanted a half-ass blowjob, then... "I want to take your cock better, Brian," she heard herself say. "Please let me."

"Good girl." But he didn't let her take the shirts off. He did it, pulling each arm down and out but he didn't pull the shirt from over her head. Instead, he tightened it somehow, making the cloth more binding and using it to guide her mouth back to his erect shaft. "Stick your tongue out and lick me."

"Why are you so damn bossy?" she muttered before she complied.

"Because it makes you hot as lightning and because you owe me. I haven't had a good night's sleep in four months." Then he stopped talking and gripped her head in his hands—one still fisted in the material of her shirt and the other splayed across her jaw. He pushed deep, deeper than she had taken him earlier. Jaynie tried to roll onto her belly so that she could handle him better but he stopped her, pressing his hand to her breastbone until she stopped squirming. "Bring your knees up."

She did and he pushed her panties down over her knees. They fell to her ankles. He slid his hand up one thigh, used his fingers to spread her folds and exposed her clit. Then he lifted his hand. "Look at that. Pretty...pink...wet..."

Brian's hand came down hard, right between her thighs, slapping her sex. She jumped. She would have screamed if she could have done it around the cock he was pushing back and forth between her lips. Torn between outrage and shock, she stiffened and tried to pull away. But the hand at her head wouldn't let her. And then he slapped her again, landing the light, stinging blow on her clit.

She came. So did he. She groaned, the sound muffled and strangled. His hand tightened on her head, pushing her farther down on his cock as he jetted his seed into her mouth. He slapped her pussy again and again and each little touch set her off anew, a series of mini-climaxes that didn't let up until she was soaked with sweat and shaking. He let her pull back and allowed the shirts to fall away from her eyes. She opened her eyes, sucked in much-needed air and stared up at him, still trembling from

the last aftershock. He slapped her pussy and held her gaze when she bucked and cried out.

With his free hand, he grasped his cock, wrapped his fingers around it and began stroking it in a casual, almost offhand manner. "See what happens to little girls who don't listen?" he teased. "They get a spanking." Then he dipped a finger inside her. "And they like it. You liked that, didn't you, Jaynie?"

Dazed, she couldn't do anything but nod. He pulled his finger away and reached up to touch it to her lips. She turned her head away and he caught it with his hand. "You liked every single second of it," he whispered as he painted her lips with the juices from her sex. He dipped his head low, licked her mouth and growled. "You taste almost as sweet like that. It's like honey. Do you have a vibrator?"

Hardly able to keep up with him, she stared at him blankly when he lifted his head. "What?"

"A vibrator," he repeated.

She blushed and glanced toward her dresser where she kept a Pocket Rocket she rarely used and a dildo that got even less use. He held her gaze as he reached over and rifled through silky panties and bras until he found both. He glanced over the dildo and said, "Maybe later."

The pocket rocket he turned on, and then, as he watched her face, he pressed the madly vibrating tip against her sensitized clit. "You do it," he ordered. Jaynie's hand shook as she took the pocket rocket and pressed it close. The sensations from the vibrations went shooting through her and she cried out. "Don't drop it." His voice was gruff but he wasn't watching her face.

Instead, he was staring between her legs, staring at the little bed toy with rapt eyes. He shifted so that he lay between her thighs and then he touched her, pushing his fingers inside. Then he touched her lower. Between the clenched cheeks of her ass, pushing and probing even though she tensed against him. The moisture from her sex eased his way just a little, so that he could press against the tightly puckered bud. "I

want to fuck you here,” he said baldly, looking up at her face to gauge her reaction. “If you don’t want me to, now is your only chance to tell me no. Because if you don’t, I’m going to have you so hot and ready for it, you won’t even be able to think, much less tell me you don’t want it.”

Jaynie’s voice was shaky. “I want it.”

A hot male grin that curled his lips and then he rolled her over onto her belly. He left the bed and when she looked back over her shoulder at him, she saw he had brought something with him. A small black bag. He reached inside and pulled out a bottle of lubricant.

Jaynie swallowed. This was the one thing she hadn’t done with Dean. They’d played a little in college and she’d gone so far as to buy a butt plug, but they never got around to using it and, in all honesty, it wasn’t on her top ten fantasy list.

Her heart skipped a few beats as he gripped the cheeks of her ass and pushed them apart. Oh, hell. Was he looking at her *there*? She sneaked a glance over her shoulder and then turned, burying her face in the comforter. Yes. He was.

He touched her and the unfamiliar stroke made her flinch. Brian curved a hand over her hip, steadying her. “Be still,” he said softly and then he touched her again, light, teasing little touches that felt a whole hell of a lot better than she would have thought possible. His hand left her and when he touched her again, his fingers were wet and slick with lubricant. It was cool at first, but then it seemed to warm on her skin, and tingle. She hissed out a breath when he started to probe the tight pucker of her anus, easing just the tip of his finger in, then withdrawing, going a little deeper with each caress.

She whimpered and tried to pull away as he took the touches deeper, pushing his finger completely inside her butt, pulling it out, thrusting in again. He was stretching her and it *hurt*, but at the same time, it felt as though his touch made a fire spread through her, a fire that threatened to consume her. She whimpered and rocked her hips

back and forth, holding the madly vibrating pocket rocket against her clit, rocking back to meet his touch, but then away before he could take it any deeper.

His hand on her hip tightened and he growled warningly, "Be still." Then he added a second finger and she screamed, startled and unprepared. He pushed both fingers inside her and rotated.

"Brian, stop it...please. Oh shit, it hurts," she pleaded. And it did, but at the same time she pushed back against him, riding his hand, trying to take more.

"My dick is bigger than my fingers, baby. We need to loosen you up before I fuck your ass," he said. "Look at you—it might hurt you some, but you love it, don't you? Look at you riding my hand. I bet you're wet too." He let go of her hip and shifted around so that she was kneeling between his thighs. He reached down and took the pocket rocket away so he could cup his hand over her mound. "Oh, yeah," he muttered, his voice a harsh, husky growl. "You're wet." Using his other hand, he pushed two fingers into her pussy and the double penetration had her arching up and convulsing in his arms. Then he started to circle his thumb around her clit—slow, teasingly light touches.

She is so damn sexy, so hot and wild, Brian thought, just a little dazed as he stared down at her. She had her head thrown back, all that wild, sun-streaked hair spilling around her shoulders. Her ass was tight, even tighter than her pussy and he wondered if he'd die of heart failure before he got half his length inside her. Impatient and aching, he craned his head and kissed her lips, pushing his tongue deep inside. So damn greedy for her taste, for her—all of her. "Tell me what you want," he muttered against her lips. "Tell me you want me."

"I want you," she groaned. She rocked her hips back and forth, a mad little shimmy that was doing dangerous things to his self-control. *Is she going to ride my cock like that?* he wondered. His heart would fail, he suspected.

"Want me where?" he demanded, twisting his wrist as he screwed his fingers into the tight satin of her ass. "Here?"

"Yes..." she arched her back, her eyes going wide, her mouth forming a soft O when he pushed just a little deeper inside. "There, please, yes, there..."

"Say it," he muttered against her neck. "Tell me what you want me to do...and where."

Too far gone to care, she begged him, "Fuck my ass, please...oh, yeah...hmmm..." He pulled his hand away and she whimpered in disappointment.

That sound had hot, male satisfaction pouring through him and if he hadn't been in such agony, he could have stayed there, using his fingers to tease her into orgasm. But the first time she came from anal sex, he wanted it to be with his cock inside her and not his fingers. "Get the pocket rocket," he ordered as he reached for more lubricant, slicking it all over his cock and then around the pink rosette between the cheeks of her ass.

Tight and small, it held his attention raptly as he pressed the swollen head of his cock against it. It didn't seem possible that something so little could stretch to take him but she did. Minute tremors shook her entire body and he could hear the small, distressed sounds she muffled against the mattress as he forged his way through the tight, untried tissues.

She screamed abruptly as the head of his cock pushed through the ring of muscle just inside. "Stop!" she whimpered, the edge of real terror and pain coloring her voice, but Brian was prepared for it.

"This is always the worst, Jaynie," he said, stroking one hand soothingly down the curve of her hip and then reaching below her. She held the pocket rocket clutched in her fist and he guided it back to her clit.

"Then stop it, damn it." Her voice was husky, thick with tears, but when the pocket rocket touched her clit again, he heard a soft, catchy little breath.

"Trust me," he crooned, splaying his hands low on her back and stilling the frantic, writhing rhythm of her hips. He held her still and steady as he pushed deeper, deeper...then he withdrew a fraction.

“Brian, stop. Damn you, it hu —”

Her words broke off into a sharp, high-pitched scream of ecstasy as he surged forward, deep and slow. He followed each deep thrust with a teasingly slow withdrawal and soon she was rocking back to meet his thrusts. “Still want me to stop?” he panted.

“Don’t you dare.” Her spine bowed forward into the bed, her hair hiding her face, but he didn’t need to see her expression to know she liked it, to know she wanted more. He could feel it in the way she clenched around him, the way she moaned deep and rough in her throat. She was stretched tightly around him, so tight, and when he surged forward, she rocked back, taking all of him inside.

It was the sexiest, most erotic image he’d ever seen in his life—cute little Jaynie bent over before him, her pretty ass up in the air as he shafted her long, hard and slow. He slid a hand up her back and brushed her hair aside, burying his fist in the strands and then using his hold on her to bring her back to him. When he had her back pressed against his front, he craned her chin around and took her mouth, kissing her deeply. Her let go of her hair, cupped one plump, full breast in his hand and squeezed a pink, pert nipple.

If he could have made it last forever, Brian would have done just that. But already, he knew he couldn’t hold out much longer. Letting go of her breast, he slid his hand down her center until he could touch her clit. He pushed the pocket rocket out of the way and muttered in her ear, “When you come, it’s going to be from me...”

She keened out his name as he started to circle his fingers around the tight, erect little bud—quick, firm strokes that had her panting and trembling against him. He could feel her orgasm coming on her and he waited until she started to come before he stopped stroking her clit. Sliding his hands along her thighs, he cupped her knees and lifted them up...up...up until all of her weight was centered right where he was fucking her.

His cock swelled inside her, Jaynie could feel it. He felt huge and throbbing inside her and even though she was still struggling to breathe from her last climax, she could feel another one overtaking her.

The sheer carnality of it overwhelmed her—his hands and cock the only things supporting her weight as he shafted her ass, his hips arching up to push his length deep inside. Dazed, she turned her head and saw their reflections in the oval mirror that hung over her dresser. His hands were dark against the soft tan of her skin. Her breasts were flushed, the nipples pink and swollen. She could see his face, his gaze boring into hers in the mirror. He lifted her up and she could see the thick stalk of flesh, just a flash, before he lowered her back down.

That was all she needed—the sight of how the two of them looked in that moment was all she needed and she came again, came harder than she had ever come before, the convulsions racking her entire body as wave after wave of pleasure battered her from the inside.

He bucked against her, growled out her name and came. His fingers dug into her hips and pressed her tight against him. He ground his hips into her, as though he could force himself even deeper inside her body as he came, as though he needed to be even closer than he already was.

And then it was over. His arms came around her body and he gently eased her up. But he didn't let her go. Instead, he lay down and pulled her back against him. She could feel the sticky, wet length of his cock pressed against her back. His hand came up, pressed against her belly. "Did I hurt you?" he murmured against her ear.

She started to say no, but then stopped. "A little. Yeah. But I loved it."

He cupped her breast and pinched her nipple gently. "Good, because there is no way I'm not going to have that again."

*And again...and again...*he thought. But Brian kept that to himself for now. Jaynie didn't realize it yet, but she was his. He was keeping her.

* * * * *

"You need a bigger bathtub," Brian complained as he lowered Jaynie into the steaming hot bath.

"Tell my landlord," she muttered. She lifted her lashes long enough to smirk at him. "Maybe he'd get me a new one if I traded him sexual favors."

Brian crouched beside her and reached for the mesh sponge that hung on a hook beside the tub. "Could be. But you'd have to agree to do it for a very, very long time." He soaped up the sponge and then ran it over her breasts, down her belly, passing oh-so gently between her thighs before moving on to her legs.

Jaynie made a soft little humming sound under her breath. "If I get treatment like this after those sexual favors, I think I could agree to it."

He bent his head and whispered, "Considering that all I want to do is fuck you again as soon as I'm done, that's a possibility." He dropped the sponge and cupped her face in his hand, turning her head so he could kiss her. "I want you nice and clean...everywhere..." He grabbed the sponge again and pushed it between her thighs, stroking it back and forth until she started to rock up to meet him. Then he let it go and pushed his fingers inside her sex. "Especially here."

"Why there?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Because we had dinner earlier. But now I'm ready for dessert." He grinned as he said it, watching the pink blush that crept up her cheeks. "I love the way you blush for me."

She brought her hands up, embarrassed, and tried to cover her face but he caught her wrists. Soapy water dripped down from his hands as he pulled her forward, urging her arms around his neck. His kiss was gentle, oddly tender and when he pulled back to stare at her, Jaynie felt a queer ache settle around her heart. His voice was gruff as he said, "You stay there and soak for a while. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Where are you going?"

He caught her hand and kissed it. "To the house for a few minutes. I want to make love to you again, but I need a shower first and you need to soak for a little while."

* * * * *

Even though she had soaked in the tub a good thirty minutes the night before, Jaynie woke up the next morning so sore and stiff she could hardly move. Brian had been good to his word, returning to the bathroom with his hair still damp from the shower. He had drained the tub and when she started to stand, he picked her up. He'd dried her off and then grabbed a bottle of body oil and carried her to bed. After massaging her from her neck to her feet with the sweet-scented oil, he had made love to her, touched her so gently and slowly and brought her to peak time and again, his eyes rapt on her face as though she was the most amazing woman he'd ever touched.

And all night, he'd held her.

But he wasn't in the bed now. She rolled onto her side and stroked the bed beside her where he had lain all night. Something was changing. She didn't know when it had started for her—maybe it had been that night four months ago, or maybe it had even been before that. Maybe it had just started last night, but she knew she couldn't put Brian back in the nice little place he had previously occupied in her life.

He was no longer just her partner at work, or her best friend's cute older brother.

He was her lover. In the truest sense of the word too. Even Dean, after she'd been with him for so long, hadn't seemed to understand her or take the time to pleasure her like Brian had. He watched her closely, as though measuring each reaction and filing it away for future reference. When he saw that she liked something, he made sure he did it, and often.

She heard the front door unlock and she rolled onto her back in time to see him come into the bedroom. He paused when he saw that she was awake then he smiled and held up a big white box. "I went by Lisette's," he said, mentioning a little local spot down on Highway 180. Lisette was a transplant from Louisiana and she made the best

beignets and pralines. On the weekends she opened for supper and a meal there was like ambrosia.

"Hmmm, gimme," Jaynie said, sitting up and tucking the sheet around her breasts. But Brian held the box over his head, a grin on his lips. "Lose the sheet."

A faint grin appeared on her face. "Pervert," she said. But she dropped the sheet.

"Damn straight." He lifted the lid and took out a beignet dusted with powdered sugar. Brian held it out to her and after she took it, he laid the box on top of her battered dresser. Glancing at his sugar-coated fingers, Brian looked at Jaynie with a sly grin on his lips. "Being the pervert I am..." He flopped down on the bed. When he touched his fingertips to her nipple, coating it with the powdered sugar from his fingers, Jaynie shivered.

Heat stirred in her belly but she slapped his hand away. "Let me eat. Hungry." Her belly rumbled in agreement and Brian groaned, rolling away.

"You're cruel."

"No. Just hungry," she said, her mouth full. She polished off the beignet and then rolled out of bed and walked naked over to the box. She carried it back to bed and settled down in the middle of the tangled sheets.

"You're going to get crumbs and sugar all over the bed," Brian said with a grin.

"Just sheets. They'll wash. Laundry day anyway." Then she wrinkled her nose and added, "After last night, they *need* to be washed." Saturday was laundry day, unless she had a shift at the hospital—or something else, like oh...say a wedding. Thinking of that, she looked up at Brian with a frown. "You know, you don't need to go with me to the wedding."

Brian laced his hands behind his head. His gaze slanted her way and he stared at her. His eyes were shuttered, unreadable and his voice wasn't any easier to read. "Are you still going?"

Jaynie didn't answer right away. Licking the powdered sugar off her fingers killed about thirty seconds, but she still couldn't come up with a short explanation. "I have to, Brian. I don't know why. I just know that I have to go."

"Then I'm going."

"Why?" she asked with a shake of her head. "You don't give a damn about Dean. You've never been able to stand him."

"Not going for him. No more than you are," Brian said. He pushed up onto his elbow and peered into the box. He selected the biggest beignet left in the box and took a bite. "I'm going for you." He polished the beignet off in three big bites and then he picked out another one.

"I can handle a wedding," Jaynie said. Then she ducked her head and added self-consciously, "But I'm not really looking forward to it."

"If you don't want to go, then why go?" He took out another beignet and offered it to her, but Jaynie shook her head.

"No more sugar." Definitely no more sugar. Her system was already buzzing from the two beignets and she hadn't even had a cup of coffee yet. "Because I have to. They sent me that damn invite for a reason. Kit did it just to poke at me, but Dean was trying to hurt me. I don't know if they think I'll come or not, but I'm going. I'm going to walk in there, watch them get married and I'm going to dance at the reception. I'll have a good time if it kills me."

Brian leaned forward on his elbow and brushed his lips down her knee. "I can help you with that."

Her hair fell into her face as she smiled down at him. She tucked it back behind her ear, forgetting about her sticky fingers. She touched them to his lips and he reached up, caught her wrist and held it as he sucked her finger into his mouth. His lids drooped low. Staring at him, she felt her heart melt a little.

Brian couldn't stand Dean. He'd never liked him and as often as possible, he had avoided contact with the other man. "Does that mean you're going to wear a suit?" She

pulled her hand away from him and rolled out of bed before she ended up doing something really stupid. Like letting him see just how sappy he was making her feel.

Still lying on the bed, Brian scowled. "Do I have to?"

"It's a wedding," she answered. "You can't go in your jeans or your scrubs."

"What are you wearing?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't worry. I'm not going in my scrubs either." She jerked a thumb toward the closet door and the peach dress that was hanging on the outside of it. "That."

He glanced at the dress and then at her, a hot, wicked grin on his lips. "Tell you what. I'll wear a suit *if* you wear that...without panties."

"You want me to go to a wedding without panties?"

Jaynie spun on her heel and made her way into the bathroom, shaking her head. "There's no way I'm going to a wedding without panties."

Brian smiled. "Relax. You got a week or two to get used to the idea."

Chapter Five

"I can't believe I'm going to this damn wedding without panties," Jaynie swore, glaring at Brian's reflection in the mirror.

He'd shown up at her door wearing a shirt that was only a few shades darker than her dress, a tie with an abstract print that had shades of jade and peach in it, and the jacket to one very nice suit thrown over his shoulder. He had left the jacket on the couch as he led her back into the bedroom and slid his hands under the skirt.

"Get used to it," he murmured, resting his chin on her shoulder and holding her gaze as he slid his hands over her hips. They continued to stare at each other as he lifted her skirt, gathering the loose material in his hands, lifting it higher and higher until he had bared the skimpy swath of silk held together at each hip by a skinny string. "Hmmm...pretty," he whispered. He trailed his fingers down over the silk. Brian hooked his thumbs under the strings at her hips and tugged the panties down until they fell to her feet. Jaynie stepped out of them and Brian bent over, grabbed the underwear and straightened, holding her gaze as he tucked them inside his pocket.

She swallowed, her mouth almost painfully dry. "Uh, can I have my panties?"

Brian smoothed her skirt back down her hips and then offered her his arm. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want them."

She rolled her eyes and muttered, "Oh, well now, that's a perfectly good reason why I can't have my panties back." She lagged along behind him, glancing back over her shoulder at her reflection. "You can't tell, can you?"

He stopped to get his jacket and then he slid a hand over her butt. "Relax. Nobody is going to know that you aren't wearing anything under that dress except a bra." He kissed her shoulder and added, "Nobody except me."

* * * * *

As far as weddings went, Jaynie decided it was overdone, overblown. Kit was wearing a dress that seemed more appropriate for the royal family instead of the small Episcopal church off Highway 59. She had five bridesmaids and there was barely room for the entire wedding party at the front of the church.

Jaynie decided that Dean looked very *GQ* in his tuxedo and she wasn't the least bit surprised to see Landon as the best man. The vows the happy couple wrote were suitably sappy. Dean looked ridiculously happy and Jaynie hardly cared a bit.

By the time the ceremony was over, she was shifting uncomfortably on the church pew. Her butt was numb from the hard wooden bench and she was acutely aware of the fact that she was buck naked under her skirt. Not that those panties had really covered much.

Along with the rest of the guests, Brian and Jaynie were being herded toward the back of the church and out the doors. The wedding party would be busy for the next hour, easily, getting two hundred pictures taken and smiling for the camera. "I suppose you are going to insist on hitting the reception," Brian asked. He had his hand in his pocket and she blushed. Every so often he did that. Some friend of the bride had sung "Ave Maria" and during the chorus, Brian had pulled the panties out. He had kept his hand closed around them but Jaynie had seen them.

He was trying to drive her nuts. She knew it. He'd been acting like this for the past two weeks, teasing, flirtatious. People at work were noticing. He had taken her out to lunch three times and he had hovered over her, so attentive and sweet. By the time the wedding came around, she felt more than a little dazed.

"No answer? Why don't we head back to my house and..." He slid a hand down her hip, his touch slow and lingering. The soft, suggestive tone sent a shiver down her spine. She covered his hand and pressed it flat. It didn't help much. The stroking stopped but now she could feel the heat of his hand and she couldn't help but remember how it had felt stroking over her body.

They hadn't been together since he'd left her apartment Sunday night two weeks ago, though she hadn't spent a single evening alone. Her body was aching and she really, *really* wanted to tell him, *Yes, screw the reception. Let's go back to the house and go at each other like bunnies.*

Instead, she craned her head around and whispered into his ear, "Later."

He covered her lips with his, sighing into her mouth. "You sure?"

She pulled away and wagged her brows at him. "So you don't want to dance with me at the reception?" They finally made their way through the crush of people at the entrance and she hooked her arm through his. "I don't wear dresses too often and I'm pretty sure this will be the first time I've done any slow dancing while I'm naked under the dress."

He slid her a hot look. "Okay. You win. But we're going to dance later too. And you'll be completely naked."

Jaynie opened her mouth to tell him there was no way she was going to dance naked. But the words wouldn't come. After all, she had thought that she wouldn't go panty-less and here she was, the hot summer breeze blowing around her legs and caressing the naked skin under her dress.

* * * * *

"Jaynie?"

She was proud of herself. When she heard Dean speak behind her, she didn't jump, didn't flinch, and ignoring him only briefly occurred to her. Yes, she had been tempted. Ignoring him might have been petty but Jaynie figured she was entitled to be a little petty when it came to him.

Brian had gone to get her drink refilled, which was seriously excellent, she had to admit. She hardly ever drank more than a glass of wine at home now and then—she'd learned the hard way how important it was to be careful.

But she felt safe with Brian, safe enough to enjoy one glass and when he offered her another, she hadn't refused. Spiked with rum and packing a punch, the concoction already had several people acting like idiots.

She had just now finished her first glass and when she turned to face Dean with a faint smile, she was glad she'd had that one glass, and only that one. At least for now. Her head was clear and when she studied Dean, she saw him with a clarity she'd never had before.

He'd always been a little vain. Jaynie had known that. But she hadn't realized just how self-absorbed he was. But now? She saw it now. He stood just a few feet away, his head cocked so that his hair fell charmingly onto his forehead, a slight, puzzled smile on his sexy mouth. As though he was on some kind of stage, he had placed his body so he stood close enough for them to speak, but far enough away that she could admire him unobstructed. Unable to stop it, Jaynie smirked a little.

"Hello, Dean. Congratulations."

He slid his gaze over her, from the top of her hair to her feet. Kate had gathered Jaynie's hair into a loose twist and secured it with a sparkly clip the same color as Jaynie's dress, teasing a few strands loose and then curling them. Jaynie had done her own makeup and had to admit that she looked pretty good.

The dress looked absolutely fantastic on her. Jaynie hadn't been able to quite believe just how fantastic. It had been worth every last penny and every fricking second she'd sat still while Kate fussed with her hair, spritzed her perfume and generally acted as if it was prom night or something.

Dean's lips curled in a warm, intimate smile and he murmured, "You look gorgeous, baby."

She cocked a brow at the *baby* but she didn't say anything other than "Thank you". Then she made a pointed effort to find Kit. "Where is the new bride?"

They found her standing by the ice sculpture of two entwined dolphins. It sat in the middle of the huge table of food and made the perfect backdrop for Kit as she stood

talking with her bridesmaids and flashing her ring at every opportunity. “Ah, there she is,” Jaynie said with a grin. “So nice to see that she can’t leave your side on this happy, happy day. Well, except to show her ring off to her dear, dear friends.”

Dean shrugged. “Kit’s the social type,” he said, his voice unconcerned. “I know you never had much use for it, but Kit likes being surrounded by people.”

Kit likes attention, Jaynie thought. “Yeah, I know. A minimum of two admirers at all times, right?” Jaynie asked.

He had the grace to look sheepish and she might have said something else, except Dean moved a little closer and lifted his hand to tug on one of the loose strands of hair that framed her face. “I can’t believe how wonderful you look,” he murmured. “I know how much you hate to take the time —”

At that she stepped back. Yeah, she had taken a lot of time on this, for this very reason. Yet, she hadn’t thought about what Dean would think, other than amazement hopefully. She’d wanted him to be amazed, all right. The way his eyes had slid over her and the shock, before he’d covered it, had done wonders for the still-healing wounds he’d inflicted on her pride.

But as the look in his eyes changed, Jaynie started to wonder why she’d needed this so badly. He had a familiar, intimate look in his eyes and his voice had dropped an octave or two, hitting that low, sexy rumble that had always driven her crazy. It wasn’t having the effect Dean had probably planned, though. Jaynie just wanted to hit him. Hard, preferably right in his oh-so-perfect nose.

He eased a little closer, close enough now that she could feel his body heat and smell the scent of after shave. She’d always thought that cologne smelled so sexy, but now she found it a little pretentious. The way Brian smelled, warm and male — like soap and shampoo and something that was uniquely him — now *that* was sexy.

Dean reached up and laid his hand at the small of her back, his fingers splayed wide, caressing the skin left bare by the low back of the dress. “We should talk sometime, catch up a little.”

"I think you should move your hand off before I take it off at the wrist," Jaynie said with a chilly smile. She shifted away from him and slanted a look in Kit's direction. "We don't have anything to catch up on, Dean."

His charming smile took on a harder edge. "Don't we? We have a lot of history between us, Jaynie. That history is why you're here, right?"

Jaynie smirked. "No. That history is why I didn't torch your clothes when I came back to get my stuff. The reason I'm here now is because I wanted to see what I would feel."

Cocking a brow at her, Dean smiled. "And what do you feel?"

"Nothing," she replied and that realization had her grinning widely. "Not much of anything at all, Dean. Kit's welcome to you."

She turned to go and ended up walking into Brian's arms. He smiled down at her, bent his head and brushed his lips across one bare shoulder. She accepted the drink from him and glanced back at Dean before smiling up at Brian. "Come on. I'm ready to go."

But Brian slid a hand down her arm and linked their fingers, bringing their hands to his lips. He kissed the back of her knuckles and murmured, "You still owe me a dance, Jaynie." He slid his other arm around her waist, pulling her up against him.

The feel of him through the thin layer of her dress and his suit reminded her of what she wasn't wearing—that Brian still had her panties in his pants pocket. The hot look in his eyes turned her knees to putty and she realized, embarrassingly, that she was swaying toward him.

"Besides," Brian added, "We haven't really offered our congratulations to the happy couple, have we?"

"Our?" Dean interrupted. Jaynie glanced back and saw that Dean was studying them with narrowed eyes. His eyes lingered down low and she realized that he was staring at Brian's hand on her lower back. She shifted in Brian's embrace, to stand with her back pressed to his front.

"Our," Brian repeated. He kissed her shoulder and Jaynie shivered a little when he touched his tongue to her skin. Then he lifted his head and surveyed the crowded reception hall. "Pretty decent party, I guess. Me and Jaynie, though, we're probably going to go for something a little quieter."

It took a minute for his meaning to penetrate and by the time it did, Dean was staring at them with a flushed face and disbelieving eyes. "You and Jaynie?" he repeated.

Jaynie was thinking, *Me and Jaynie...what?* She turned her head to stare at Brian. He reached around, cupped her chin and angled it up to meet him as he brought his mouth down on hers. His kiss was deep, breath-stealing and when he pulled away, she couldn't have said anything to save her life. It seemed as though her higher brain function had just shut down.

Dean's insistent voice cut in through the fog of sexual arousal, buzzing around her like some sort of pesky insect. Licking her lips, she looked back at Dean. "Huh?"

Brian laughed and nuzzled her neck.

"Are you two *together?*"

The disbelief in Dean's voice jarred her enough that she came dropping back down to earth. She really should say something. Really. But the way Dean was glaring at her, like she'd done something wrong, totally pissed her off. She slid a hand down and covered Brian's. Their fingers twined and Jaynie couldn't keep relaxing against him. "Sort of looks that way, doesn't it?"

Whatever else Dean might have said, Jaynie didn't know because Brian spoke over her shoulder. "Congratulations, Dean. Now, Jaynie, about that dance..."

He took her drink and put it down on the table before guiding her out onto the dance floor. Jaynie let him pull her into his arms and then she looked over his shoulder toward Dean. "You shouldn't have done that, Brian," she said, even though she couldn't stop smirking.

"Done what?" he asked as he pulled her up against him. He rested his hand low, *way* low, on her back. He was practically cupping her ass to hold her against him and she shivered at the slow, deliberate way he caressed her flesh.

"Let him think we're talking about getting married," she said.

"Oh. That." He seemed unconcerned, lowering his head to nuzzle her neck.

"Yes, *that*," she responded.

"Don't see why not." Brian brought his free hand up and brushed the strap of her dress aside, kissing her naked shoulder.

"How about because it's not true?"

Finally, he lifted his head to stare at her with a queer little smile. "Oh, it's true, all right." He cupped her chin, holding her still so that she couldn't have looked away from that intense stare if she had to. There was no way she *could* have looked away just then, though. "You're going to marry me, Jaynie."

"I am?"

"Hmmm." He kissed her and it wasn't the sort of kiss that belonged at a very public party. He kissed her as if they were already naked, as if he was already inside her. He kissed her in a way that had her so much more aroused than she had ever been with Dean. He pushed his tongue into her mouth, kissing her deep and hard, circling her tongue with his and then settling into a rhythmic ebb and flow that had her rocking against him and whimpering in her throat. *More...more...more...* she thought mindlessly as he pulled away.

Kisses like that shouldn't happen unless she was in a place where she could strip naked and jump on him. But that was exactly why he'd done it, she realized, to make her so stupid with lust that she barely paid attention to what he said. "We haven't even really gone out on a date, but you're telling me that we're getting married?"

He shrugged. "We can do the dating part later. And don't worry, I know you need a little bit of time to get used to the idea." He skimmed his hands down her sides, pulled her flush against him. "But you're going to marry me, Jaynie."

He stepped back a little, putting a few inches between them as he looked around the room. When he grabbed her hand and started walking, pulling her along behind him, Jaynie numbly went along. She was still trying to process this marriage thing he was rambling about. "Brian, where are we going? And what are you talking about, us getting married? We *can't* get married."

"Yes, we can," he said as they left the reception hall, but not through the main entrance. He was walking so fast she could barely keep up with him. "And we're going to. But don't worry. I'm not in any rush...ah, that's what I need."

She looked up and saw the closed door in front of her. She had no idea where they were but figured they were in some administration part of the rental hall. "What are we doing here?"

He opened the door and went inside, pulling her in after him. It was dim – the only light came through a partially opened door in the back. He let go of her hand and went to peer through the door. She saw enough to know it was a bathroom and then she looked back at Brian. The look in his eyes was all the answer she needed to know what they were doing.

With no preliminaries, without saying a word, Brian reached out and fisted his hands in her skirt, slowly raising up and baring her to his gaze. "It's been driving me crazy, thinking about you naked under this dress," he murmured, watching with rapt fascination as he bared her knees, her thighs. As the hem edged up past her hips, he sank to his knees in front of her.

He leaned in and put his mouth on her and Jaynie's knees damn near gave out. She slammed her hands down, bracing herself against the smooth wooden door at her back but it didn't help much as he slid his tongue around her clit in a slow, teasing circle. Then down...down...down...and in. Jaynie gasped out his name and began to sag

down. In an effort to stay upright, she gripped the doorknob, squeezing it until her knuckles went white.

He stiffened his tongue and stabbed it inside her, over and over. Then he slid his hands up over the back of her calves, her knees, her thighs and cupped her butt in his hands. As he took some of her weight, she sagged back in relief and fisted her hands in the thick, unruly silk of his hair. "Brian..." She opened her eyes and found herself staring into the darkened office. The wedge of light coming in through the open bathroom door fell on him, highlighting half of his face, throwing the other half into shadow. He lifted his head and glanced up at her.

"You're so fucking sweet," he muttered, and his voice was thick, almost drugged-sounding. He pressed his mouth back against her.

"Brian, we can't—"

"We can," he growled. The vibration of it went singing through her and she shivered. "We will. Come, Jaynie. I'm dying here."

His tongue circled her entrance and then pushed back inside her. She sobbed, feeling the world around her begin to shake and deep inside she felt a hot, thrumming beat start, pulsing and pounding through her in rhythm with the strokes of his tongue moving in and out of her sex. He stroked his fingers up and down her hip, pulled her in closer to his mouth, away from the door so that she was all but riding him. Then...he spanked her, his hand coming down with jarring force on the curve of her rump. She arched up and screamed his name.

He growled against her and shifted to take her clit between his teeth, biting down with soft, gentle force. Jaynie came, rocking against him and crying as the climax tore through her. Before she had a chance to even breathe, he had her on the floor under him, her legs shoved wide and her skirt pushed to her waist. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a rubber.

Brian never looked away from her face as he tore the packet open and rolled the thin latex barrier down over his rigid cock. He covered her, pushed inside her and

Jaynie reached up, wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. He crushed her into the carpet and muttered in her ear, "You're going to go out there looking like you've been fucked, smelling like me. He's going to look at you and know he can't ever touch you again. You *are* mine, Jaynie. Even if you haven't figured it out yet."

His control was gone and Brian didn't seem in any hurry to get it back as he shafted her, pumping into her with a strength that had them sliding across the floor. Her hair fell down around her shoulders in tangles. He fisted his hand in it and used his hold on her to angle her face up to his, taking her mouth with the same heated intensity.

"Mine," he muttered, lifting up just enough that he could growl it against her lips. "Mine. Mine. Mine." He echoed each time with a deep, driving thrust. Deep inside, she felt him swell. He shifted his angle and she whimpered as it had the head of his cock rubbing against the bundled bed of nerves deep in her pussy. He passed over it—once, twice, three times—and by the fourth, she was coming again, clenching down around him and sobbing out his name.

He followed, his cock jerking almost viciously inside her as he climaxed into the rubber. Jaynie closed her eyes, tried to calm her breathing, but she was still gasping for air when he stroked a hand down her arm. She lifted her lids just a little to stare at him from beneath her lashes. "Can't move yet," she mumbled.

Brian chuckled and left her lying there as he got to his feet and dealt with the rubber. Then he crouched beside her and pulled her into his arms and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Come on. We'll go out there, get your purse, then I'll take you back home."

She glanced down and shook her head. "I can't go out there like this."

Brian's smile faded away, replaced by an intensity that shook her to the core. "Yes, you can." He stood her up and smoothed her dress down and smiled at her possessively. "You look beautiful."

"I look like I just had sex."

"Exactly." He slid his hand under her skirt and cupped her in his hand. "You look rumpled and sexy and beautiful." She was still so wet and when he pushed his finger inside her swollen sheath, she whimpered and clenched down around him. "Mine, Jaynie."

She forced herself to open her eyes and look at him. "You and me, we need to talk."

He pulled his hand out from under her skirt, and holding her gaze, he slid his finger inside his mouth. "Yeah, we do. But not now. Now, we just go out there, get your purse and my jacket and we leave." Then he fell back a step. "Unless you're really opposed to everybody seeing you like this, with me. People will look at you and know, Jaynie. They'll look at me and know. If you can't handle that, tell me now. I'll get your purse and I'll take you home."

Unspoken were the words—*and then I'll leave you alone.*

It was a dare. It almost felt like an ultimatum and Jaynie wanted to be pissed off about that. She wanted to do it that way just to prove to him that he couldn't challenge her. But she didn't care if a hundred people, a thousand, saw her looking like this, her clothes wrinkled, her hair a mess.

Lifting her chin, she said calmly, "Let's go."

Brian hadn't been planning it. Yeah, he'd been suffering a lot of sleepless nights since that first night of mind-blowing sex months earlier. But it wasn't just that. It was like she had gotten under his skin and every little thing she did or said only made it worse. The way she smelled, the way she smiled at a crying child as she promised she could save a beloved pet—and the way she waited until she was alone to cry when she couldn't.

He'd fallen in love with her, but sometimes it felt as if he had been waiting his entire life just to do that, waiting for just this moment. He could think back and recall things about her with a clarity that amazed him, like the way she'd looked on prom night when she and Kate had rushed around for hours getting ready, primping in the mirror, wearing a silvery purple dress that shimmered against her skin. The way she

looked a few months after the prom when her mother finally got too careless and overdosed on Jack Daniels and sleeping pills, how she'd stood out in the rain, watching the paramedics as they took her mother's dead body away. She hadn't cried, not once. Not until he had wrapped his arms around and held her close. Kate had been there and the two of them had held Jaynie between them as she cried herself hoarse.

He remembered that night when he'd run into Jaynie at the frat party. Geez, it had been more than seven years since he had looked down into her wide, vacant eyes and realized somebody had slipped her some kind of drug.

He'd seen her with Dean just a little before and she'd looked fine but then, her motor coordination had been so poor, she'd stumbled into him. To this day, he still didn't know what had been stronger, his fear for Jaynie, or his rage at the still-unknown bastard who had drugged her.

Then there was the way his heart had stopped when she had come racing to their house the night she caught Dean involved in a threesome. Her eyes bright with tears and her face pale. Something had hurt her and Brian had known he'd move heaven and earth to keep her from being hurt like that, ever again.

And the way she looked now, strolling out into the dimly lit reception hall with her arm linked through his. Her dress was wrinkled, her hair mussed and her makeup had suffered some serious damage in the past twenty minutes. She still looked amazingly beautiful and as they walked past Dean and Kit, her chin tilted up just a little. Brian met Dean's gaze and he couldn't keep the satisfied smile from spreading across his face when he saw the knowledge enter Dean's eyes.

They reached the table and he paused long enough to grab his jacket while Jaynie knelt to get her purse from under the table. He suspected the purse had been Kate's doing because Jaynie hadn't so much as touched it since she'd dropped it under the table when they first got to the reception.

She slid the delicate gold chain over her shoulder and smiled at him. The sight of that smile hit him like a punch in the gut and he almost kissed her again. Instead, he

wrapped his arm around her and guided her to the door. Once there, he glanced back over his shoulder. Dean was still staring at Jaynie and as Brian grinned back at him, Kit got up in his face.

By the time the door closed behind him, Kit was yelling so loud he could hear her over the music blaring through the speakers.

Jaynie grinned up at him and Brian felt his heart get all tight. Yeah, he'd probably been falling in love with her for years, and never even realized it.

Chapter Six

When he took the turn west down Highway 180 instead of east, Jaynie glanced over at him. "Where we going?"

"The beach." Most of the beaches along that way were privately owned but there was Bon Secour, right before the old Civil War fort, Fort Morgan and the ferry to Mobile. As far out of the way as it was, that particular stretch of beach usually wasn't very busy. The occasional family or nature buff might hit it but when Brian turned down the broken paved road that led to the beach, it was empty.

"They're never going to repave this," Jaynie muttered.

Brian glanced at her. "Sure they will. Then we'll get a hurricane that tears it all up to hell again." He did a three-point turn and then pulled his car off the busted pavement in case anybody else came down the narrow lane. He slid out of the car, turning to offer Jaynie his hand. She slid her feet out of the skimpy, strappy sandals and left them on the floor before taking his hand.

The pavement was hot and rough under her feet. There was a warm breeze that smelled of the ocean and Jaynie smiled. She loved it here. Not just this stretch of beach, though it was pretty with its sugar-white sand and blue-green water, but living here, right on the Gulf. She couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Even with all the tourists that came in droves. Brian led her off the pavement onto the sand, holding her hand as they followed the path that led to the beach.

There were no condos this far down and the closest house was nearly a quarter mile away. It was completely, utterly peaceful. Nerves jangled inside her while they walked through the surf. She glanced up at Brian but he was staring out over the water.

"Why did you let Dean think we were getting married?"

Brian glanced down at her. "Because we are."

The calm, utterly confident way he said it was nearly as disturbing as the way he smiled at her. Like he didn't have a single doubt in the world that what he said was anything less than completely true. Self-conscious, she laughed. "You know, it sort of helps to be in love with the person you plan on marrying." Then her smile turned bitter. She'd been in love with Dean and he'd cheated on her.

"Yeah, well, I'm willing to wait for you."

She stopped in her tracks. He kept walking until he had to either stop, let go of her hand or pull her along behind him. "You're...you're willing to wait for me?" she repeated. She licked her lips and tried to wrap her mind around that statement. *Was he...was he saying...?*

No. Damn it. He couldn't be. "Are you saying...?" But she couldn't even form the words to ask him.

Brian didn't seem to need for her to, though. He closed the distance between them and reached up to curve a hand around her neck. He leaned in, pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "Don't look so scared, Jaynie. I'm not asking you for anything, at least not right now."

"You can't really..."

With his lips still pressed against hers, he grinned. "Sure I can. You know, it's your fault. You said all you needed was a night—that was all it was supposed to be. But I haven't slept good since. Well, except when I slept with you. Slept real good then."

"Good sex doesn't equal love."

He lifted his head and studied her face. He still had that strange, gentle smile on his lips. "I know that, Jaynie. But memories of good sex won't keep you awake night after night. At least not for months on end. It won't turn you in to some dopey teenager who hangs around after work, hoping to catch even the quickest look at his kid sister's pretty best friend. Good sex won't leave you tied up in knots like this. So if it's not sex, there's only one other thing it could be." He threaded his hand through her hair and angled her face up.

When he kissed her again, it was soft and gentle. Nothing sexual about it at all, though heat went shimmering through her. "Relax," he whispered. His hands slid down over her shoulders, settling low on her back. As his hands started to massage the tense muscles, Jaynie leaned against him and wished she could relax, just as simple as that.

But it wasn't going to happen.

* * * * *

The door flew open and Kate came breezing in, wearing a two-piece swimsuit covered with a tropical-print sarong knotted over on smooth hip. "Hey, Brian, you know where Jaynie is? She isn't...oh."

Jaynie opened one eye, saw Kate's face and flopped over onto her belly.

She cuddled up against his side, her face buried in the sheets and he watched as she settled back into sleep. At the foot of the bed, Kate was still staring at them. Her eyes were wide and round, her mouth an O of amazement.

"Did she... are you...Brian!"

Growing up with Kate enabled him to follow that scattered sentence well enough and he could have answered easily enough but he wasn't ready to explain this to her. Not right now, not until he had a better understanding about what was going on. Especially on Jaynie's part. He was still coming to grips with his own perceptions about Jaynie but he could handle them.

It was harder trying to deal with his insecurities. If she didn't—no. He wasn't ready to think about that yet. Not with Kate still standing over them and staring at them as if she had no idea what could have been happening there.

"What is Jaynie doing here?" she asked.

Stirring in his arms, Jaynie lifted her head and glared at Kate through the mess of her hair. "She's trying to sleep. Go away. You can interrogate me later."

Kate walked out of the room, still looking a little shell-shocked. As the door closed behind her, Brian pressed his lips to the top of Jaynie's head. She wiggled closer and mumbled unintelligibly under her breath. Then she sighed, a deep soft sound, and went back to sleep. Her body went lax and her breathing slowed. Once he knew she was asleep, he pulled away from her and rolled out of bed.

Jaynie might not be ready to face an interrogation but Brian figured he might as well get it out of the way. And there were a few things he wanted Kate to know, anyway. He dragged on a pair of loose sweats and headed out, closing the door behind him as he left.

He found her in the kitchen, stirring a cup of coffee and staring outside with a bemused, vaguely worried look on her face. She hadn't put on any makeup yet—kind of unusual for her—and her hair was pulled back from her face in a loose braid. "You look like Mom standing there," he said softly.

Kate glanced at him, smiling faintly. "If you're trying to distract me, it's not going to work."

Brian shrugged. "Just stating a fact. I remember when I'd come down in the morning after getting ready for school, she'd stand there, looking outside. I could always tell when she was thinking about Dad. She'd look sad, worried—then she'd see me and it was like whatever I thought I had seen disappeared."

He poured himself a cup of coffee then moved to the island. He leaned his hips against it and, as Kate turned to face him, met her gaze levelly. "I know why Mom looked worried. Money, raising two kids alone, missing Dad."

Their dad had been a firefighter and he'd died when Kate was only three. Brian still had some vague memories of their dad, enough of them that sometimes he was startled when he looked in the mirror. He looked just like his dad. In middle school, he'd shot up to six-foot-three practically overnight and up until his junior year in high school, he had been painfully klutzy, rail-thin, big hands, big feet and absolutely graceless. Then he started catching up with his body, his muscles filling out and basically just growing

into his size. That was when he'd first noticed the similarity to his father. He had his mother's eyes, but everything else about him came from his father.

Kate was the opposite—slender, fair and delicately pretty, just like their mom but instead of the blue-green eyes Mom had, Kate had their dad's dark, dark brown eyes. Right now, with that thoughtful, worried look on her face, Kate looked so much like their mom, it was eerie.

"What are you standing there worrying about?"

She slid her glance upward and then smiled sweetly. "Gee, I do wonder." The smile left her lips and she said, "Brian, I can't believe you did this. You got any idea how hard yesterday had to be for her?"

With a shrug, Brian said, "Actually, I don't think yesterday was all that hard for her after all. She's over him, Kate."

"You don't know a damn thing about women. She's been with the guy her entire life. She isn't going to get over him as quick as that."

"She might if she wasn't as in love with him as she thought." Brian stared into his coffee instead of at Kate, but the dark, steaming brew didn't hold any simple explanation. "Maybe she was just used to him. Jaynie likes the status quo, Kate."

Kate rolled her eyes. "She wasn't going to marry him just because she was used to him. She loved him—she probably still does."

A smug grin curved his lips and Brian shook his head. "She isn't in love with him, Kate." She might not love Brian yet, but he had no question about how she felt about Dean. She might have come to Brian that once out of hurt and need, but what was going on now wasn't about hurt. Just about need—her needing him nearly as much as he needed her.

"Even if she isn't...Brian, look at me." He met Kate's level stare. "Even if she isn't in love with him, you don't need this. I was hoping maybe it is just a thing, you know? One night. God knows I wouldn't blink twice over Jaynie having a night or two. Or ten.

But I'm looking at you and I'm not seeing this as a 'thing'. You're serious." She looked away from him as she added, "I haven't seen you serious about a girl in like...never."

"And the problem with that is?"

Kate set her coffee cup down so hard it sloshed all over the counter. She didn't even notice as she glared at him. "The problem is, I don't want you turning into a rebound guy. You deserve better than that. I don't want you getting serious about her if she's not ready to get serious about you. She's my best friend, Brian. She's part of my life and I don't want whatever this is to cause problems between you two later down the road."

"I'm not going to be a rebound guy," Brian said quietly. Although deep inside, he knew he was lying. He was worried. Just a little.

Kate was right about one thing. He hadn't ever had a woman in his life whom he really felt serious about. This had come on him out of the blue and yeah, he was still more than a little dazed by the intensity of it. But it felt right.

It *was* right. Jaynie was right for him and that was all there was to it as far as he was concerned.

"You can't know that." Kate's voice was gentle, her gaze concerned.

He shook his head. "Jaynie isn't the type to jump into a relationship unless she's really ready for it." But even as he said that, he couldn't help but think about the night that had started all of this. Overhead, he heard floorboards creek and he heaved out a sigh. "Look, can you not worry about this right now? It will be okay."

She scowled. "Not worry about it, he says," she mumbled. She saw the splattered coffee on the counter and turned to grab a sponge from the sink. Sopping up the coffee, she rinsed out the sponge and Brian thought maybe she would actually do as he asked and let it go.

But he should have known better. Katie wasn't done yet. She rinsed the sponge before turning on him. "If she hurts you, Brian, I'm going to be pissed. Very pissed. But she's in a bad place right now and probably not thinking clearly. *You*, on the other hand, don't have such an excuse. You hurt *her*, I'm going to kick your ass."

Grinning, he pulled her against him and hugged her tightly. He let her go but when she turned away, he tugged on her braid. "You couldn't kick my ass if you had to."

Kate sniffed. "Could too. I remember a time or two when I did just that."

Brian rolled his eyes. "The only time you got a couple of good punches in on me, I was sick with the flu." He heard footsteps and looked up as Jaynie came into the kitchen, wearing the button-down peach shirt he'd worn yesterday with his suit. She had rolled the sleeves up over her elbows and the shirttails hung practically to her knees. She looked adorable. A grin tugged up the corners of his mouth and he added, "The other time you got in any good hits was because Jaynie here helped you."

She looked between Kate and Brian and just shook her head. "Need coffee." She didn't bother pouring a cup, just took the one Brian had left on the island and huddled over it.

Brian found another cup and poured himself more coffee, watching Kate from the corner of his eye. She stared at Jaynie with a worried look and he tensed, swearing silently. She wasn't going to let it go. Damn her stubborn head.

But then she sighed. She looked at him and the look in her eyes spoke volumes. *Be careful.*

Brian could have assured her that he had every intention of being careful. He wasn't going to ruin this. Not if he could help it.

Chapter Seven

They hadn't talked about it. It had been nearly a week and the inquisition she'd been expecting from Kate had never come. She'd thought that Brian would want to talk as well but he didn't seem too concerned with changing anything. Monday, they rode to work together and he managed to get her out of bed early enough to go for breakfast before going to the office.

Tuesday night, he had taken her to a little seafood restaurant close to the Alabama-Florida state line and they'd ended up spending a few hours at the Flora-Bama lounge as well.

Under most circumstances, Jaynie couldn't drink at a party or at a bar. Not since college. But with Brian, she felt safe enough—knew she *was* safe. And she'd had a margarita or three. By the time they'd left, Jaynie had been slightly drunk and she vaguely remembered spending the entire drive home with her head in his lap. Not resting, either. If they'd gotten pulled over, they would have given the cop one hell of a show.

Friday night found them sharing pizza and arguing over the wording for a newspaper ad. Their small practice was getting too big for the two of them to handle—unless they wanted to pull ten-, twelve- or fourteen-hour shifts, which neither of them wanted to do. They scheduled appointments, but it wasn't the appointments keeping them there until eight or nine o'clock. It was the emergencies, a dog that got hit by a car, a ferret that got a little curious and ended up eating something it shouldn't.

"Part-time," Jaynie argued. "Possibility of a full-time position or partnership. Don't go offering the full-time slot right off the bat. What if it doesn't work out?"

"We're working our asses off, Jaynie. We need more help than part-time." He scowled and tapped his pen against his notepad. "We're going to have to consider extending the weekend hours sooner or later."

Jaynie groaned and thunked her head down on the table. She liked having her weekends off. "Can't we worry about that later? Let's get somebody hired first." Maybe they could find somebody who was a workaholic and would just love to work every weekend. Somebody who would settle for part-time employment with the potential of a full-time partnership.

"We're going to have a hard time finding a part-time vet, Jaynie."

She scrubbed her hands over her face and then dropped them to the table. "Look, how about we offer thirty hours a week on a trial basis. If it works out, *on both ends*, we can move to full-time after, oh, ninety days. Or maybe a hundred twenty days. If we get asked about buying into the practice, we can discuss that after a year's employment. Or two." She didn't mind sharing the workload, and it wasn't really paying another partner that bothered her. Another full-time vet could enable them to care for more patients, which led to more money.

What she hated was giving up any control.

Brian leaned back in the chair and folded his arms across his chest. His turquoise gaze studied the table and then he finally nodded. "I guess that could work. Thirty hours a week would get you and me out of there a little earlier most nights and it would definitely help on the weekends." He leaned forward and grabbed his pen, jotting down a brief ad and then he shoved it over to her. "How's that?"

She crossed out a few words, snickering when Brian rolled his eyes. "You have to have the last word on everything," he murmured.

With an angelic smile, she replied, "Oh, not everything."

"Hmmm..." Under the table, she felt his hand on her knee. "You mean there're a few things you would let me have the last say on?"

Her heart skipped a few beats and she sounded a little breathless even to her own ears as she said, "Maybe one or two."

Brian pushed back from the table and turned his chair so that he faced her. "Prove it," he said with a wide grin. "Take your pants off."

Heart pounding in her throat, she stood up and reached for the drawstring waistband of her scrubs. She loosened the tie and they bagged around her hips. She wiggled her hips a little and they fell down to her knees. She pushed them the rest of the way off and then stood there in front of him, wearing panties and the same thin strapped camisole she wore under her scrub tops. She'd taken her bra off practically the minute she got home, leaving that and her shoes in the apartment over the garage before joining Brian for pizza.

"Now take off your shirt."

She reached for the hem and started to take it off quickly, but then her hands slowed. Brian tracked every movement with his eyes and she grinned, feeling a little reckless. She glanced toward the back door, pretending concern. "What if Kate gets home?"

Brian cocked a brow. "She called earlier and said she was going into Mobile with the guy she's dating."

"Oh." She lifted the camisole over her breasts and then let go. "Maybe we should close to the blinds. Somebody could see in..."

"Jaynie," he growled at her. Actually growled. The sound of it was enough to make her knees go weak but she still wasn't in any hurry. "Take the damn shirt off or I'll take it off."

She fiddled with the hem and then flashed him a grin. "Why don't you do that?"

But when he got out of the chair, she dashed away from him, circling around so that the table stood between them. "Brat," he muttered. He feinted left, then right, but Jaynie managed to evade him each time he made a move to grab her.

She edged away from the table and made her way backward to the kitchen island. Brian kept back just a few feet, watching her, a heavy-lidded, predatory look on his face. "What are you waiting for?" she teased.

A grin curved his lips ever-so faintly. "You know what happens to pretty little girls who like to tease?"

"Nope."

He lunged for her and Jaynie yelped, spun on her heel to take off but he caught hold of her braid, effectively stopping her in her tracks. He hauled her back against him and thrust his hips against her butt. "I spank them," he whispered in her ear.

She wiggled against him and tried, not very hard, to pull away. "Don't even think about it."

With one arm wrapped around her waist, he slid the other hand down her side. "Oh, I'm going to do more than think about it." He grabbed the hem of her shirt and jerked it upward. Then he reached around and palmed her breasts, one in each hand. He crowded her forward, bending over her so that she had no choice but to bend as well. "Put your hands on the island, Jaynie."

She did, bracing herself. A shiver raced down her spine as he rocked against her butt. The denim covering his cock caused a sweet little friction, making her panties slide back and forth over her sex. He kept up that slow, teasing rhythm until she was panting and rocking back to meet him. When he stepped away, she groaned in frustration. "You've still got a spanking coming," he murmured. Hooking his thumbs in the waistband of her panties, he dragged them down her thighs. Bending, he pushed them all the way to her feet, before he straightened up and kissed her back.

He moved off to the side and Jaynie craned her neck around to watch as he stood next to her. "Stay there," he ordered. She held still as he grabbed one of the chairs from the table and hauled it around. He sat down and then reached for her. She tried to turn in his arms, but he restrained her, guiding her down so that she lay facedown over his lap.

Shit, he was serious. He'd swatted her butt a few times during sex, but he hadn't ever spanked her before—not really, not like this. She resisted and tried to pull away. “Brian...”

He slid a hand down her back, smoothed it over her rump. “Shhh...trust me.”

And she did. She lay over his lap with her butt up in the air. She would have thought she'd feel like an idiot but as the seconds ticked by and all he did was caress the silky flesh of her buttocks and back, she realized the only thing she felt was *heat*. He lifted his hand and she tensed. His hand came down on her buttocks with more force than she'd expected. She cried out and he did it again. Then he stopped, traced his fingers across her ass. “Look at that...you've got the prettiest ass, Jaynie, and now it's blushing so nice and pink.”

He spanked her again. Her hips rocked forward involuntarily. It hurt—but at the same time, each carefully placed strike flooded her with a pleasure that was almost too much to handle. He stopped again and pushed his hand between her thighs, then pushed two fingers inside the aching emptiness of her pussy. “Shit, Jaynie,” he groaned.

Brian moved her so quickly her head spun. Once more, she was leaning against the island, but instead of bracing her weight with her hands, he bent her over it so that she lay flat against it with her hips right at the edge. The island had a raised eating area on one end and that was where he put her, boosting her up so that her feet left the ground and the island completely supported her weight.

She heard the harsh rasp of his zipper and then he pushed inside her. Jaynie screamed at the fullness of his cock, the way he stretched her, invaded her—totally possessed her. He pulled out and, as he burrowed back in a second time, he spanked her. He alternated, slapping first her right buttock then her left, each forceful blow leaving the skin of her butt stinging and almost painfully sensitive.

She scrabbled around, reaching for something to hold on to, something to anchor herself. Already, that fast, she could feel the climax building inside her. Thrust, slap, thrust, slap, each one sending her closer and closer to the edge.

Then...he stopped, stiffened against her and swore roughly. "Fuck," he growled, jerking away. "I don't have a rubber. They're all upstairs."

Jaynie eased her weight up on to her elbows and glanced back over her shoulder, watching as he pulled his pants up. He was red and wet from her, his thick length pulsating. "I'll be right back," he muttered.

"Don't." The word slipped out without her realizing it. But she wasn't going to take it back. "I don't want you to wear one."

"Jaynie..."

She shook her head. "I'm clean. I called Dean and made him get a blood test after I left, told him that if he didn't, I'd make his life a living hell. I had one too." She'd been on birth control since she was fourteen, thanks to some very painful, very irregular periods, so pregnancy wasn't an issue.

And this was Brian. She laid her head against her arm and stared at him, feeling very exposed in that moment, sprawled out on the kitchen island and watching him. "I trust you," she said softly. "I want to feel you inside me."

He came back to her, stared at her, his eyes so dark and intense. He slid his hands back over her hips and pressed against her. He muttered hoarsely, "I love you."

She didn't say it back. She wanted to. She was almost there, she knew, falling for him so hard and so fast, it was almost scary. But she still wasn't sure. Until she was, she wasn't going to say anything. Instead, she murmured, "Make love to me, Brian."

He came into her hard and fast. He felt hot, and so thick inside her. The flared head of his cock rubbed against her just *there* and she clenched around him, arching to meet each thrust as much as she could. It was precious little, the raised, narrow platform didn't have much to grab on to and, with her legs hanging over the edge, she couldn't brace her knees and move her lower body. The inability to move only added to the erotic intensity of the moment—for some reason, lying there, unable to do much more than just take him, was incredibly arousing, oddly empowering.

She could feel him groaning and panting as he shafted her, felt his desperation as his fingers dug into her hips and his thrusts grew faster and deeper, as though he couldn't get close enough to her. His hands tightened, lifted her hips. That slight shift changed the angle oh-so slightly but the effect it had on her was devastating. She clenched down around him and came with a mewling scream.

She bucked against him and Brian braced a hand low on her spine, holding her still. He took her harder, pounding into her until the promise of pain loomed large in front of her until, with one last thrust, he arched into her and went still, almost frozen. A low, harsh groan vibrated out of his chest and his cock jerked viciously. She felt the heated splash as he came.

When he pulled out of her a few minutes later, she looked at him over her shoulder and smiled. He pulled her into his arms and without saying a word, carried her through the house and up to his bedroom.

There, he made love to her again and again, until she was all but limp with exhaustion and the muscles in her thighs screamed in protest. It was nearly midnight when he fell against her one last time. He rolled to his back, pulled her with him, and they both went to sleep.

Chapter Eight

I trust you.

It wasn't exactly a declaration of love. However he'd known Jaynie her entire life. Though it wasn't a declaration of love, it was pretty close.

It had been nine hours since he'd left her sleeping in the bed. His cell phone had started ringing and it was the ring reserved for work emergencies. Probably wouldn't be anything major—most of the “emergencies” they had weren't exactly emergencies. So he'd left her a note, climbed out of bed and dressed.

But he'd gotten there to see a big Rottweiler with a mangled back leg and internal injuries that Brian was still surprised the dog had lived through. It was going to take some doing to figure out what had happened and he suspected it was going to require getting the police involved. Being hit by a car didn't leave a dog's leg looking like it had practically been chewed off.

He'd been forced to amputate and he still wasn't sure the dog would be allowed to go home. Something strange was going on. The dog malnourished, thin and dehydrated, but he'd been so well-behaved that Brian had known he wasn't a stray. The surgery had taken a while and since dawn, he'd been camped out a cot a few feet away from the dog, watching him closely.

The staff who'd assisted him during the surgery had gone on home and it was quiet in the small hospital. There were two employees who stayed through the night to watch over sick animals on an as-needed basis, but lately, that as-needed basis was becoming pretty much round-the-clock.

They needed another vet, maybe even two, and they needed more nurses and techs. He had two techs coming in a few hours and as long as the Rottweiler was stable, he had plans to go home and crash for a little while. Of course, once they hired that third

vet, maybe they could work it out so that one of them could be there throughout the weekend. Or at least most of it.

His back screamed when he sat up on the small, cramped cot that was too short for his long body. Spending hours in surgery and then sleeping on a cot was one damn sure way to tie the muscles into knots. He stretched a little and then climbed to his feet and went to crouch by the dozing Rottweiler. He checked the dog's pulse, lifted the lids to peer into his eyes.

Well, so far so good. If there weren't any complications, the dog just might pull through.

The next couple of hours passed by in a blur of exhaustion. If he hadn't spent most of the last night taking Jaynie in every way he could think of, he knew he'd be a little more awake. Not that he had any regrets about how he'd spent his night but by the time the techs showed up at noon, he was about ready to fall flat on his face.

The drive home seemed to take forever though he knew it was only took fifteen minutes maximum. When he pulled into the drive, it took a few minutes to place the truck that was parked in the driveway.

When he did, he climbed out of the car and slammed the door closed, stalking up the driveway. He started to head inside the house but he heard voices coming from Jaynie's apartment. He climbed the steps silently, imagining how much fun it was going to be to put his fist inside Dean's mouth. He hadn't been able to hit Dean the way he'd wanted and there was no time like the present.

Stupid ass coming over, hanging around Jaynie like he actually had the right.

He reached the landing and reached to open the screen door. But then shock punched him in the gut, hitting him with a force that actually hurt. He fell back a step and reached out, his hand catching hold of the railing, fingers digging into the smooth, worn surface of the wood.

Jaynie stood in the circle of Dean's arms. Brian couldn't see her face but her hands rested against Dean's chest, not attempting to push him away or even to get free. Dean dipped his head and Brian turned around before they kissed.

If he saw Jaynie kiss that sorry fuck, he was pretty sure he'd puke. Halfway down the steps, he braced a hand on the railing and hurtled over, hitting the ground at a run. He didn't know where he was going and he didn't really care. He just needed to get away from there.

Not watching where he was going, he crashed into Kate and out of sheer reflex he caught hold of her arms, steadying her. "Watch it, you klutz," she teased. Then her smile faded and she reached up, touched a hand to his cheek. "Brian, what's wrong?"

He glanced back at Jaynie's apartment, looked down the driveway at Dean's truck parked off to the side. "I gotta get out of here," he muttered. He brushed past Kate and took off to his car at a jog. As he climbed inside, he heard raised voices, Jaynie and Dean, followed by the door slamming.

He peeled out of the driveway and as he shifted into drive, he saw Jaynie rounding the corner, followed by Dean. A bleeding Dean.

But he didn't stop. The blood flowing from Dean's nose barely even registered and all he could see was Jaynie, standing so close to the bastard and not doing a damn thing to move when Dean bent to kiss her.

Dean grabbed hold of her arm as she headed for her car and she spun around with her fist lifted. Her knuckles still throbbed from punching him in the nose but she was more than ready to hit him again, looking forward to it actually.

She couldn't believe he'd shown up at her doorstep, acting as though he had the right to be there—putting his hands on her, his wedding ring gleaming on his finger and a sensual smile on his lips.

She had known from the second she saw him on her doorstep that Dean had some weird belief that she was still his. Kate had been in the apartment with her. She hadn't

wanted to leave, but Jaynie had convinced her. She'd known that she needed to deal with Dean once and for all. She had to disabuse him of that notion and she'd rather get it over with so she didn't have to worry about tripping over him.

So Kate had left, not happy about it and Dean had come inside with a satisfied smile and she'd known damn well he was thinking that she was still gone over on him. She'd turned on him to let him know just how wrong he was and he'd wrapped his arms around her.

"Get the hell off me," she'd said, keeping her voice low and soft, not letting even the slightest hint of her irritation color her voice. She had been more than ready to punch him even before he started reminiscing and telling her how much he'd missed her, how he'd forgotten how gorgeous she was.

"Have you forgotten you're married too?"

He'd given her that sheepish grin he had always used when she was mad at him but this time she hadn't been at all charmed. Just pissed off and vaguely disgusted. Then he'd tried to kiss her.

When he hadn't let go right away, she'd brought her foot up and then down, smashing her heel into the top of his foot. His yelp had been very satisfying, but not as much as the crunch his nose made when she'd decked him. He'd started swearing and she almost hadn't heard Kate's raised voice coming from outside. Movement had caught her eye and she'd seen Brian down in the yard close to the house. He'd looked back at her and, even across the distance, she'd seen the pain and fury on his face.

"Son of a bitch."

She'd raced down the steps, leaped down the last few and taken off running. She'd heard Brian's car door slam and called out his name. Behind her, Dean had been yelling at her. Tires squealed as Brian peeled out of the driveway and she'd rounded the corner to see him look back at her. Kate stood off to the side, watching everything with wide, fascinated eyes.

"Brian..."

Dean grabbed her arm from behind and she spun around and hauled off and punched him in the mouth. Pain flared but she ignored it as she squared off and faced him. "I want you gone, Dean. Out of my face, out of my life. For good."

He spat blood on the ground and sneered at her. "What? You didn't really think I was going to take you back, did you?"

"Well, you didn't come here to say thanks for your wedding present," she snapped. She glanced down at her hand, eyeing the swollen knuckles and torn flesh. She wiggled her fingers and winced as pain shot up her arm. "What in hell are you doing here, Dean?"

He leered at her, eyeing the low-cut lace-trimmed neckline of her tank top. "You should be able to figure that out. You finally decided to start dressing and acting like a woman. You must have wanted me to come looking for you. Took you long enough but you finally loosened up."

She curled her lip at him. "I never needed to *loosen* up."

Dean snorted. "The hell you didn't. Tried to get you to loosen up back in college and the one time I got close, that dumbshit Brian showed up before I could..." his voice trailed off, almost as if he realized he'd said something he shouldn't have.

But it was too late. "The one time you got *close*?" she repeated, hardly able to believe what her brain had put together. Her gut churned in nauseating circles and she shook her head. "Dean...God. Please tell me that you aren't the one who spiked my drink."

Dean scowled at her. "Damn it, if you weren't such a damn prude, I wouldn't have had to. You weren't even willingly to try anything!"

Jaynie had been angry before. What she felt now made any emotion she'd ever felt pale in comparison. She wasn't angry. She wasn't furious. The emotions inside her were volcanic and when it spilled out, there might not be any survivors. She closed a hand into a fist and whispered, "If you want to live, you'd better turn around and walk away. Right now, Dean."

He was either too stupid or too arrogant to understand how pissed she was, though. He just stood there, sneering smile on his face and said, "The bastard owes you, babe. Cost you what probably would have been—"

She hit him. And while he was still reeling from the first punch to the gut, she delivered a left hook to his temple. He wobbled, but didn't go down and she desperately wanted him down so she could pound him into the dirt. She spun around and struck out with her right leg, delivering a side kick right into his solar plexus.

This time, he fell.

And if soft, gentle hands hadn't wrapped around Jaynie's upper arms, she might have gone after him again. Kate held her tightly and murmured, "Sweetie, that's enough. Much as he deserves to get stomped for this, he isn't worth it."

"Let go of me," she growled.

Kate shook her gently. "Honey, look at your hands."

It wasn't until she saw the puffy knuckles of her right hand that she felt the pain. Physical pain, on top of the pain wrenching her heart as she realized what Dean had been planning to do. She'd loved him—or at least she'd thought it was love, but how could she love a man like that?

She flexed the fingers of her right hand and gasped as pain shot up her arm.

Dean shoved to his feet, wobbling a little. "You fucking bitch."

"Get the hell away from me," Jaynie warned.

"I ain't done with you yet," he growled, his voice low, ugly and menacing.

Jaynie was too pissed to care. "Leave now, or the next time, I won't stop until you're dead."

"Probably won't take much," Kate drawled from behind Jaynie. "Look how easily you made him bleed, Jaynie. You put him down real nice."

Dean glared at her. "Would you shut the hell up?"

Kate grinned at him. "You know, you're bleeding all over your shirt there. Getting bloodstains out is such a bitch."

Dean's lip curled in a snarl and for a second, Jaynie stood there wondering exactly why she had spent so many years with him. His temper was ugly, always had been and she was getting an inkling of just how self-centered and immature he was. His face, where it wasn't covered with blood, was an ugly, florid shade of red and he was glaring at Kate with a rage that was unsettling. People with that much anger inside them had a bad habit of releasing their frustrations on others.

"Shut the fuck up, Kathryn. Why do you always feel the need to stick your nose where it doesn't belong?"

Kate started forward, but Jaynie reached out and caught her arm, tugging her back. Softly, she said, "He's got one thing right, Kate. This really doesn't involve you." She patted Kate's arm reassuringly and then faced Dean one last time. "Dean, you're the one who needs to shut up, though. I'm done with you. I'm done with this." She glanced down at the simple white shirt she wore. It was cotton, nothing fancy, with a scoop neck, trimmed with the thinnest edging of lace and little shiny white buttons. It was comfortable, cool and she had to admit, she liked the way it looked on her a lot better than the T-shirt or scrubs she would have worn a month ago.

She might have started this transformation with Dean in mind, but in the end, it hadn't been Dean she'd been out to please. It had been herself. She tugged on the hem of the sleeveless shirt, smoothed it down and smiled up at Dean. "This isn't for you, Dean. Might have started out that way, but that's not what it's for now. It's for me. I feel nothing for you—or at least that's how it was until about five minutes ago. Now, I've got feelings, all right. Loathing and disgust. I wonder if Kit knows she married a would-be rapist."

"I've never raped anybody."

"Are you so stupid you really believe that?" She laughed softly and shook her head. "You know what? I bet you are."

"This is all kind of sad, Dean. I gave you nearly ten years of my life. *Ten* years. We were together in high school, we were together through college." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head, sadness edging its way into her voice. "Ten years, and we never even set a wedding date. I never saw you for the pathetic man you are, not until now."

Then she glanced down the drive, staring at the spot where Brian's car had sat. She remembered the pain she'd felt when she'd found Dean in bed with Kit and Landon. It had hurt so badly at the time. It hadn't even been all that long ago, so why did it feel like another lifetime?

Part of it was because of Brian, she knew. But not all of it. She'd changed in the past few months, done some serious growing up. Staying with Dean had been comfortable for her. But comfortable wasn't right.

Brian, as bizarre as it seemed, felt right to her. He made her laugh, he made her think and when he touched her, she lit up inside in a way she couldn't even begin to describe. And she never would have gone to him that night if she hadn't felt so lost, so hurt.

When she looked back at Dean, she was smiling. "But you know what? I'm glad this did happen. I'm glad I know what a slimy bastard you are and I wouldn't have known that if this had never happened. I wouldn't be where I am in life and I like where I am. A lot." She stepped back and gestured toward his car. "Now you need to leave. And don't come back here, Dean. Not for any reason."

"Jaynie—"

She narrowed her eyes. "You either leave now or I'm going to let Kit know where you were tonight."

He shoved her with his shoulder as he pushed by and she almost went after him again, almost hit his already bruised and bleeding face. Almost. But she had more important things to worry about. Like finding Brian.

Chapter Nine

The screen door banged shut behind him as Brian came stomping in a little after midnight. He kicked the front door closed, a brown paper bag under one arm. He had one destination in mind—the basement. He was going to lock the door behind him and get shit-faced drunk.

The hangover he'd have in the morning wouldn't make it any easier to look at Jaynie but he was already working on the solution to that. She didn't want three full-time vets, so fine. She could hire one full-time to replace him. He was getting the hell out of Dodge, away from her and...

"Jaynie, is that...oh." Kate came around the corner and stopped short when she saw him. She frowned at him and he glared right back.

"Not tonight, Kate. I'm in no fucking mood," he growled.

She smiled sweetly. "Well, that's too damn bad." She placed herself in his path and Brian stopped in his tracks.

Bending down, he put his face in hers and said, "Leave me alone tonight, Kate. You can give me the I-told-you-so crap tomorrow."

She cocked a brow at him. "I don't have any I-told-you-so crap. I have the where-the-hell-have-you-been-and-why-did-you-turn-your-damn-phone-off crap for you. Oh, and Jaynie has been out looking for you for the past four hours when she really needs to get her butt to the emergency room." Then she smiled angelically. "But since you're not in the mood for it."

Kate turned on her heel but she didn't even make it one step before he reached out and caught her arm. "What did you say?" he demanded, his voice hoarse. He was pretty sure his heart just stopped.

She gave him an innocent look. "About what? The phone? You disappearing?"

"Where's Jaynie?" he demanded through clenched teeth. He hadn't raised a hand to his sister since he was twelve and she was seven. He'd punched her in the arm for losing his baseball and their mom had tanned his hide. Since then, he hadn't ever lifted a hand against a woman in anger, but in that moment he was tempted to grab Kate and shake her until her teeth rattled.

Kate blinked. "Jaynie? She's out looking for you."

"No, I'm not."

They turned as one to stare at Jaynie. She stood in the doorway, staring at Brian with unreadable eyes. Yeah, he was sure of it. His heart had stopped. There was blood on her shirt. For a minute, he forgot the pain slicing through him and he went to her, looking for injuries. "What happened? How did you get hurt – did Dean...?"

She glanced down at her shirt and then back at him. Behind them, Kate quietly left the room, slipping outside. "The blood isn't mine," she said, her voice flat. "It's Dean's."

"Dean's?" He glanced back, looking for Kate only to hear her car engine start out in the driveway. "Kate said something about an emergency room."

Jaynie shrugged. "Kate exaggerates, you know that."

"What is she exaggerating about?"

"Does it matter?" she asked softly. Then she looked away. "I didn't invite Dean over here, Brian. I didn't even want him here."

The anger came flooding back. "Could have fooled me." He turned around and headed for the kitchen. On the way there, he ripped the bag off the bottle of whiskey and opened it. He grabbed a glass from the dish rack, making a pointed effort not to look at the island. Had it been just yesterday when Jaynie had looked up at him from there and whispered, *I trust you?*

Well, technically, it hadn't been yesterday, since it was after midnight. He smirked a little and muttered, "Yeah, makes all the difference." He splashed whiskey into the juice glass and then threw it back, hissing as it burned a path down to his belly.

"What makes the difference?" Jaynie asked.

He glared at her. "Nothing," he snarled. He poured some more whiskey into the glass and carried it and the bottle over to the kitchen table. "I'm trying to get drunk here, Jaynie. So why don't you go on home?"

"Not until we talk." She reached out, snagged the bottle of whiskey and then backtracked before he could grab it back.

"I'm in no mood to *talk*, Jaynie." He shoved up from the table with a force that sent the chair flying. "Give it back."

Coolly, she said, "No." She turned away from him and went over to the counter where he'd dropped the bottle's screw-top lid. He stalked over, intent on grabbing it from her but then he saw her right hand.

Her very ugly, very swollen right hand. The skin of her knuckles had split and it didn't look like she'd cleaned the blood away. He stilled, staring at her battered hand, watched as she tried to pick the lid up only to wince and drop it back down onto the counter. "What happened to your hand?"

She shot him a narrow look. "I punched Dean."

"That looks a little worse than just one punch."

She shrugged. He watched as she moved over to the refrigerator and filled a cup with ice. She carried the cup of ice to the island and took one of the hand towels that hung from pegs on the side. Awkwardly, she dumped the ice onto the towel, making an ice pack for her hand. "I didn't hit him once."

A memory flashed through his head, Dean following Jaynie around the corner of the house as Brian pulled away, his face bright red with blood. A busted nose tended to bleed a lot—and splatter. Could explain the blood on Jaynie's shirt. "I saw him kissing you," he said, his voice stilted. "I saw him with his arms around you and you didn't do a damn thing."

"He didn't kiss me," she corrected. "He tried, and I hit him." She slid him another sidelong look and asked, "You didn't see that part, did you?"

He didn't answer as he tried to figure out if he had been that big a fool.

Jaynie's voice was soft as she asked, "You don't have much faith in me, do you?"

He glanced at her, startled. Affronted, he snapped, "What in hell would you think if you walked in and saw somebody you're crazy about holding another woman?" Then he smirked. "Wait a second, that's how we ended up here, isn't it? You saw Dean with Kit and ended up jumping in bed with me. Oh, wait...let's not forget the third party. I never did hear his name."

Blood stained her cheeks pink. "So you know that part too, huh?"

He gave her a mean smile. "Yeah. I know that part too. So was that a new thing for him? Is three a crowd for you?"

Jaynie opened her mouth to reply but she didn't say anything right away. She turned away from him and Brian hoped that maybe, just maybe, she'd leave him in peace so he could get drunk.

But she didn't leave. Instead, she looked back at him and the look in her eyes was one that would haunt him. He knew it. "Do you remember when I was in college and you had to take me to the emergency room?"

Thrown a little off balance, Brian stared at her. What was this? What was she up to? "Yeah. I remember." *That night still gives me a bad turn when I think about it.* Of course, he didn't mention that part. She already had too much power over him. No reason to add more.

"Dean had this idea that I'd be good for a threesome with him and one of his friends. I told Dean no. He's the one who slipped me the roofie. So yeah, three definitely counts as a crowd for me."

Brian stood up. Without saying a word, he grabbed his keys and headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?"

He looked back over his shoulder and said in a conversational tone, "I'm going to kill your ex."

Jaynie slid past him and planted herself in front of him. "No. You're not. He's not worth it."

"Oh, yes. I am. But don't worry. This doesn't mean I'm still expecting you to fall head over heels in love with me, Jaynie. You obviously want a guy who's going to treat you like shit."

She balled up her left hand. "You know, it's going to be damn hard to work with two busted hands, but I'm willing to risk it."

He bent down and caught her fist in his own. His hand all but swallowed hers. "Go ahead. Feel free. You're safe, you know. I don't hit women back—or drug them."

"Brian..." She looked down at their hands and then back up at him. "What do you want me to say? I didn't want Dean over here. I didn't want him to kiss me. I didn't let him kiss me and I don't want him back."

"Right now, what I want you to do is to get out of my way so I can go kill him. And then...hell, you do whatever the hell you want."

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

Brian cocked a brow. "Killing him? No. I'm not going to let that go."

She waved a hand dismissively. "I'm not talking about that." She gestured between them and said, "I'm talking about us."

Us. Now that she'd ripped his heart out, she was willing to talk about *us*. She hadn't once tried to do it before, he thought bitterly. *You haven't really either*, a small voice inside his head whispered. But he ignored it. Women always wanted to talk about relationships, didn't they? Since Jaynie didn't seem too interested in talking about it, he hadn't really figured she had much to say.

"There really is no us, is there, Jaynie?"

Her mouth fell open and even through his own rage and pain, he could see her pain reflected in her eyes. "So that's it?" she asked, her voice hoarse. "Just like that?"

Not just like that. He was going to hurt over her every day for the rest of his life. *But—but what?* That sane little voice inside him hammered at him. *But what? She's the one. And you're walking away. You don't even know why. She just said she wasn't kissing him. She doesn't love him.*

But there was another part of him arguing. *But she doesn't love me either.*

Torn, he turned away from her and slumped against the wall. "You don't know what this is doing to me," he muttered.

"The hell I don't. I didn't see Dean trying to hug some girl—I found them together naked. You only saw Dean with his arms around me, for what...all of five seconds? Don't tell me I don't know what this is doing to you. I've already been through it."

"That being the case, maybe you could try to see where I'm coming from," he said testily.

"I am!" she shouted, her temper erupting. "Damn it, your head is like a rock."

Brian scowled. "Yours isn't any better, sugar. You spent ten fucking years with him! What in the hell was I supposed to think? Shit, screw what. *How* was I supposed to think? It felt like I'd just been sucker punched."

She cocked her head. A slow smile curved her lips and she said, "Believe it or not, I understand that. Very much." She sighed and started to say something but instead, she grabbed the whiskey bottle. She didn't mess with a glass, just lifted it to her lips and drank. One deep drink that led to a coughing fit. When it passed, she took a second drink and then put the bottle down. "I'm going to tell you what I told Dean earlier. I'm done with him. I don't care if I never see him again. I don't really care about him one way or the other. When he showed up, I figured I might as well just get that point across. He apparently thought I invited him inside the apartment with something else in mind."

Then she gave him a dejected look. "Even if you weren't thinking too clearly about Dean showing up, do you really think I'd get involved with a married man?"

"No." Now that much he could answer honestly and without even thinking about it. He had to touch her. The ugly knot in his chest had receded just a little and he thought he might be able to actually breathe again, though he wasn't completely certain. Her hand gave him an easy excuse to touch her too. He reached out and took her battered hand, examining it. He deftly probed her knuckles, watching her face and pretending a professional interest. "That didn't make much sense to me, but honestly, I wasn't thinking about him and Kit. I was too busy thinking about the fact that you had spent the past ten years of your life with him. You got history."

She hissed as he probed her swollen hand. "Would you stop it?" she demanded.

"You need an X-ray."

Jaynie shot him a baleful glance. "Gee, really?"

Instead of responding, he led her back to the kitchen and left her at the table while he got the first-aid kit from the pantry. Inside were a few emergency ice packs. He found the biggest one and closed his fist around it, tightening his fingers until he felt the little *pop*. Almost immediately, it started to chill and then he turned and took her hand, laying the fresh ice pack along the top of it.

"So what happened?" he asked cautiously. Fifteen minutes ago that would have been the last thing he wanted to hear.

"What, you're willing to listen to me now?"

He gave her a baleful look.

She shrugged jerkily. "I don't know if he just wanted a trip down memory lane or what. I don't really care. He tried to kiss me and I punched him. Then I heard you outside with Kate and I knew you'd seen something. I went after you and Dean followed me. He ran off at the mouth again and I ended up hitting him in the mouth that time." She wiggled her fingers a little. "Ended up splitting my knuckles on his teeth."

“And the roofie?” Brian wouldn’t have just split his knuckles on the bastard’s teeth. He would have knocked them clear down Dean’s throat.

Her lids drooped, shielding her eyes from him, but still, he caught a glimpse of the wounded, betrayed look in them. “Figured it would loosen me up. He’s had the ménage fetish for a while now. I wasn’t interested and he wasn’t interested in me saying no.”

Brian gritted his teeth. Oh, he was going to kill Dean. “And he just now mentioned this?”

She sneered at him. “Gee, do you think I would have stayed with him if I had known before this?” Gently, she tugged away from him and circled around the kitchen to avoid brushing past him.

“I didn’t mean for anything to happen between us, Brian. When I came to you that night, I was just looking for some comfort. Some reassurance. I never meant for anything like this to happen.” She stood with her back to him, her shoulders slumped and her head low.

Brian closed the distance between them, brought his hands up to rest on her shoulders. “Me, neither,” he murmured. “Does that mean you’re sorry we ended up here?”

She slanted him a look over her shoulder. “I don’t know yet. I—” she blew out a breath. “I have feelings for you that I hadn’t ever expected to have. But I just went through the wringer with Dean. I’m not ready for an emotional roller coaster.”

“Is that what we are?”

“What else would you call this?” she asked, her voice self-deprecating. “You saw one thing and overreacted. Does that mean you’re going to be the kind who gets jealous if I so much as speak to another guy?”

Brian tightened his hands on her shoulders. “Come on, Jaynie. Give me a break.” He blew out a breath and wished he could just undo the last four hours. Wipe them out of both their memories. “It isn’t like you were talking to some guy in the store or at work. Dean is the guy you spent ten years with—the guy you found cheating on you—

and then you ended up in my bed. I know about rebound guys. I told myself that wasn't what was going on but..."

She turned around to study him thoughtfully. "Then you show up and find him there."

"So have I totally messed this up?" he asked softly.

A slow smile tugged at her lips. "I don't know."

He blew out a breath. "Okay...let me ask this. If I try to kiss you now, are you going to hit me with that other hand?"

She tipped her head back and the smile seemed to spread just a little. "I dunno. It's possible."

He kissed her, quick and light. Then he slid his arms around her, eased her body up against him, careful of her battered hand. "I'm sorry."

She snuggled against him. "So are you still planning on asking me to marry you?"

And just like that, Brian felt his world fall back into place. With a grin, he asked, "Yeah. You still willing to trust me and see where this leads us?"

Against his chest, he could feel her smile. "I'm standing here, aren't I?"

"Yeah." The knot in his chest melted and disappeared altogether and he cupped the back of her head in his hand, cradling her close. Her body, soft and warm, molded against his and Brian felt that familiar hot need stirring inside him. In a few minutes, he was going to have to figure out how to make love to her without hurting her hand, but for now, he was content just to hold her. "Yeah, you're here, all right. Thank God."

About the Author

They always say to tell a little about yourself! I was born in Kentucky and have been reading avidly since I was six. At twelve, I discovered how much fun it was to write when I took a book that didn't end the way it should have ended, and I rewrote it. I've been writing since then.

About me now...hmm... I've been married since I was 19 to my high school sweetheart and we live in the midwest. Recently I made the plunge and turned to writing full-time and am looking for a part-time job so I can devote more time to my family—three adorable children who are growing way too fast, and my husband who doesn't see enough of me...

Shiloh welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Shiloh Walker

A Wish, A Kiss, A Dream *anthology*

Coming In Last

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails II *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Tales From the Temple IV *anthology*

Every Last Fantasy

Firewalkers: Dreamer

Firewalkers: Sage

Good Girls Don't

Her Best Friend's Lover

Her Wildest Dreams

His Christmas Cara

His Every Desire

Make Me Believe

Myth-behavin' *anthology*

Mythe & Magick

Mythe: Vampire

Nightstalker: Back From Hell

Once Upon A Midnight Blue

One Night With You

Silk Scarves and Seduction

Telling Tales

The Dragon's Warrior

The Dragon's Woman

The Hunters: Ben and Shadoc

The Hunters: Declan and Tori

The Hunters: Eli and Sarel

The Hunters: I'll Be Hunting You

The Hunters: Jonathan and Lori

The Hunters: Rafe and Sheila

Touch of Gypsy Fire

Voyeur

Whipped Cream and Handcuffs



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com