

The book cover features a woman with dark hair and red lipstick lying on her side, wearing a white lace-trimmed top and a silver bracelet. Her hands are resting on her bare midriff, with red-painted fingernails. The background is a soft, warm-toned skin. The title 'Perfect' is in a red script font, and 'GAME' is in a large, white, bold serif font. The author's name 'Jordana Ryan' is in a dark red serif font. The publisher's name 'BookStrand' is in a blue and red serif font at the bottom right.

Perfect GAME

Jordana Ryan

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PERFECT GAME

Jordana Ryan

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PERFECT GAME

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DEDICATION

To Cheyenne for being my inspiration in everything. I love you so much, Munch.

To Stephanie for bearing with me during rewriting, always being encouraging, constantly rereading, and believing in me no matter what. Your dedication to my success means the world to me.

To Autumn for never giving up on me, for being my best friend, my closest ally, and my confidante. We're joined at the heart and always will be.

To Cindy for encouraging me to do it my way and never letting me forget that I was given this talent for a reason.

To my family for your belief in me as a person and your support in everything I do. Knowing that you believe in me makes all the difference.

PERFECT GAME

JORDANA RYAN

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Chapter 1

Trevor Malone groaned when the door opened and he saw Jessie Kirk take her first tentative step into the locker room. The last time Coach's daughter had been in town, she had gone out of her way to get the entire team in hot water. That had been years ago. She had been a seventeen-year-old troublemaker, but in some ways, Trevor had seen the vulnerable little girl underneath her crazy antics. Despite that, she had made it damn hard to muster up any pity for her. A long time had passed, and he hoped it was long enough for her to grow up. She looked a lot different from the little girl he remembered.

He watched a wide smile turn up the corners of her lips when she saw him. It was uncertain and almost sweet. Definitely not the smile of the vixen he remembered her to be.

"Hi, Trevor. Where's my dad?"

"In there." Trevor nodded in the direction of Coach's office. Bright eyes captured his attention as they stared at each other. In them, he saw a certain maturity that had not existed last time he saw her. His eyes traveled the length of her. *Without a doubt she's not a little girl anymore*, he thought.

"Thanks." The softly spoken word interrupted his slow perusal of her.

Trevor nodded. Having spent the entirety of his major league career with The Devils, Trevor knew Coach Dan Kirk well. On occasion, they even hung out together off the field. Coach was a nice guy, but the one time his daughter had been around, he had turned into an irritable mess. Trevor

didn't know what had happened to Coach's marriage, and he didn't ask. Rumor had it that when the divorce was final, Melody Kirk packed up her daughter and moved to Kansas to be near her family.

Trevor knew that Coach saw his daughter very little. He seemed to like it that way. In fact, the last time she had visited Santa Fe, she had only been there because her mother had to go out of the country on business for two months, and in what Coach had called a rare moment of selflessness, his ex wife had called to say she didn't want their daughter to be without supervision. Trevor remembered Coach's grumblings, but despite the fact that Coach had acted like he'd rather do anything than care for Jessie, he had taken in the young woman for what had turned out to be a disastrous two months. Maybe it was superstition, but during that visit, the team had called her their bad luck idol because Coach had been so on edge he turned into someone they didn't even recognize. All the extra workouts had exhausted them, and the cursing and perpetual bad mood of Coach had reflected in the way they played. The team had lost all their games when she was there. Several fluke injuries had afflicted the players. Overall, the team had decided, Jessie was bad news.

Trevor shook his head. He hoped her visit would be different from the last one. Curious about why she was there, he moved closer to Coach's office. Pressing his body up against the wall, he strained to hear the conversation.

"Daddy, she's gone. One day she was alive, the next she wasn't. Mamma was healthy. The doctor said she had an aneurism of the brain. It was sudden. Shocked us all."

Silence greeted her declaration. From the little bit he knew about Melody Kirk she was a habitual liar, she had problems with taking responsibility and her number one priority was herself. Of course, that had come from Assistant Coach Max Devin who had been with Coach Kirk for a long time.

"Why did you come here?" Coach asked irritation oozing from every syllable.

Ouch. That was harsh, Trevor thought.

"I didn't know where else to go."

Trevor had to give her credit. There was no pathetic ring to her voice, no bitterness and no anger. It was just a simple fact.

“What about your mother’s family?”

“They know where I am.” Jessie sounded offended. She continued. “I didn’t run away Daddy. I’m twenty-five years old. Don’t you think it’s time you get to know me?”

Trevor didn’t want to feel sorry for her, but he’d be damned if he didn’t.

“Jessie, what is it you’re asking of me?” Coach asked, sounding resigned.

“Can I live with you for a while? If it doesn’t work out, fine. But I deserve the chance to know my father. Mom always told me what a prick you are. Now I want to judge for myself.”

Trevor stifled a laugh. He wouldn’t call Coach a prick. Hot tempered and intense maybe, but not a prick. Picturing the look on Coach’s face, he grimaced at the thought of the tongue lashing that poor girl was about to get.

“Okay, I guess I owe you that.”

Surprised, Trevor raised an eyebrow. He listened to Coach laugh, the uneasiness apparent in the stiff sound.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“I guess you’re going to hang around for the game?”

“If that’s okay.”

Trevor heard Coach grumble. For however long she was here, Coach was sure to be a bear to deal with. He didn’t look forward to the consequences that would surely follow Jessie’s unexpected arrival

“I don’t see how you’re gonna know where I live if you don’t.”

“I’m just going to go out and get my jacket. It’s cool tonight.”

Just before Jessie walked out of her father’s office, Trevor moved back to his locker and pretended he hadn’t been listening. Holding her head high, she strode toward him.

“It was good to see you again, Trevor.” Her low, sultry voice sent a shiver down his spine.

He stared at her. Auburn hair hung loose around her shoulders. Silver eyes met his with bold confidence. Too-tight jeans encased her legs and a lacy black top dipped too low, giving off an enticing view of her breasts. While he scrutinized her, a small wave of desire rushed over him. Damn, the last thing he needed was some crazy attraction to Coach’s daughter.

“Wish I could say the same, Jessie. Don’t you go cursing us like you did last time you were here.” Trevor winced. Guilt over the cutting remark nagged at him when he noticed the change in her demeanor.

The bright eyes he had looked into moments before turned icy. Without a word, she walked past him and out of the locker room. As she left, Trevor couldn’t help but admire the sweet little ass she had. What was wrong with him? There were plenty of pretty women who came to all their games and the after parties with the desperate hopes of hooking up with one of the guys. Being the team’s star pitcher, he had his pick from the cream of the crop. But damn, none turned him on quite like Jessie had just done without even trying.

* * * *

Bottom of the fourth inning and so far, the Montana Eagles had not managed a hit off him. It looked like this might be another of his perfect games. Watching the catcher, Mark Winter, give the signal for a fastball, Trevor nodded slightly, wound up, and released the ball. The batter swung, and missed. Two more strikes and it would be another hitless inning for the Eagles.

Trevor eyed the catcher, waiting for a signal. Mark indicated a change-up—his best pitch. Distracted, he searched for and found Jessie. Although he couldn’t see her well, in his mind, he saw her pouty lips that begged to be kissed and the creamy breasts revealed by the plunging neckline of her blouse. It turned him on.

Damn, I gotta focus, he told himself. He shook his head for clarity, glanced back at Mark who gave a slight nod, and wound up for the pitch. He let go of the ball and watched it lose speed when it reached the plate. The swing, the crack of the bat, the sound of his teammates springing to action swirled in his mind. The ball seemed to go in slow motion, and much to his surprise it was headed straight for him. Trevor moved, but not quick enough. As if in a dream, Trevor heard the sickening thud when the ball nailed him in the shoulder. The world started to spin, and he hit the ground. The stadium went silent.

The burning wouldn’t stop. It was pain like he’d never before experienced. Nausea welled from deep within him, and he prayed he

wouldn't embarrass himself by getting sick. Coach Kirk's voice broke through the silence, and Trevor looked up to see the man standing over him along with the rest of the team. In a sluggish, warped voice, Coach called for the trainer. Trevor closed his eyes when another wave of nausea passed through him.

"He's hurt bad," Trevor heard someone say.

"Trevor, can you get up?" Coach's voice seemed far away. Trevor forced himself to focus. With a groan, he opened his eyes and tried a smile.

"I'm fine. Just give me a minute."

Hands settled on his shoulder, pushing and prodding in a way that was excruciating.

"Coach, he needs to go to the hospital."

"I'm fine." Trevor said, trying to sit up. A sharp, shooting pain that seemed to affect every nerve ending in his body pushed him back down.

"Get a stretcher," someone called.

Several seconds ticked by before Trevor heard a flurry of activity around him. He cracked an eyelid and saw the sterile white sheet of the stretcher nearby. Three more paramedics squatted beside him, and they made quick work of getting him on a backboard. Trevor didn't understand why they were treating him with such kid gloves. It wasn't his back that hurt. It was his shoulder.

The movement caused another searing pain, and this time he couldn't help but cry out in agony. Situated on the stretcher, he looked out at his teammates and managed to croak out, "Win the game." With that said, the paramedics wheeled him toward the waiting ambulance. The last thing he heard before blackness engulfed him was his name chanted over and over again.

* * * *

Trevor remembered little of those first hours in the emergency room. The pain was so intense that he couldn't focus on anything but keeping the nausea it caused at bay. He remembered meeting a rotund, white-haired doctor who had said something about pain medicine and that was all. Groggy, he tried to remember the events of the past few hours but gave up when it made his head hurt. Hushed voices nearby went right through him,

and he opened his eyes to ask whoever it was to be quiet, but the room was empty. The only company he had was the newscast playing on the TV nearby. His eyes fixated on it. A pretty reporter appeared on the screen and began to recap the top stories of the day. When she got to sports, with a delicate frown she reported the unfortunate injury that had befallen, New Mexico's very own Trevor Malone.

A fractured shoulder. *Shit! There goes the rest of the season.* If he were lucky, he'd play again. But at his age, this kind of injury was a death sentence to a pitcher's career. "Unfortunate my ass," he mumbled to himself. The door opened and Coach Kirk walked over to the bed.

"You're awake!"

"Have I been out long?"

"Nahhh, not too long. It was the pain medicine. It knocked you out."

Trevor closed his eyes against the mental anguish that overcame him. What would he do if he couldn't play ball? He always knew there would come a time that his playing days would end. He had anticipated that day would come far in the future, and he would have a plan. Something he could see himself doing. But he didn't. Without the game, he was nothing.

"Will I play again?" Trevor's voice was broken when he spoke.

"Doctor's don't know, son."

Trevor groaned. That was a doctor's way of saying no when he didn't want to come right out and be honest.

"Come on now, son, we have the best trainers and physical therapists that work with our players. A little hard work, you can come back. I know you have it in you."

Trevor tried to focus on the positive words Coach said, but he couldn't. For more than ten years, he ate, slept, and shit baseball. At thirty, people wondered how much longer he had to play. The fact was there were plenty of other young studs in the minors who would give anything to play for a team like the Devils.

"Get some rest, Trevor. No decisions have to be made today."

"But, Coach, it's midseason. How can you say that?"

Trevor knew that look. Regret burned in his stomach.

"I'm sorry, Trev. Your season is over."

Chapter 2

Jessie opened her eyes and looked around the guest room her father had given her the night before. The room was devoid of any personal touches. The solid oak furniture that filled the room was tasteful, if a little masculine, for her taste. The plain white walls held no pictures, no artwork, and no personality. If she were going to stay, she'd have to see about making some changes. At this point, that was a big *if*.

Her father had stayed just long enough to show her the room. After seeing her settled, he left the house again mumbling something about needing to be at the hospital. His star pitcher was hurt, that was what was important to him. Not the daughter he'd spent twenty-five years avoiding.

Maybe she shouldn't have come. It'd been years since she had even gotten a birthday card from him. Jessie couldn't help thinking that she was out of her mind. What was she doing here begging for the love of someone who didn't want her? He'd proved with his absence that he didn't love her, and during her last visit he had acted like she was nothing more than a pesky fly sent there to annoy him. Why was this so important to her? Even as she thought it, she knew the answer. Just once, she wanted someone to love her just the way that she was. A sad smile turned up her lips when she thought of her mother. Melody Kirk had never been the epitome of motherly love, but at least she'd never abandoned her. Jessie laughed bitterly. *Even if the world did revolve around her, at least I knew her.*

Jessie made her way into the living room. Taking in her new surroundings, she noted the black leather furniture looked almost brand new. The desk in the corner was stacked with books off to the side of a state-of-the-art desktop computer. A large screen television had been placed beside a large brick fireplace. Aside from a trophy case against one wall, the room also was devoid of personal affects. The house was small and had a lot of potential, but in its current state, it was nothing more than a house—by no

means a home. Why hadn't her father at least bothered to make it look lived in? She glanced down the hallway leading to her father's wing, one room was his bedroom, the other his office. Maybe someday she'd be welcome in his area of the house. For now, she resigned herself to the fact that she was nothing more than an unwanted guest. Jessie sighed, and made her way into the spacious kitchen and flipped on the small TV that sat on the counter. Sinking down into the sturdy oak dining chair at the glass-top table, she focused on her father's face, listening to the interview he gave.

"Doctors haven't specified how long he'll be out." Strain and worry were evident on his face. The normal complexion was pale with exhaustion. His lips were set in a grim line while he answered one question after another.

A reporter fired the question at him. "What is the extent of his injuries?"

"We don't know at this point. All I can tell you is that Trevor Malone has a shoulder injury and will be placed on the disabled list for the next sixty days." Her father sounded irritated. She didn't doubt the press had been relentless.

"Who will replace him?" The question came from a female reporter who wore so much makeup that she looked like she'd fit in more with a group of prostitutes than the team of professional reporters she was surrounded by. Jessie rolled her eyes when the reporter batted her eyelashes at her father.

"No decisions have been made at this time." The terse reply from her father set off a flurry of questions from the press.

"That's all I have to say at this time." He nodded toward the press and walked away, with his shoulders held back and his head held high. Her father was a formidable man. His height had him towering over even his best player. He wasn't fat, but the muscles of his younger years had grown soft. His steel grey eyes still held a piercing effect when he looked right at you. Jessie longed to see those eyes filled with love rather than the same cold distrust with which he looked at the press.

Jessie remembered her mother used to tell her *"Your father's a good-for-nothing prick. A boy was what he wanted Someone to play baseball with. When he got a girl, he was so disappointed. He ain't got no use for a girl, just like he had no use for a wife."*

Jessie wondered how much of that was true and how much was her mother's imagination. Although she had loved her mother, she knew her

mother was a self-centered, materialistic, demanding woman who loved herself more than she had ever loved her daughter. Part of her had always wondered if her mother was angry because her father didn't give in to her every wish. Regardless of how her father might have felt about Melody Kirk, Jessie wasn't to blame for any of that. She didn't ask to be born.

In private moments, she'd always admired her father, had watched every game the Devils played hoping to catch just one tiny look at the man who had sired her. She watched all of his interviews and memorized his every feature. She bought every magazine she could find about Coach Kirk and his stellar team, the Santa Fe Devils. Many of the articles were worn from being pulled out so many times, but she'd kept them all safe in a binder just the same. Jessie liked to imagine that someday her father would come riding in all teary eyed and full of apologies. In her fantasies, he would sweep her up in his arms and tell her that he always loved her. That day never came. The need to know her father had only intensified through the years. She wanted to know the man, not just the way her mother had seen him. Despite the fact that he had never tried to know her, she wanted to know him. When her mother had died, that need became overwhelming, and here she was. Stupid as the decision may have been, for better or worse, she would finally know her father.

Jessie was determined to do two things. First, she never wanted to be like her mother. Her mission in life was to be the complete opposite of who she was. Second, she vowed to give to others what she never had—love. It seemed so simple, but it wasn't. Left to fend for herself for so long, she had become used to taking care of herself. Leaning on others wasn't her style. She'd learned a long time ago that people couldn't be depended on. In the end, they had always let her down. But in a moment of passionate grief, and need to be cared about, she had packed her bags and made the decision to seek out her only remaining parent. Jessie sighed. There had been nothing left for her in Kansas. There was no one who cared about her there. *What would I do if someone did care about me? This is so stupid. I should just go somewhere that no one knows me and start over—alone.*

There had been many times that Jessie had believed someone cared, but circumstances had enlightened her to the truth—they didn't. Boyfriends wanted only one thing, and so called friends cared only when it was convenient. Of course, Jessie knew she wasn't the easiest person to love,

and the fact of the matter was, most people just didn't take the time. The only two people who had stood the test of time were Chrissy and Carly, the best friends she'd ever had. They were good friends, but Jessie knew something was missing out of those relationships as well. She had always been the strong one. They came to her with their problems, but never once did she allow herself to really open up and share herself with them. Although they had tried to get her to lower her defenses, she just couldn't. Eventually, they had stopped spending as much time together, and in the past couple of years, they didn't seem like friends at all anymore. College had changed them, and distance had caused them to grow apart, but Jessie still loved them. Maybe someday there'd be a time they could come together again and recapture the friendship that had once been. Rather than bemoan the loss, Jessie had moved forward, remembering the good times, but she'd never tried to get close to anyone else. Loneliness had been her constant companion, and that didn't seem destined to change anytime soon.

Jessie sighed and looked around the kitchen. The high ceiling with the solar window made the room bright. There were many cabinets and drawers. It was a cook's dream. It was spotless. Like every other room in the house, this one was devoid of character. There was nothing personal, it was bare and bland, and she hated it with a passion. Jessie stood and walked to the cabinets. Opening and closing each one, she realized her father must never eat at home. The house was barren of food except a few eggs, some peanut butter, and bread. She was going to have to go shopping. Fast food wasn't her idea of a great meal. In fact, it had been almost two years since she touched the stuff. It wasn't that she was a health freak. She just preferred a nice home-cooked meal to the fat and carbohydrates found on most fast-food menus. Back in Kansas, before she enrolled in the University to get her degree in psychology, people had urged her to go to culinary school and become a chef. *"Girl you can cook. Not to mention it will get you away from here and that no-good mother of yours."* She smiled at the memory of Chrissy's words. She hadn't listened. Psychology and the chance to help others had been more interesting. And she was happy with the choice she made, but cooking had always remained a deeply loved pastime.

After careful inspection of the drawers, she found few utensils and one pot. Jessie had her work cut out for her. If her father would let her, she

intended to make his house a home—the home she had been lacking all her life.

With a heavy sigh, Jessie moved back into the room that her father had given her. After dragging her suitcase to the bed, she struggled to lift it up onto the surface. She picked up a pair of white denim jeans and a rose-colored sweater and laid them on the bed. She pulled out several pairs of pants and folded them neatly into the top drawer. Once she emptied the suitcase, she pulled off the tank top and shorts she slept in and dressed for the day.

* * * *

Jessie hummed “God Bless the Broken Road” while she drove back to her father’s house. Her bit of success at Las Cosas Kitchen Shoppe and Whole Foods had left her quite pleased with herself. Pulling up in the driveway of her father’s house, she eyed the truck that sat in the driveway. Nerves hit her hard and fast. She opened the car door and took her time grabbing the groceries out of the trunk. When she opened the door, she was relieved to hear the shower running. Jessie set the bags on the table and headed outside to get the rest of the load.

When she came back through the door, she was startled to see Trevor standing there in the kitchen. Jessie took in his neat, dark, wavy hair. She met his brown eyes. They reminded her of the color of sand. Her stare moved down to his bare chest and she admired the tanned skin that covered the muscles beneath. There was no hair on his chest, and she thought it was damn sexy. She looked him over from head to toe. Shaking her head, she thought, *He even looks great in sweat pants*. Trevor Malone was one fine specimen of man, but he was still a conceited jock. The weight of the bags had her arms going weak. She struggled to hang on to them but they were slipping through her fingers while she stood there staring at him.

“I’d offer to help, but you’ll understand if I don’t.” He sounded tired.

“No it’s okay. I got it. I just need to get to the table.”

Trevor moved aside clearing the way for her. Jessie looked away from him, trying not to touch him when she moved past him to the table and set down the heavy sacks. Shaking her arm with the relief, she tried to keep her eyes averted from Trevor.

Without a word, she began unpacking the groceries and arranging them in the refrigerator and cabinets. While she worked, she could sense Trevor's eyes on her. It annoyed her to have him staring at her.

"Don't you have something else to do?" she snapped.

"Like what?"

His slow drawl annoyed her. She turned and glared at him. "I don't know, like watching game tapes or something?"

His eyelids dropped, and when he looked up again, his eyes were full of anger. "I don't see where that would get me, considering I'm out for the season."

Jessie cringed, sorry for her thoughtless remark. She hadn't meant to rub salt into the wound. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. Trevor merely shrugged, the look of mental anguish never disappearing. *Damn big mouth*, Jessie thought as she turned and went back to unpacking her groceries. She tried to ignore the eyes she still sensed on her, but she was unsuccessful.

A chill climbed her spine when he stepped beside her, taking a can of soup in his good hand. Jessie glanced sidelong at him. Their eyes met in a mix of emotions that she couldn't quite read. This man unnerved her, he always had. When she was seventeen, she had developed the biggest crush on him. Despite his arrogant, womanizing ways, she had seen a certain vulnerability in his eyes that had called out to her.

In spite of her antics, out of all the guys on the team, he had always been the nicest to her. When she'd gotten on the plane to go home, it had surprised her to discover that her biggest regret wasn't the lack of relationship between her and her father, although that was huge, but bigger than that was her regret over having acted like a child, instead of a grown woman with developing feelings in front of Trevor. She wished she had told him how she felt, but he had always looked at her like the Coach's bratty daughter. Or so she thought. That certainly wasn't what she had just seen in his eyes.

"What's all this?" Her father's booming voice came from behind her, startling her from thoughts she was better off not having.

Jessie turned to him. "I thought..." She faltered. "You didn't have any groceries,"

"Don't need any." Her father eyed her, wariness in his cold grey eyes.

"Well, I do. In case you've forgotten you did say I could stay here."

“Where’d you get all your money from?”

“Work mostly, but there was a little money left over from Mom’s insurance policy after the bills were paid. The policy she had through her job paid for the funeral.”

A grunt and a shake of his head were his only reply. He moved to the bag and picked up the whole-wheat pasta she bought.

“You don’t expect me to eat this crap, do you?” He tossed the box on the table behind her.

Jessie rolled her eyes at him. She didn’t know what to say. She thought she was doing something nice for him, but he seemed angry about it. “No. I don’t expect anything from you.” The words were loaded, and she knew it.

Silence ensued. Father and daughter stared at each other. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Trevor’s mouth open and close a couple of times. He looked uncomfortable in the tense scene. Jessie couldn’t stand it anymore. She turned back to the groceries and once again began putting them away.

“Well, Coach, since I’ll be staying here too, I hope you don’t mind if I eat, if she’s of the mind to cook.”

Jessie spun around and stared at him. The last thing she expected was to be forced into living with the arrogant but damn sexy pitcher that she’d never quite gotten over the attraction to. She groaned when a cocky half smile appeared on his face.

“What’s for lunch, Jess?” Trevor asked.

“I guess if you’re going to make it, I’ll eat it,” her father said grudgingly. “But none of that funny stuff. I’m a meat-and-potatoes kinda guy.” He added.

Jessie hurried to put away the rest of the groceries and pulled out some eggs, mushrooms, and spinach. Slicing a little bacon and tossing it into a pan, she vowed that she’d get through this the same way she got through everything else--with determination. Pure stubborn determination.

Chapter 3

Trevor stared across the dinner table at Coach and his daughter. This was the second meal he'd shared with the two of them that was so quiet it was painful. He'd known that they didn't have the best relationship, but it was obvious to him now that they had no relationship at all. Did she really have no one else?

Pity for her nagged at him the same as it had eight years ago. He knew what it was like to have no one. He had no brothers or sisters, and when his parents had passed away, he had been left alone. Although he had many friends, most of them were his teammates, and outside of the game or partying, they spent little time together. The women in his life were shallow, most looking for nothing more than the thrill of chasing the star pitcher of the Devils. He didn't bother spending much time with them—they only wanted one thing.

The last thing he wanted was to be staying with Coach, but it was mid-season and there was no one else that could help him as he recovered. Coach would be traveling a lot with the team, but Jessie would not be going with them. Although impractical, it seemed like a good solution. Trevor would stay at Coach's house, and Jessie would help him out. Trevor studied the sullen woman across from him and wondered if anyone had asked her whether this was okay with her. Maybe he should try to talk to her—break the ice so to speak. If they were going to spend a lot of time together, the least they could do was try to be pleasant about it. Trevor stuffed the last bite of food from his plate into his mouth and pushed the plate back a little.

"Are you finished?" Trevor looked at Jessie, who had given up the pretense of eating and was reaching for his plate.

"Yeah, I'm done. I think I'm going to go to bed." Trevor pushed back from the table. "Do you need any help?" he asked.

Pretty silver eyes met his. Trevor saw a hint of gratitude behind the unshed tears. Trevor was uncomfortable with the tense, not quite buried hostility that existed in the house. He couldn't imagine how she must feel. Again, a surge of pity gnawed at him while he waited for her answer. Several seconds went by before she shook her head. "No, thank you, I can do it."

Trevor wasn't surprised when she declined his offer. Even from their brief encounters, he could tell she was full of pride and fiercely independent. He wondered if anyone had ever been there to help her with the simple things, much less the big things that everyone goes through. Had she always been forced to deal with life alone? Trevor found himself intrigued. He wanted to know more.

Despite his desire to spend time with her, the pain was starting to stab at him once again. He needed to take his pain pill and lay down. "Okay. Thanks for the great meal." With that, he rose from the table. He moved to the counter and, with his good hand, grabbed the medicine box Coach had put his pain pills in. He popped the top with his thumb and tilted the plastic container toward his open mouth. Before he could turn around, Jessie sat a glass of water within his reach. He picked it up and took a hefty swig, washed down the pills, and then turned to smile his thanks. Jessie just shrugged and turned to the dirty dishes in the sink.

Trevor shook his head thinking what a difference his simple offer to help had made in the way she treated him. It was a small step, but it was something. Maybe they would even learn to be friends by the time he was ready to go back to his own house. Trevor studied her small frame as she moved with ease through the kitchen. He had a feeling that when Jessie wasn't busy erecting walls, and being defensive, she was some woman. The idea that he wanted to be the one to draw out that woman hit him, and he was amazed at the realization. Relationships weren't his thing, so why the sudden interest in what lay beyond the surface of Jessie Kirk? Trevor shrugged, the haze of pain and medication made it hard to think. "Goodnight, Jessie," he said, and then turned and made his way from the kitchen to the room Coach had given him.

It was a struggle to get undressed, but he was determined not to ask for help. A half hour later, he was down to his boxers and resting on the small bed. Trevor looked around the sparse room and wondered if Coach believed

in decorating. The white walls were boring and plain, and Trevor hated them. If he could find a way to get to his house, maybe he'd bring some of his personal belongings to spruce things up a bit.

* * * *

Trevor closed the book he was reading when the front door opened. Long, tense seconds passed by while he and Jessie stared at each other. He wondered if she had any idea how sexy she looked in the pair of running shorts, and a tight as hell tank top that showed her sexy flat stomach. Trevor cursed himself for the thought. If sexual attraction was all he felt, he could've handled that. But Jessie was a mystery, one he was interested in unraveling. Feeling like that would get him into trouble. He was supposed to be focusing on getting well, not a woman with so much baggage she could travel the entire world and never want for a thing. Trevor sighed. Jessie Kirk was a complication he didn't need. He cleared his throat. "Hi Jessie."

"Hi, Trevor." Without so much as a glance his way, she headed toward her room. He shook his head, he'd been there for almost two weeks, and she had been little more than polite.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up off the couch and made his way to his room—straight across from hers. He sank down onto the bed and began to flip through the latest edition of *Sports Illustrated*. When Aerosmith's "Rag Doll" blared out of the speakers, he looked up and allowed his gaze to settle across the hallway on the woman in the other room. He watched her hips sway to the beat of the music in a seductive, rocking motion. Trevor cursed his instant erection but couldn't resist the urge to get closer to her. He rose from the bed and began to walk toward her room. When he reached the hallway, she spun around and caught him in midstep. Their eyes locked, and he watched the play of emotions on her face.

"Want some company?" Trevor drawled.

Surprise entered her eyes. "No, I just want some time alone." Jessie reached out and placed a hand on the door.

"Well, if you ever want to talk, or maybe watch a movie or something..." Jessie just stared at him. "Since we're both stuck here, we might as well make the best of it, right?"

"Right."

Jessie rolled her eyes. Trevor would have given anything to know what she was thinking, but she had closed herself off—no trace of the vulnerability he had seen in her rare unguarded moments existed. He knew that he wasn't going to get through to her at that moment. "See you soon, Jessie." Trevor stepped back and Jessie closed the door. Shaking his head, he sighed and walked toward the kitchen. He was surprised to see Coach Kirk sitting at the table. He hadn't thought he'd be home until after the game that night.

"Hi, Coach."

He grunted in reply. Trevor pulled up a chair and watched Coach study the roster for the game.

"Does she have to play that damn music so loud?"

Trevor looked at Coach. He didn't think the music was that loud, but he supposed when someone lived alone, he got used to silence. Trevor couldn't stop himself from asking, "Coach, why do you act like you hate her?"

Trevor held his breath as he watched Coach lower the paper he held in his hand and look up at him.

"I don't hate her,"

Trevor didn't miss the pained expression that passed over the older man's face. Trevor raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think you should tell her that? In two weeks, you've hardly spoken to her, and when you do, it's to yell at her for one thing or another."

Coach's face turned red, and Trevor wondered if he'd gone too far. "Look, Coach, I don't mean to be nosy, but staying here, I can't help but notice some things. I don't know your personal situation, but I respect you as my coach and feel I've known you long enough that I can speak openly."

Coach Kirk studied him. Trevor didn't think he was going to speak. Rising, he went to the refrigerator and used his good arm to pull out a container of orange juice. Coach spoke from behind him.

"I was young when I married her mother. Melody was beautiful and sweet, everything I ever dreamed of. Back then, I played for the Hornets and she had stars in her eyes."

Trevor reached for a glass, poured half a cup, and then put the juice back in the refrigerator. He sat back down across from Coach Kirk. He'd never seen the man look so defeated. He looked like he was going to cry, and Trevor wished he hadn't opened that particular can of worms.

Coach continued. “Back then, I was just Dan Kirk, the up-and-coming rookie. My career could have gone either way, but as it happened, I got better and better. The more prestigious my career became, the more money I made. You know the drill.”

Trevor nodded. He watched the man across from him search for an explanation.

“Time at home became less and less frequent, and she resented me for it. That’s when she really became materialistic and self-serving. She didn’t love me anymore but was more than happy to sit back and spend my money.”

Coach rose and walked to the window. He stared out at the expansive yard in the back of his house, and Trevor wondered if he would go on.

“When she got pregnant, I thought it was perfect. I thought maybe it would restore my marriage and I’d finally have the child I dreamed of having. When she had Jessie, I adored her. The first year of her life was the greatest year of my life.”

Trevor wondered what happened, but he didn’t want to ask. Coach took a ragged breath and said, “Then one day I came home from practice with a sprained wrist. Much to my surprise, I caught her in bed with the man I considered my best friend, Grant Abrams. Naturally, I was angry, and we had a huge fight. She told me she was leaving me, but the real knife to the heart was when she told me that Jessie wasn’t mine.”

Trevor took a deep breath, not sure what to say. What a horrible thing for a man to have to go through.

“Maybe I could have dealt with it if Grant had been her father, but Melody admitted she’d had more than one lover and she wasn’t quite sure who Jessie’s father was.”

“Dear God,” Trevor said.

Coach Kirk moved back to the table and sat down with his head in his hands.

“I told her I didn’t care. I wanted to keep my daughter. I loved her. That first year of her life meant the world to me. After a month of arguing, Melody told me that if I fought her, she would tell the courts, our friends and family, the media, everyone the truth.”

Trevor felt bad for the man. In a small gesture of comfort, he placed his hand on his shoulder.

"I was young and stupid at the time. I didn't want any bad publicity which would affect my career. I let her go with the stipulation that I could see her, and she'd never be told I wasn't her father. Melody allowed me one month during the summer. Not much time to bond with a child."

Coach laughed, it was a shrill, brittle sound. Trevor could sense the raw pain and anger that oozed off the man.

"In time, I became angry. I guess that resentment got transferred to Jessie. Now, I'm old, set in my ways, and have lived for the game for so long that I don't know how to get close her now."

Trevor met Coach's eyes and squirmed, uncomfortable with the wealth of emotion there. He rose and patted Coach on the shoulder.

"Maybe you could try talking to her instead of yelling at her."

Dan Kirk looked up at him and shook his head. "What do I say?"

Trevor shrugged, "I don't know, maybe you could just open the door and let her start."

With that, Trevor walked out of the kitchen. His heart went out to Coach Kirk and his daughter. How could his wife do something so heartless? He walked down the hall toward his room, when he reached it, he turned toward Jessie's room and stared at the closed door in front of him. Eminem blared from the speakers of her stereo. An odd compulsion to make a greater effort to get to know her made him knock. He wondered if he was being stupid while he stood there waiting for her to answer. What business was it of his anyway? Maybe it had something to do with the haunted look in her eyes and the perpetual frown she always wore. He wanted to see her smile, and damn it, he was determined to be the one to put that smile there.

Maybe it was because he was used to women falling at his feet, not closing doors in his face. What else did he have to do with his time? The door opened, and he looked into the wary eyes of the woman he couldn't stop thinking about. He smiled a bright smile. "Hi, Jessie. Can I come in?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why?"

"I'm not about to fall at your feet, Trevor, and let's face it, those are the kind of women you like."

"Jessie, would it kill you to try to be friends with me?"

"I did if I recall."

Trevor bit his lip. True enough, she had. Years ago, he had been the object of her affection, and he had known it. Many of her antics had been designed to get his attention, but the little girl lost look she had back then had scared him. He had seen much in those deep silver eyes and he hadn't been prepared to deal with any of it.

"Jessie, that was a long time ago. I've changed, you've changed."

"I no longer delude myself into thinking a big man like you might sweep me off my feet. I'm more realistic now."

Trevor chuckled. "I never knew you thought so highly of me."

Jessie let out a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a groan. Trevor smiled brightly. Jessie reached out and put her hand on the door, and he knew she had every intention of closing it in his face once again.

"Jessie..."

"Not interested." She closed the door. In the seconds he had to catch a glimpse of her before she was hidden behind the barrier of the door, he caught a hint of the little girl lost look he had seen so many years ago. This time, it didn't scare him. He put his hand on the door as if to reach out to her through the solid wood that separated them. Getting to know her might be harder than he thought, but he was up for the challenge.

Chapter 4

Jessie turned her stereo louder, and sat down on the bed to look at the old magazine she had pulled out of her binder. A picture of Trevor Malone smiled up at her. It was right after he'd moved to Santa Fe to play for the Devils. He looked much the same now as he had then with the exception of a few lines of age that creased his face, and the perpetual look of arrogance that had existed then had decreased. Now he only looked arrogant most of the time. *The change is probably just because he was brought to his knees with an injury*, Jessie thought with a shake of her head. In her experience, people like that didn't change.

Jessie turned the page and looked at a picture of Trevor on the mound. He looked, comfortable, at home, happy. She wondered if there was anything besides the game that could give him the same euphoria he obviously felt when that picture had been taken. Despite her desire not to get close to Trevor, he opened the door to what she had desperately wanted years ago—to know him. Yet years had passed. She was no longer a little girl with a crush. She was a woman who'd been hurt far too often in her life, and she wasn't about to open the door to another possible heartache.

Still, she couldn't resist asking herself if it was worth the risk. Aside from the one crack he had made in the locker room the day she arrived, he had been nothing but nice to her. That set her off balance. She wasn't here to hook up with her father's stud pitcher. But the lack of progress she was making with her father made Trevor's friendliness welcome. Jessie knew she had erected a boundary between them with her cool politeness. Relationships never worked out for her. Everyone she had ever cared about left her, and the person she most wanted to care about her didn't. Despite the desire to give in to his overtures of friendship, it was safer to keep him away.

Her cell phone rang, and she reached for the stereo, turned it off and

grabbed her purse off the back of the nearby chair. Digging through the contents, she found the phone and flipped it open.

“Hello?”

“May I speak to Jessie Kirk?”

“This is she.” Jessie tried to sound pleasant. In the past few days, she interviewed for several jobs, and she didn’t want to sound put-out if they called.

“This is Marnie Rice, from the Santa Fe Youth Center.”

Jessie held her breath. Out of all the positions she’d applied for, this is the one she wanted the most. In Kansas, she had worked with troubled teens and had loved it. Her job was the one thing that she missed about Kansas, but it hadn’t been enough to keep her there. She missed those kids more than she could ever express, and finding a similar job had been important to her

“Ms. Kirk, I’m pleased to tell you that we have selected you for the youth specialist position if you’re still interested.”

Jessie wanted to jump up and down with pure joy. “Yes, I am.”

“Wonderful, I believe you will make a great addition to our team.” The woman made her an offer on salary and she accepted. Jessie contained her excitement when Marnie continued, “We can discuss your schedule on your first day of employment. I’ll need you to come in tomorrow and fill out your paperwork.”

“That sounds great, what time tomorrow?”

“How about eleven o’clock?”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

“Welcome aboard, Ms. Kirk.”

“Thank you, Ms. Rice.”

Jessie snapped her phone shut and turned the stereo back on. She danced around the room in pure joy.

* * * *

Jessie walked out of the Youth Center giddy with excitement. Marnie was a nice woman and Jessie knew she was going to enjoy working for her. Opening the door to her Jeep, she looked at the place where she’d be spending much of her time starting Monday and the first twinges of happiness that she’d found since coming to Santa Fe worked its way through

her.

Fanning herself, Jessie rolled down the windows and wiped sweat from her brow. It was damn hot. The Jeep roared to life, and she shifted into reverse. Glancing over her shoulder, she caught sight of a young boy walking behind her car. Pressing on the brake, she stopped and waited for him to pass. The boy came up the side of her car, and when he passed she glanced at his face and a knot formed in her stomach at the despondent look on his face. Her eyes followed the boy while he ambled into the building and disappeared from sight.

A half an hour later, Jessie walked past her father's truck and in the side door of the house. Her father's voice stopped her in her tracks. "Where you been, Jessie?"

Jessie stared at him not sure what to say. It was the first time he had shown any interest in her.

"I got a job. I went to sign the tax papers and such."

He looked uncomfortable. He wouldn't meet her eyes, and his ruddy complexion seemed even redder. Jessie went to the refrigerator and pulled out a Diet Coke. Taking a chance that she'd be welcome, she sat in a chair across from her father and waited for him to speak.

"What kind of job?"

Jessie eyed him carefully. "I'm a youth specialist at the Youth Center." Jessie popped open the can of Coke and sipped it.

"I didn't know you liked working with kids."

"There's a lot you don't know about me." The words were honest, but Jessie didn't mean for them to sound harsh. Mumbling something about needing to watch game tapes, her father pushed away from the table. Jessie smiled as she watched him walk through the door. It was progress, and she was encouraged by it.

Jessie looked at the clock and saw that it was almost two. Her father had to leave soon for the game. Standing, she walked to the refrigerator and pulled out the sausage and vegetables she had bought the day before. Jessie pulled out the cutting board, grabbed a knife, and began to hum as she sliced the produce. When she finished, Jessie took the large bowl she had put the chunks into and moved to the boiling pot of beef stock on the stove. She jumped when her father cleared his throat from the entryway to the kitchen behind her. She turned and met her father's gaze.

“What are you doing?” Jessie was surprised that once again he started a conversation with her. She didn’t know what had changed, but she was glad for it.

“I thought I’d make some soup and sandwiches to eat before you have to leave.”

“I eat my soup out of a can,” her father said in a voice tinged with irritation.

“You’ll like this soup.” Jessie reached into the refrigerator and pulled out some fresh garlic and a lemon.

“What kind of sandwiches are you making?” Her father moved closer to her and peered over her shoulder while she pressed the garlic over a cutting board.

“Grilled ham and cheese.”

His reply was a grunt.. Seconds later, she heard the scraping of a chair moving across the floor. When she turned to look at her father, tears filled her eyes when she saw he had picked up the knife she left there and was slicing the sausage.

“Thanks, Dad.”

They said very few words, but to Jessie, it was the most meaningful hour of her life. Together, she and her father prepared the soup and sandwiches. Jessie grabbed three bowls out of the cabinet and placed them on the table.

Before she could turn around to get spoons, Jessie found herself crushed against Dan Kirk’s chest. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you, Jess.” After a tight squeeze, he let her go, and she looked up at him. Emotion rolled through her and made it impossible to speak, so she just nodded and walked toward the stove.

A few minutes later, her father said, “I’m going to go let Trevor know that lunch is ready.”

Jessie stirred the soup until she heard her father’s footsteps fade away. With tears in her eyes, she retrieved the spoons and placed them by the bowls on the table. She set the soup on the table, and a few minutes later her father and Trevor came into the kitchen and sat down.

The meal was quiet with the exception of her father’s occasional sighs. When Dan Kirk spoke, it startled her. “This is very good, Jessie, thank you.”

Jessie didn’t know what to think. On one hand, she knew it was a start.

On the other, she didn't know where to go from there. Could they make up for all the hurt feelings and time missed? Did making up time matter? She'd asked for a chance to get to know him and her father had just handed her what she asked for. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life wondering what might have been.

She gazed at her dad, said a silent prayer of thanks for the change in him and for the strength to be forgiving.

Chapter 5

Trevor hated being helpless. Even the simplest tasks were too much for him. He wasn't scheduled to go into surgery until next month, and Coach insisted that he stay with him until he recovered fully from the operation. It wasn't out of the goodness of his heart Trevor knew, but he appreciated the gesture just the same. Coach wanted to keep him close so he was sure he knew everything about his prognosis. He imagined if he were in Coach's position, he'd want the same.

Trevor needed to go by his house and pick up some of his stuff. When he was in town, Coach was busy with practice and driving was out. That left him with no other option. He was going to have to ask Jessie if she'd help him. When he needed something, Jessie always helped him out, but with a cool politeness that reminded him of a nurse who hated her job. She didn't complain, but her chilly attitude told him he was definitely imposing. Trevor had tried to break through her icy shell, but so far, no luck. That didn't mean he was giving up, he would just rather spend time with her when he wasn't asking her for something. Trevor sighed and pushed himself up off the bed. He went across the hall and knocked. When she didn't answer, he set out to find her.

She was sitting at her father's desk. "Whatcha doin'?" he asked.

Jessie swiveled around and looked at him. She looked good sitting there in black shorts and a pink tank top.

"I'm doing some research on activities I can do around here with the kids at the youth center."

"How do you like your job?"

"I've only been there a week, but so far it's good."

"I'm glad, Jessie. You seem happier since you started there."

"What do you want, Malone?"

Her sharp tone had his irritation rising. He wasn't used to women using that tone with him and he bristled. Usually when women asked him that question, it was in a seductive whisper while they pushed their saline-enhanced breasts into him and pulled at his belt buckle. Although the team had a large following of groupies, their advances annoyed him, and he almost never fell for them. It surprised him to find her tone to be ten times more annoying.

"I need to go to my place and pick up some clothes. Your father didn't bring over enough. He's been in and out of town so much with the team, and when he is here, he's busy with practice and doesn't have time to cater to my every need."

Jessie sighed. "And you want me to take you?"

Trevor bit back his pride and nodded.

Without a word, she shut down the computer, slipped her feet into a pair of sandals, grabbed her purse, and said, "Let's go."

Her Jeep smelled good. It was a combination of cherries and coconut, he decided. The leather interior was smooth and warm from sitting in the sun. It reeked of the essence of her and he liked it. The smell reminded him of the way she had smelled when she threw herself at him eight years ago when her visit had been pure hell on everyone she had come in contact with. At seventeen, she was hell on wheels defying anyone who dared to try to give her guidance. Trevor remembered when her father had caught her smoking and drinking. He had gone through the roof. After that, Coach Kirk didn't even try to tell her what to do anymore. Jessie had free rein. It was then that things went from bad to worse. Trevor couldn't help but smile when he remembered her coming on to almost all the guys on the team. When they rejected her, she went running to her daddy telling him that the guys were making the moves on her.

Coach had done the fatherly thing and let the team have it, but Trevor believed that deep down, he knew that Jessie was the one creating the problems. When she left to go back to her mother, Coach Kirk had returned to his normal self. Jessie had never come to visit again—until now.

"Are you going to tell me where to go or are we going to drive aimlessly?"

Her voice pulled him from his thoughts. He cleared his throat and looked at her. “Go through the next two stop lights. Make a left at the street right after the second light.”

He studied her profile. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a little makeup. The pink hues of the eye shadow and lip gloss she wore softened her features. When his eyes reached her lips, he wondered what she tasted like. Shaking his head, he tried to turn his thoughts to anything but the beautiful woman beside him. When she made the specified left turn, he said, “Go right at the fourth street. My house is the one on the corner.”

After she swung the Jeep into the driveway, she turned off the engine and sat staring forward. He didn’t mean for his good hand to touch her thigh, but it had a mind of its own. He almost laughed when she jumped at the contact.

“I need some help, Jess. I can’t get this door open.”

She looked flustered and embarrassed and redness darkened her cheeks. She stepped out of the car, and said over her shoulder, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

He watched her hips sway when she walked around the front of the car. This attraction to her irritated him. If it were just a physical attraction, he could deal with it. It wouldn’t be that hard for him to find a woman to take to his bed and work out his physical frustrations. But it was more than her body that attracted him. He wondered what had happened to her in the past several years to bring about such a change in her personality.

“Are you planning to get out of the car?”

Trevor looked at Jessie who had opened the door wide and stood behind it with her hands on her hips. “I need help.” He gave her a half smile when he looked at her. Although he was sure he could have managed, he had an odd desire to be close to her. Trevor swung his legs out of the car.

“What do you need?”

He chuckled at her raised eyebrows. “Just lean over and let me use your shoulder to push myself up.”

She leaned closer. He took a deep breath the sweet scent of her overwhelmed him. She smelled good. When he was steady on his feet, he looked down at her and saw that she was even more flustered. He stepped to his right to give her space and she pushed the door shut. When she turned

her back, he shook his head. Being close to her had been nicer than he'd imagined it would be. Unfamiliar emotion welled up in him and it confused him. She was a beautiful woman, being attracted to her seemed natural, but the almost aching need he'd felt to hold her and erase every pain she'd ever suffered was not by any means natural. *Get a grip*, he thought. *You don't have time for a woman in your life, especially not one that comes with baggage and strings.*

"Can you make it?" she said over her shoulder.

He stared at her. "It's my shoulder that's broken, not my feet." He watched her turn and shoot him an icy glare. He regretted the remark. He wanted to restore balance to his emotions, not hurt her. "I can make it," he said, forcing a smile. When he reached the door, Trevor held out his keys to her and nodded toward the lock. When she reached up to take the keys from him, their fingers brushed and a brief shock of electricity crackled between them. He wondered if the heat of the touch affected her too. He searched her features for some recognition of it, but saw none.

It was good to walk into his own home. There was no place like home, and he valued more than ever all that was his.

"I need to go upstairs."

"Okay, I'll just take a seat."

She sounded bored. Most women he brought home with him were nosy. They wandered through the house looking through his things, admiring the tasteful furniture, rugs, and art that graced his walls. She seemed uninterested, and it intrigued him.

"I am going to need some help packing."

Her sigh reeked of annoyance, but without a word, she stood and walked toward the staircase. He watched her shapely ass as she preceded him up the stairs. He wondered if she knew just how pretty she was.

When they entered his bedroom, he used his good arm to flip on the light. He walked to the dresser and struggled to pull out the drawer.

"There is a suitcase in the closet. If you don't mind, would you please grab it for me?"

No response. He turned and saw that she was intently studying the numerous pictures on his wall. Mixed with his family pictures were framed baseball cards and magazine covers that either he or the team had been

featured on. He wondered what she found so intriguing. The covers were common, and unless she lived in a hole, she had to have seen them before.

“Jessie?”

She turned to meet his eyes, raising a brow in question.

“The suitcase?”

The blush spread up her cheeks again. She moved to the closet and picked up the suitcase. Once she set it down on the bed, she moved closer to him and without any encouragement began sorting through his clothes. While she folded, he noticed her eyes focused on the trophies lining his dresser. He had awards that dated back to his peewee days. His most recent accomplishment, the MVP trophy for the 2005 World Series, sat forward from the rest.

“You always wanted to be a baseball player?”

The question surprised Trevor. He met her eyes and saw the genuine interest in them. He smiled. He wasn’t irritated by the invasion of his privacy, in fact, he welcomed it. It was nice to share a little piece of himself with someone who appreciated it.

“No, not always. My dad dreamed of playing in the Majors. He injured his back in a car accident when he was twenty. I guess that ended that. I’ve been tossing a ball and swinging a bat for as long as I can remember.”

“But you love it?” Her voice was tentative. Her eyes were shadowed with something he couldn’t name.

“Yeah, I love it. In high school, I gave it up for a year. I wanted to explore my options. What I really wanted was to be a musician. But being on stage didn’t give me the same rush that I got when I was on the field. Hitting that perfect note didn’t measure up to the allure of pitching the perfect game.”

“And that’s when you knew you wanted to go pro?”

He watched her run her hand over his precious MVP trophy. There was something more to her questions but he couldn’t pinpoint it.

“No. I knew I loved the game. There was never any question about that. I didn’t decide to make it my life until my dad died when I was nineteen.”

She reached out and touched his arm. The touch was warm and compassionate.

“I’m sorry about your father.”

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago." He glanced at the picture of his father and mother smiling at each other. "Every game I play is for him. I'll never forget the look in his eyes the first time I took the field after I graduated high school. I was playing for a college team then, and it was an away game. My old man drove all night to get there. Anyone who looked at him could just tell he was so proud of me. We lost that game, but he put his arm around my shoulder and congratulated me anyway—for a game well played. Each time he'd come to see me play, he'd tell everyone who would listen, stories about my little league days."

With a look of longing, he picked up the picture of his parents and blew dust off the intricate frame. Jessie studied him in silence. He could feel her eyes burning into his skin. He couldn't turn and meet her eyes. In fifteen minutes alone, she'd gotten more out of him than any other woman he'd ever had a relationship with. She was easy to talk to. The genuine interest he sensed in her made him vulnerable. He wondered, not for the first time, what happened to the spoiled little girl he'd met so long ago. Maybe someday he'd ask her.

"What happened to your dad?"

Trevor heard the sadness in her voice. It amazed him that she could have such an emotional reaction to his memories. "Toward the end of the season, my dad was on his way to see me play. Somehow, he lost control of his car and slammed into a median. They said he died on impact." Trevor's voice cracked with emotion.

Trevor's eyes misted and he turned toward the suitcase on the bed so she wouldn't see his tears.

"If you can't play anymore, what are you going to do?" Trevor was grateful for the change of subject, although this one was not much more pleasant. That was the million-dollar question. He didn't know anything but baseball. Sure, he had other interests and talents, but he'd nurtured his talent in baseball. What would he do if he couldn't play?

"Any ideas?" he asked trying to sound flippant.

Her smile brightened the room. He couldn't stop staring. The desire to make her smile more often was becoming more intense. Pretty became beautiful when her face lit up in a smile the way it was now.

"I have an idea."

The melodic tone to her voice made him smile. He liked the playful side of her. He hoped he would see more of it.

“Well, what is it?”

Jessie shook her head. She looked around the room again, pausing on each picture and studying them.

“I’d say you have your answer right here in this room. Maybe you can’t play anymore. But going into it, you knew there’d come a day you wouldn’t be the star player anymore. Once you realize you can get that rush of pitching the perfect game doing something else, you’ll know what you want to do.”

He hadn’t expected to have this conversation with her. In the past three weeks, she had said very little to him. He realized the cool distance she kept between herself and others was a defense mechanism. He wondered how many people she’d allowed to see this more vulnerable side of her. More important, why was she showing it to him?

“I don’t know anything but baseball.” His words were quiet but intense.

“Nobody says you have to leave the game just because you can’t play.”

He searched her eyes. The compassion he saw in them touched him.

“Do you know anything about baseball?”

Jessie turned her back and walked away from him. He watched her run her hand over a picture of her father. His heart went out to her.

“No. But I do know about human nature. We are a species who adapts. You need only to stop trying to live in conditions that are no longer viable for survival.”

He didn’t know what he’d expected when he asked her the question, but that certainly wasn’t it.

“Do you always attach yourself to wounded birds?”

The clear, crisp laugh gave him chills.

“I didn’t know we were attached, I was merely curious, that’s all.”

The cool, aloofness was back in place and he didn’t like it. He wanted the more vulnerable woman she’d been moments ago. He watched her resume packing his clothing into a suitcase, and he knew that woman was gone.

Chapter 6

Jessie didn't expect to find such a sensitive man behind the arrogant jock. People didn't often surprise her, but when she looked at Trevor, she was shocked. She hated to admit it, but she liked him injured. It humbled him. Five years ago, he had been so cocky and full of himself while he strutted in front of cameras with a different woman every night. There had been nothing gracious about his acceptance of praise for a game well played. It was like he expected people to fall at his feet whether he played well or not. Since his injury there was a crack in the persona he portrayed. The cockiness had lessened, and she liked the man she saw beneath the surface.

Now that he was packed, Jessie started to get uncomfortable in the bedroom. Moving to the large waterbed where the suitcase sat, her eyes rested on the fluffy red comforter that laid in tangles at the foot of the bed. Unwanted thoughts of how many women he had taken to that bed crept into her mind. She didn't know why it mattered. It wasn't like she'd allow him to ever get close enough to her to get her into bed. His sexual exploits shouldn't be an issue. However, when she picked up the suitcase and turned toward the door, she realized it did matter.

Eight years ago, she threw herself at him, and he'd rejected her. It wasn't that she had expected he'd get it on with a seventeen-year-old, but it had still been a blow. A blush crept into her cheeks when she remembered it wasn't just Trevor whom she had thrown herself at, it was any man who paid her the least little bit of attention. Ultimately, when the time came for her to go home, her father packed her up without a word and placed her on an airplane. No hugs, no kisses and no words of love, just a simple statement that had her vowing she'd never let anyone matter to her again. *"Thank God you're going back to your mamma. Maybe now my life can get back to normal."* In her naïve, seventeen-year-old mind, she had thought her daddy would be glad to have her around. She imagined he'd have tears in his eyes,

hug her, and tell her how sorry he was. She dreamed he'd rescue her from the hell of living in Kansas with a mother who believed her to be an obstacle to her own happiness. That hadn't happened. So, she went back to Kansas and accepted that this was her life. In time, she came to accept her mother, faults and all, but she never did allow anyone to get too close to her.

Unwanted tears filled her eyes, and she forced her mind to focus on something else while she descended the steps. At the bottom of the staircase, she placed the suitcase in a corner. Stepping into the living room, she gazed at the suede sofa and couldn't resist walking toward it and running her hand over the soft fabric. A black marble table rested in front of it, and she saw a number of sports magazines stacked in a neat pile in the center. Several red candles circled the magazines. It was nice. She wondered if he decorated the place on his own.

In the corner, there was a nice stereo system and a large case of CDs sat nearby. Moving closer she inspected the CDs and noted his taste was very eclectic. He had everything from hard rock to classical. A smile turned up the corners of her mouth when she imagined the big, muscular jock vegging out to classical music.

Jessie jumped when the speakers came to life with the sounds of Aerosmith. She turned and stared up into Trevor's humor filled blue eyes. In answer to her unasked question, he held up a remote control.

"Want to dance?"

Jessie shook her head. It was hard to concentrate when he was so close. Two steps to the side put enough distance between them, and she could breathe again. Out of the corner of her eye, she studied him. He was tall, but not a giant. His stomach was flat, and when he moved a certain way, his muscles rippled enticingly beneath his shirt. He had long legs and a narrow waist. Blond hair kept at a very short length graced the top of his head. She itched to run her fingers through it. Rubbing her palms against the leg of her shorts, she turned to study the paintings that rested above the marble fireplace. They were all mountain landscapes. He had good taste.

"I love these paintings. They're beautiful."

"Yeah, they liven up the place a little."

Jessie turned and glanced at him. "More than a little. You have impeccable taste."

He chuckled, a low and enticing sound. “Thank you. I’m not sure my kitchen would meet with your approval though.”

She saw the hint of humor in his eyes and knew he was teasing her. She wasn’t so sure she liked it. Moving back to where his suitcase sat, she grabbed it and started for the door.

“What’s your rush?” he asked.

Without turning to look at him, she said, “No rush. We have what we came here for. I’ve got to get back to my research.”

“I have a computer here you can use if you like. It would be nice to stay here for a while, if you don’t mind.”

Jessie turned and looked at him with raised brows.

“I don’t like being away from home. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the kindness of your father, but it is nice to be home. Would you mind?”

How could she tell him that she did mind? It was very disconcerting to be there with him. He was too open there in his own home, and it set her off balance. Jessie met his eyes and the honesty there touched her. Although she wanted to, she couldn’t deny him.

“If you aren’t going to do anything that requires the use of that arm, why don’t I just leave you here and come back for you later?” Jessie prayed he wouldn’t argue. He may want to be home for a while, but she didn’t need to be there.

He looked so disappointed by her suggestion that she almost laughed.

“That would be a terrible waste of gas,” he said, his tone smooth. “Besides, I kind of like your company. It’d be nice if you stayed with me.”

Talking to him *had* been nice. It almost made her feel like she had a friend—almost. Even though she had taken some small steps in building a relationship with her dad, he was always busy, and the couple of times she had gone to see him at practice, the guys had acted like she had the plague. She supposed the stories about her had made the rounds. Jessie didn’t blame them. It made her sad, but she didn’t blame them. It was nice to be around someone who didn’t treat her like crap. Setting the suitcase back down, she turned to him and smiled.

“Okay then, I’ll stay. Got any food in this house?”

A low laugh rang out, and she smiled.

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

He moved closer to her and reached out for her hand. She snatched it back. Holding her hands close to her like she'd been burned, she looked up at him.

"What are you doing?"

Looking confused, he said, "I was just going to show you to the kitchen." He sounded defensive.

"Fine, but we don't need to hold hands to get there. Don't get the wrong idea, Malone. I'm only here because I'm a nice person. Don't read anymore into it."

She watched his eyebrows raise, and a spark come into his azure eyes. It occurred to her that she was being petty, but she couldn't stop herself. The emotions he evoked in her scared the hell out of her. Jessie hadn't meant to lash out at him in defense of her guarded heart, but she had and she couldn't take it back now. She wasn't used to someone treating her so well. In her whole life, she had trusted only two people— Chrissy and Carly, and that had been on her terms. They understood her and respected her. Most of all, they never pushed her. She loved them for it. If it weren't for them, she wasn't sure she'd have made it through high school. The town outcast was what she had been, but she never minded. If people didn't like her, then she never had to worry about them hurting her.

Trevor was different. Being the recipient of his intimate kindness confused her. It was something she had never experienced before. His two personalities were such a contrast. The woman in her wanted to know the gentle side of him. What harm could there be in forming a friendship with him? Perhaps, befriending her father's star pitcher would bring her closer to the breakthrough she hoped to have with the man who sired her.

The cynic in her told her that he was just trying to see how long it would take to bed the coach's daughter. It didn't seem possible that the arrogance he had displayed in the past was a front for the kind hearted man she was with now. Friendship with him could cause nothing but hurt.

Why isn't there any in-between? she asked herself.

"Are you planning to stand there in the doorway, or are you going to quit making me nervous and come sit down?"

Startled, she followed his voice and realized he had moved away from her and was lounging on his sofa. With a shake of her head, she moved to the sofa and took a seat near him.

“Wanna watch anything in particular?”

“I thought you were hungry,”

“I changed my mind. Let’s watch a movie first,” Trevor said. “Do you have anything special you’d like to watch?”

Jessie shook her head, and he began to flip through the channels. After several minutes, he came across the movie *Groundhog Day*, a favorite of hers. Jessie giggled. She sensed his eyes on her but refused to look at him. They were too close. The moment seemed too intimate. She felt the electricity between them when they’d touched earlier, and she was afraid that meeting his intense stare would cause the spark between them to ignite into an all out blaze. And that was something she’d avoid at all costs. He set the remote control on the couch next to him, and they settled into a comfortable silence while they watched the movie. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that each time she would laugh, his eyes settled on her. Jessie was self-conscious, but she enjoyed the easy camaraderie.

An hour and a half later, the movie ended, and she shifted her eyes to him. The lazy smile on his face was endearing. When he moved to get up, he winced in pain, and she scooted down on the floor in front of him.

“Here, use my shoulder.” Jessie didn’t question the desire to help him, or the pang in her gut when she’d seen his pain, she’d simply acted. The look of gratefulness in his eyes warmed her. Little moments like this, where she’d offered, and he hadn’t expected, drew her closer to him. Although unspoken, these moments created a bond between them. Although she had fought it, and would continue to fight it, she found that the more she knew him, the more she liked Trevor. Eight years ago, attraction had ruled her. Now her heart was becoming involved. The idea of it made her want to vomit.

He placed his good hand on her shoulder, stopping her from following her instinct to run, and she grabbed the bicep of his good arm. He pushed, she pulled, and together, they rose. They were so close. His scent was masculine and crisp. It made her think of cold winter nights, when the air smelled of snow. It was a nice smell. Trevor reached out and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, and nervousness overwhelmed her. She looked up and his blue eyes captivated her. *Run*, her mind screamed, but her feet wouldn’t listen.

His good arm gathered her close to him and he hugged her. Jessie wasn't sure what possessed her to remain in his embrace, but she didn't move away despite the voice in her head berating her over and over again for her failure to follow its command to hightail it out of there and back to the safety of her loneliness. She knew the last thing she needed was to go breaking her own rules and getting close to someone. Especially an arrogant jock who she was sure saw her as a conquest. But the contact was nice, she was loathe to let it end so soon.

"How about that lunch?" His whispered words seduced her when the sexy rasp passed his lips. Jessie didn't think he could have sounded any sexier if he had asked her to go to bed. Pulling away from him, she smiled.

"Okay. Where's the kitchen?"

"Through the dining room," he said, pointing to an opening just beyond a large, cherry wood dining table.

With a nod, she walked in the direction he indicated. With a look over her shoulder, she saw that he was following too close behind her. She'd have to analyze how that made her feel later. Emotionally, she had always distanced herself from others. Why were the walls around her crumbling?

The kitchen was spacious. A baby blue paint covered the walls. So different from the bold colors she had seen in the other rooms of the house. The butcher-block table in the center of the room looked well used. The counters were a pristine white, and they offset the blue hue to the cabinets. The canisters that lined the counter made her smile. The Disney figures were cute and unexpected. A large toaster oven was in the corner. It looked like he'd never used it. There were a lot of cabinets and drawers. She thought, someday when she owned her own house, this was the kind of kitchen she wanted. The blue crystal lamp that hung over the table created the perfect, homey touch. The man knew how to decorate if indeed he had done it himself.

Opening the first cabinet, she saw a stack of plates and bowls that complimented the color scheme of the kitchen. On the shelf above were beautiful blue glasses with pink flowers on them. Jessie made a surprised sound.

"They were my mother's." His voice was quiet.

Turning to look at him, she smiled. "They're pretty."

"She liked nice things."

“When did she die?” The question flowed out without thought, though she kicked herself for asking it. The more she learned about this man, the more she was drawn to him. It was much safer keeping things light and impersonal.

“Last year.” He didn’t elaborate, and she didn’t ask.

Moving to the next cabinet, she opened it, and the neat stack of pots and pans made her smile. Organization was something she admired. After inspecting every cabinet, she opened the freezer and licked her lips at the wide variety of meats and vegetables he had stocked. The refrigerator wasn’t as full, but he hadn’t been home so she didn’t question it. Jessie’s eyes lit on bottles of fruit nectars that lined the top shelf, next to a bottle of wine and several bottles of Gatorade. On the second shelf, a selection of cheeses that looked delicious made her mouth water. She couldn’t help but wonder who was the chef, she or he.

“A little-known fact about me, I like good food. Don’t tell anyone.” The light humor in his voice stilled the butterflies that fluttered in her stomach.

“You cook?”

His eyebrows rose. “Would it score me points with you if I said I did?”

She shook her head. Jessie stared at him. He was definitely eye candy. Things would be much easier if he had warts on his face, and a beer gut. She didn’t want to be attracted to him.

“I have a housekeeper that comes by and cleans up the place. She likes to cook and often will whip something up for me before she leaves. I may not be here to eat it fresh, but she puts it in the fridge or the freezer for me.”

“That’s nice of her.”

He reached around her and grabbed a bottle of Gatorade. “Tell me about it. She’s a great lady and takes good care of me.”

Jessie opened the freezer again and pulled out some chicken breasts. She placed them on a plate and opened the microwave. While the chicken thawed, she fried up some bacon and minced some garlic. She poured a slight amount of Worcester sauce and then some white wine into another frying pan. Turning on the burner, she waited for the mixture to boil. When it did, she scraped the garlic along with salt and Italian spices into the fragrant mix. Taking a large pasta pot, she filled it with water and set it on high heat. When the chicken was defrosted, she flash fried it in the marinade

she made, and placed it in a baking dish. Covering the chicken with bacon and Havarti cheese, she smiled.

“My own recipe. I hope you like it.”

“Mmmmmm, smells delicious.”

He sounded sincere and she realized the compliment meant more than he knew.

Once she had poured spaghetti sauce over the chicken and placed it in the oven, she broke up some spaghetti noodles and dropped them in boiling water. With nothing left to do but wait, she sat down across from him in one of the straight-backed chairs at the table.

They stared at each other without saying anything for several minutes. She hated to admit it but she very much enjoyed his company. She wondered if it was time to let someone in, to let him see the real her? The thought paralyzed her with fear.

“Did you work with kids back in Kansas?” She was glad that he had torn her from her thoughts.

“I worked with kids that had problems, most often with the law.”

“I guess being a troublemaker helped you to relate to them.” He laughed before continuing. “The way I remember you, Jessie, I could’ve sworn you’d be in jail or pregnant by the time you turned twenty-one.”

“Try the life I lived for even one day, and then laugh. You don’t know me. You don’t know why I did the things I did.” Her voice held and icy ring.

“Oh, come on, Jessie, you were a spoiled brat! You can’t blame that on anyone but you.”

“Spoiled?” she shrieked.

“Yes. Spoiled”

Glaring at him, she said, “In case you’ve forgotten, I never had anyone to hand me things the way you did. I worked for what I have, including my sanity. You want to see spoiled, go look in the mirror.”

Jessie stood almost toppling the chair when she did so.

“You are one cold, callous son of a bitch,” she said with cold finality. She walked out of the kitchen, picked up her purse, and opened the door.

“Hey! Wait a minute! What about lunch? Who’s going to take me back to your dad’s place?” he called after her.

“As for lunch, enjoy it alone. As for getting back to my dad’s? Figure it out! I’m sure he’d be happy to come and pick up the golden child if you ask

real nice.” With that, she slammed the door behind her and stalked to her Jeep. With tires squealing, she drove away from the house and that arrogant son of a bitch who owned it.

Chapter 7

“Goddamn it!” The curse exploded from him and rang through the empty house. What was he supposed to do now? He couldn’t even get the food out of the oven. Pissing her off hadn’t been his intention, but he had to admit she was rather cute when she was huffy.

Pushing his chair back with more force than he intended, he stood and walked over to the stove. The lunch Jessie made smelled fantastic. He pulled open the oven and tried to retrieve the pan using only one hand, no success. When he straightened, he was panting and tired. The damn pain pills the doctor prescribed made too much activity difficult to bear.

A string of curses shattered the silence in the house. He stalked toward the phone and yanked it out of its cradle. He listened to the ringing of the phone and prayed he would get an answer. On the fourth ring, it was answered.

“Hello?”

“Coach, I need a favor.”

“Trevor where are you? I’m sitting here at my house wondering where in the hell you went off to.”

“Is Jessie there?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I just got home. I don’t search the house for her when I come home.”

Trevor sighed. Coach was in a cantankerous mood. There was no doubt he was going to be livid that he had to use the short break he had before the game tonight to come pick him up. It would have been so much easier if he could have talked to her and smoothed things over. Why did he have to call her a spoiled brat?

“Coach, I’m at my house.”

“How in the hell did you get there?”

Trevor didn't know how to answer that. How would Coach take his sudden, crazy interest in his daughter? It would piss him off if he knew that she had left Trevor stranded. It crossed his mind to tell him that he had taken a cab, but then Coach would want to know why he didn't just take a cab back. It didn't seem like he had any other options. So he told the truth.

The string of curses Coach let loose set his ears on fire, but like he'd known he would, Coach said he would be there shortly. Trevor hung up the phone and set it on the table. Twenty minutes later, the loud knock on his door had him moving quicker than he had in days. Coach had put himself out for him. The last thing he wanted to do was make him wait.

"Hi, Coach, sorry about this."

He looked tired. The hat that he always wore sat low on his forehead shadowing his features.

"Are you ready?"

Trevor hesitated. "I need some help first."

"Oh Christ on a pogo stick, what is it?"

Trevor bit back a laugh. Coach had the most inventive ways of getting his point across. It never ceased to amaze him how the man could grumble so much about something, but his actions always displayed an innate kindness. He wondered why he put up a front. He wasn't a bad person. Just took some getting used to.

"Jessie started lunch before she stormed out. She left it in the oven, and I can't get it out."

Coach eyed him. Trevor wondered what he was thinking, but his face gave nothing away. He just shook his head and walked toward the kitchen. Trevor followed and watched while Coach pulled the pan out of the oven, drained the noodles, covered it all with tin foil, and stuck it in the refrigerator.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if he'd be back to eat the fragrant meal Jessie made, or if her efforts would be tossed in the garbage. Stupidly, he wondered how that would make her feel. Trevor almost choked on the cold reality of his thoughts. Jessie was coming to mean a great deal to him. Women had spent months trying to get close to him, all with no success. Jessie—the little minx, had managed it in record time. Her hot and cold manner irked him, and he knew that the road he was traveling would only lead to heartache. But, something inside him wouldn't let it go. If only being

the one who made her smile wasn't so nice. She frowned far too often for his taste.

"You've taken a liking to Jessie it seems," Coach said with a hint of humor in his voice.

Trevor considered the question. He hated to admit it, but he had. He liked Jessie Kirk. She was different from other women he knew and it excited him. Jessie was more than just a challenge. He liked the way she listened and seemed to understand. Compassion oozed off her like a bright light emanating from a halo. *Did I really just think that?* Trevor grinned at his own sappy thoughts. The reality of it was, it was nice to spend time with someone who wasn't interested in his money or what he had in his jeans. He didn't have to impress her. He could just be himself, a novel concept indeed.

"I guess you could say we've established a kind of friendship."

Coach smiled a crooked smile. "That so?"

"Yeah."

"So why'd she leave you here with no way to get back to my place?" Coach leaned on the counter and pinned Trevor in place with his gaze. The glint of humor that passed through the other man's eyes irritated him. Trevor had no response. Turning on his heel, he walked to the front door.

On the ride back to Coach Kirk's house, it occurred to him that Dan seemed to enjoy the idea of a budding relationship between Jessie and his star pitcher. He wanted to ask why, but figured Coach would avoid the question anyway, so he remained silent. When they pulled up in front of the house, Trevor turned to and said, "Good luck with the game tonight."

"Want to go?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Jessie's going to be there. She came by my office yesterday and got her pass."

Trevor stared at the black Jeep that sat in the driveway next to Coach's car. He wondered what she would think if he went to the game with her. He shrugged.

"I guess it couldn't hurt."

Coach howled with laughter again. Patting Trevor's shoulder, Coach said, "Never thought I'd see you so smitten."

Trevor rolled his eyes. "I'll see you at the game." Coach laughed again, leaned over Trevor, and pushed the door open. Trevor thanked him

and used all of his strength to pull himself out of the car. It seemed like there were weights attached to him as he walked to the door. He was so tired. He didn't want to fight with Jessie, but in light of the way she left things, he knew he was in for a doozie of an argument. There was no way around it. He held his breath, pushed open the door and stepped inside.

His gaze traveled to her of its own accord. Her hair was a mass of wet curls hanging down her back. At that moment, she looked more like the little girl he remembered. He wondered why she straightened her hair when it looked so pretty in the springy spirals. The black shorts and pink tank top had been replaced with a pair of khaki pedal pushers and a sheer silver top under which she wore a sexy-as-hell black camisole. He drank in the sight of her. Damn this attraction, there was no question he wanted her, but girls like her had always been on his hands-off list. Jessie Kirk could never be a no-strings kind of girl, and that was the only kind of girl he took to his bed. His heart raced at the realization that getting Jessie into bed was the last thing on his mind. He wanted so much more from her. The idea scared him, but he'd never run from anything in his life, and he wasn't about to start now.

"I see you made it home. Too bad." She gave him a mocking smile.

"I'm sorry, Jessie." He meant it. The warm fascinating girl she had been this afternoon captivated him. He wanted to know her better. But first, he'd have to get past the frosty woman who stared at him like he was a rodent who dared run across her floor.

It was a first for him. Trevor Malone never apologized. When he took in the icy daggers she was shooting at him, he wasn't at all sure he was doing it right.

"Look, Jessie. I didn't mean it. You have to understand the person you are now is so different from the little girl I met years ago. I haven't had time to adjust to the woman that you are." He could have said more, but her glare had not changed. Perhaps he was better off saving it for when she was in a more forgiving mood.

"I better get cleaned up if I am going to go to the game with you."

Her eyes widened, and she shot up out of her chair.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." With a look of determination, Jessie shook her head.

Trevor smiled what he knew was his cockiest smile and moved closer to her. With less than a half an inch between them, he reached up with his good hand and tilted her chin up. Meeting the silver eyes that continued to shoot daggers, no, they weren't daggers anymore; they were grenades, he lowered his head and brushed his lips across her cheek. The scent of her distracted him from his purpose and he inhaled, enjoying the sweetness. Huskily, he whispered, "That's a damn shame, darlin'. Considering your father's expecting me to show up, and I can't get there without you, I'd say that if you don't go to the game with me, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do."

The look of outrage on her face amused him. Biting back a laugh, he saw that he had hit a nerve. One thing he knew for sure, Jessie Kirk was damn cute when she was mad. Trevor had no doubt it was an observation he'd make often, he seemed to have a habit of pissing her off.

* * * *

It was nice being at the stadium again. The team had welcomed him and he had endured many slaps on the back and well wishes from fans. Women threw themselves against him offering their sympathies, some offering to come and cook him dinner others asking for his autograph. It was every superstar's dream to be surrounded by adoring fans. He wasn't lacking attention this night, but it lacked something.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jessie looking bored and disgusted at the same time. The game got underway, the crowd got louder and they cheered on the Devils. His replacement, Cage Lawson, had pitched a good game so far. It wasn't a perfect game, but he was still wet behind the ears. In time, he didn't have any doubt this young pitcher from the minors would find his own fame in the league. With the Devils up by three in the bottom of the eighth, the game was in the bag. Excitement filled the stadium when the Devils made their way into the dugout. He glanced at Jessie and saw the same bored look on her face and some of the excitement left him. Somehow all the attention he had received that night meant little because it didn't come from the one person he wanted it from.

Taking a risk, he reached over and took her hand in his. Her hands were cold and stiff, but she didn't pull away. He turned to her.

“Jess, I really am sorry.”

A brief flash of warmth passed through her eyes, and he smiled.

“Can you forgive me?”

The nod she gave was barely perceptible, and he took it for what it was, another chance to prove to her that he wasn’t like everyone else. The idea of trying to please her was foreign. Women tried to please him, not the other way around. He smiled at Jessie and thought, maybe having strings attached wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Trevor let go of the breath he had been holding while he waited for her reply. When he saw the almost imperceptible smile turn up the corner of her lips, he pulled her into his arms. He lowered his head to hers, and their lips met in a light, feathery kiss. The stadium erupted in cheers when Adam Waverly hit a homer when he stepped up for his last at bat of the night. Normally, he’d have been on his feet screaming his support louder than anyone. But with his lips pressed against hers, he didn’t even notice the excitement.

* * * *

Jessie and Trevor made their way down to the locker room to congratulate the team on their victory. When they entered the celebration in progress, Jessie slipped her hand from his. Turning back to look at her, he saw the cold aloofness back in place.

“Hey, get her out of here, before she curses this team again.” Donnie Cramer called out.

Trevor turned to Jessie and was furious when he saw the glint of tears in her eyes. With her shoulders pulled back and her head held high, she turned and walked out of the locker room without a word. It pissed him off that the team gave her such a hard time, especially guys who weren’t even there eight years ago. He continued to stare after Jessie. Although he wanted to follow her, his teammates pulled him farther into the locker room and the celebration resumed.

Chapter 8

Jessie heard the door to her room open and then shut again. Closing her eyes, she pretended to be asleep. Heavy footsteps approached her bed, and she tried not to move.

“Jessie?” There was a husky tone to his whisper. Her lack of response didn’t deter him. His footsteps came closer, and he lowered himself down on the bed next to her. The hand that reached out and rubbed her back was gentle. The act was supportive rather than intimate.

“What do you want, Malone?” Her voice cracked and she hated it.

“As strange as this may sound, I genuinely want nothing more than to be your friend.”

He sounded sincere. Tears slipped from beneath her lids. Getting close to someone, especially a man wasn’t in her plans, but when more tears fell from her eyes, she realized she didn’t want him to go.

“Want to talk about it?”

Jessie let out a strangled laugh. She turned over and faced him. In a gesture that was more tender and full of compassion than she had imagined him capable of, he reached out and cupped her face with the palm of his good hand. The pad of his thumb moved over her skin wiping away her tears.

She stared up at him. Part of her wanted to scream at him to leave her alone. A bigger and stronger part of her wanted to pull him close to her. When he leaned over and kissed her forehead, she held her breath. Afraid of giving in to her desire.

Trevor straightened and moved away from her. Just for the one night, she wanted to find strength in someone else. All her life she’d had to be strong. Fend for herself and find her own way. There had been no one to care about her, to ask if she’d done her homework, to come to her choir concerts or softball games. Never had anyone wrapped his or her arms

around her when she cried, and she had never trusted anyone enough to tell them her inner most secrets.

In a voice not more than a whisper, she called out to him.

Silence, the door hadn't opened again so she knew he was still there. Several minutes passed with no response. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she tried again. "Could you just hold me for a while?"

Again, he didn't respond. She sighed and turned to face the wall. His footsteps again came closer, and he sank down on the bed.

"I need you to move to this side of the bed. I can't hold you with this arm."

Without a word, they changed places, and she settled her head on his chest. A strong arm wrapped around her, and she knew safety for the first time in her life. For the longest time, they said nothing at all. The strength he offered was comforting and the body that pressed against her was warm. Jessie didn't want to like being close to him, but at that moment, she wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. When his breathing evened out, she thought he was asleep. With no one there to see her, she gave way to the tears, letting them fall freely.

Exhaustion overwhelmed her. The strength that she had left drained from her, and she closed her eyes. A few snuffles were the last remaining sign that she had allowed herself this moment of self-pity. With her emotions released, she relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

* * * *

Trevor's restless tossing and turning woke her far too soon. It was strange. A few weeks ago, she couldn't have imagined allowing herself to get close to a man. Now she lay in bed next to one whom *she'd* asked to hold her in her time of need. Instinct told her to push him away, but somehow, after the sensitivity he'd shown her last night, it didn't seem right.

"Good morning." She tilted her head to look up at him.

"Are you always a blanket hog?"

She looked down and realized she had pulled all the blankets over to her side of the bed and was hugging them close. With a laugh, she pulled a blanket out from underneath her and tossed it at him.

"Happy?"

“Very. Thank you.”

Neither of them seemed eager to move, and she lay silent with her head on his shoulder and enjoyed the closeness they shared in the moment.

“Jess, tell me something?”

Facing him, she raised her eyebrows in a questioning gesture.

“What made you go into counseling kids?”

Her muscles stiffened and she rolled away from him. Sharing more personal information strengthened the bond between them, and she wasn’t sure she liked that.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, like I said, the last time I saw you, you were a bit on the wild side. I never would have guessed you would become a counselor.”

If she were honest with herself, she knew he was right. Counseling was the last thing she’d have imagined herself doing eight years ago.

“I don’t know. I guess I had a desire to give to kids what was never given to me.”

When she turned to look at him, she found no trace of humor, and she continued.

“Maybe I was a little wild eight years ago, but when you have no one who holds you accountable for your actions, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Trevor’s hand cupped her cheek. Meeting his eyes and seeing the understanding there, she realized although she’d only known him for a few weeks. It would hurt if he stopped trying. The effort he put into chipping away at her walls had succeeded more than she had known before that moment. That thought scared the hell out of her.

Sitting up, she ran her hand through the tangled mass of curls.

“I’m going to make breakfast.”

Before he could respond, she was out of the bed and crossing to the door.

When she reached for the knob, his voice stopped her.

“I don’t let people get close to me either, Jess. Maybe we have different reasons, but you and I are a lot alike. It’s nice to feel like I have a friend. Don’t ruin it by running away. I’m willing to try if you are.”

She turned and faced him. “What exactly are we trying for?”

He looked at her long and hard. After swallowing several times, he said, "I don't know, Jess, but whatever it is, I think it's worth it. For what it's worth, Jess, I've never been in bed with a woman and just slept. I didn't even know it was possible."

Although she wanted to believe him, she couldn't help but remember whom she was talking to. He was the star pitcher for the Devils, an arrogant, self-centered jock. Tabloids had told many a tale about his exploits. When his shoulder healed, he would go back to his career, and the man with whom she had connected with would be gone. Believing in him wasn't an option. She'd have to be more careful around him. Maybe she could be nice, but her carefully erected walls, could not crumble for him--ever.

* * * *

Jessie whipped up eggs to dip the bread into. The mashed banana and cream cheese mixture sat off to the side. The challah bread sat nearby and she smiled. This was her favorite breakfast. Humming while she worked, she got lost in the enjoyment of preparing the meal.

"Smells great, whatcha making?"

A chill went down her spine at his voice. The deep timbre was almost as sexy as the man himself. Without looking at him, she continued her task and she said, "Banana-stuffed French toast, bacon, and sliced fruit."

"Sounds wonderful."

It was nice to have someone to cook for. Although she loved to cook, she never had the chance to see the look of enjoyment on people's faces when they ate. In Kansas, she had worked at an upscale restaurant for a couple of years. It had helped to fund her college education. The cook was nice to her, and sometimes, after hours, he'd teach her a thing or two. It was there that she had learned to cook and love it, but her heart would always lie in working with troubled kids.

"Is my father here?" She tried to sound nonchalant.

"Nope, another game tonight. On game days, practice starts at six."

"Oh."

Perhaps she shoved the bread into the egg wash harder than usual, but it was the only sign that it bothered her that her father was once again, not around.

“Hey Jess, what do you say we go to the Museum of Fine Arts today?”

The French toast forgotten, she turned and stared at him. Was he asking her out? Maybe she was reading too much into it. Maybe he was just bored and needed something to do. It couldn't mean anything, could it? The smart thing to do would be to say no. Turning back to the meal she was preparing, she didn't answer. Maybe he would assume she didn't want to go if she didn't answer him, no such luck.

“Well?”

His patient tone was patronizing. With every intention of telling him no, she turned to him. “Sure. I'd love to.”

She didn't know what made her say yes. Every ounce of common sense she had told her this was a bad idea. Used to being alone, she was uncomfortable with this whole situation. Why did the damn loneliness of her life have to kick in now and make her so vulnerable? Maybe it was her mom's death and her father's inability to put much effort into having a relationship with her, but Trevor, arrogant though he may be, kept trying and that kept her from going under.

Breakfast was far more pleasurable than she'd expected it to be. Trevor's playful chitchat made her comfortable. He complimented her cooking and told her how pretty she looked in the morning. By the time it was over, Jessie was glowing on the inside.

When she washed the last dish, she set it aside and dried her hands. With nothing left to do but get ready for the day, she headed toward her room, but she wondered if she wasn't making a mistake. She'd never allowed herself to care about a man before, that was a path straight to heartache she was sure. Something about Trevor wouldn't allow her to regret her decision. For better or worse, she was going to enjoy the day.

Jessie made her way back to her room and pulled out a pair of khaki shorts and a black tank top. She took her time getting dressed and then pulled her hair back into a ponytail. After applying a touch of makeup, she studied herself. She thought she looked nice. Stuffing her feet into her black sandals, she was ready. When she opened the door, she almost ran straight into Trevor who was about to knock on her door. They laughed as they made their way out to her Jeep. The playful banter he'd established at breakfast continued on the short drive.

Jessie was amazed at how beautiful the museum was. Its adobe walls were structured in such an appealing way. To Jessie, it was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

"Let's go inside." Trevor sounded amused, but when she turned to look at him, he was looking at her with what appeared to be lust. The butterflies in her stomach started working overtime. She followed Trevor toward the entrance. When they entered the Constellation exhibit, Trevor's hand slipped into hers. Heat surged through her at the contact. Turning to look at him, she thought she saw a spark of desire in his sparkling blue eyes. Jessie couldn't stand the sudden tension between them. Later, she'd examine what it was about him that made her so uncomfortable, but for now, she just wanted the feeling to go away. Ignoring the few people around them, Jessie pulled Trevor toward a corner. Why she did it, she didn't know. All the new and strange emotions Trevor evoked set her off balance. It was so good to be wanted, and seeing the desire in Trevor's eyes sparked her own. Without thinking, she turned toward him, stood up on her toes, and leaned into him.

Her lips were mere inches from his, and oh God did she ever love the sensation. Ever so slightly, she moved her head forward until her lips grazed his. Kissing him had not been the brightest idea she ever had, but it took the edge off the tension surrounding them. When she stood back from him, she lifted her eyes to his and was stunned to see open, raw passion in his own. His good hand shot out and pulled her back to him with such force it amazed her. Just before his head descended to hers, he said,

"Now, if you're going to kiss me, you may as well do it right."

With that, his mouth slanted over hers passionately. His tongue traced the outline of her closed lips. His hand worked up and down her back in slow and lazy strokes. Her hands moved up to tangle in his hair, pulling him closer as she relented and opened her mouth to his searching tongue. Hot hands settled at the small of her back, and she warmth pooled in the core of her being.

The man could kiss. Jessie wasn't a nun and enjoyed sex as much as the next woman, but she never allowed herself any emotional attachment to the men she gave herself to. One kiss was all it took for her to know Trevor was different. The kiss continued. It was soul searching, scorching and full of passion. In the back of her mind, alarm bells started to ring. In that moment, she knew Trevor could never be just a casual fuck. They had something

more, and it frightened her. Not only was she scared to know it was there, she was terrified it would go away. The man who kissed her now, was not at all what she expected the arrogant jock she met eight years ago to be like now.

When his lips moved away from hers, they were both breathless. When she dared to meet his eyes, she saw his were full of emotion.

“Now that is how I like to be kissed,” he said before his lips again captured hers.

Chapter 9

There in the museum, ignoring all others around them, Trevor kissed her for all he was worth. She tasted sweet—intoxicating. Last night, when Jessie asked him to hold her, he had done so because her tears tore at his heart. It never had been in his nature to ignore a crying woman. When she settled her body in the curve of his, it fit perfectly. Somehow, lying there with her against him seemed right. It was more than just a desire to stop her tears. He wanted her to be happy. He didn't understand his feelings for her at all. He'd never been the kind of person to love 'em and leave 'em, but he never went out of his way to make deep emotional attachments either. Many women thought he was a coldhearted bastard. Nothing could be further from the truth. He just hadn't met a woman worth committing anything to for more than a few nights of great sex.

It seemed strange, but with Jessie sex hadn't even entered his mind when he'd climbed in bed with her. When they woke that morning, he'd wanted to kiss her but sensed it would make her run. But since she made the first move, he sure as hell wasn't going to turn her away.

Damn she can kiss, he thought while her tongue tangled with his. She massaged his scalp in a sexy, circular motion. His hand rested on the small of her back holding her body close to his. When she broke the kiss, he wasn't ready for the loss of contact. Inclining his head, he nibbled at the skin along her jaw. When his lips met her ear, he delighted in the light moan that escaped her when he nipped at the delicate flesh.

Her hands moved to his shoulders, and he thought maybe she was about to push him away. He captured her mouth again before she had the chance to run. This time, he applied more pressure and was more urgent. He groaned when she melted against him. Her body was limp, held up by nothing more than the strong arm he had wrapped around her. His hand slid up the back of her shirt. Soft, warm skin met his calloused palm. When he

reached her bra, he traced the thin strap before moving back down over the silky expanse of her back. He enjoyed the texture of bare skin beneath his palm. He wished they were somewhere private, he longed for more.

A bright flash of the camera stopped him dead in his tracks. Jessie sprang away from him and gaped at the man who had taken the picture. Trevor recognized him—a photographer from one of the trashy rag mags that liked to take one tiny grain of truth and blow it up way out of proportion. Trevor lunged forward, but the photographer jumped back and ran. Trevor turned to Jessie.

“I’m sorry,” he said, quiet and sincere.

“Are those pictures going to be plastered all over the tabloids?”

Trevor was nervous. He couldn’t read what she was thinking. “I hate to say it. But, yes.”

Trevor stared at her for several minutes. He nodded to confirm the truth of his words. She turned pale and then she reached down and took his hand.

“What’s done is done, can’t change it. Come on, let’s go see the rest of the museum.”

Trevor couldn’t remember a day that he had enjoyed more than this one. Together, they enjoyed all of the exhibits in the museum. To his delight, she shared his love of good art. Often they would stop and discuss a particular painting and what they believed the artist was trying to portray.

Fans would stop him to ask for an autograph or to pose for a picture and Jessie stood back watching, never once getting impatient. When it was just them again, she’d take his hand, and they’d pick up where they left off. Many women he’d dated hated the interruption of the fans, and they let him know it. Jessie didn’t seem to mind, and he appreciated it. His fans meant everything to him. Without them, he wouldn’t be where he was today.

Several times, he focused on their joined hands. He’d never known a woman who took such joy in an act so simple. Hell, he couldn’t remember how long it’d been since he held hands with a woman, and the fact of the matter was that with Jessie, he was more than just an object, he was a human being.

Her laughter made him smile, and again, warmth and pride spread through him over the fact that he was the one who made her laugh. The light mood stayed with him while she helped him into the Jeep, rounded the car, and climbed behind the wheel.

“Dinner?” Trevor asked, wanting to prolong their time together.

“Yeah, but first...” Soft palms cupped his face, pulling him closer to her. That time, he did not have to coax her mouth to open. His tongue found easy entrance. Her hands ran over every inch of his body that she could reach. His hardness strained against his jeans. They had to stop or he’d do the wrong thing and take her in the back of her Jeep, right here in front of the museum. Maybe if this was any woman but Jessie, he’d let go of his self-control, but she deserved better than that. When he pulled away from her, he wondered when he had become so damn noble.

“Dinner,” he said in a strained voice.

The sultry smile that settled on her lips did nothing to ease his raging erection. When the Jeep sprang into motion, he focused on the clouds, the sky, the grass, the dirt and any other thing he could, to prevent his eyes from wandering to the woman beside him.

Jessie pulled up in front of Tomasita’s, a restaurant Trevor had suggested. It was one of his favorite places to eat. The atmosphere was great, and it was located right next to the historic train depot. They stepped outside, and Trevor watched her stare in awe at the beautiful adobe building and scan the surroundings in the rail yard. Her eyes lit up when she saw the old train car that said “Santa Fe Railroading Company” on it.

“There’s a lot of history here. When the railroad expanded into Santa Fe, this is where all the activity was.”

Trevor waited while she turned around, taking in all that was around her—the outdoor performance stage that sloped off the hillside, the children’s play area that was made of all natural materials. The trees, the picnic tables, and nearby trails all seemed to excite her. He realized that it was this appreciation for the smaller things that others would no doubt overlook that drew him to her. Thinking back to their time at his house, he realized it was her appreciation of his trophies that moved him beyond physical attraction and had endeared him toward her emotionally. He’d seen the look of pride and her genuine interest in what he had to say. No other woman had ever cared so much about how he got where he was. It was the fame and the fortune, which held their interest.

Trevor took her hand in his and led her across the gravel parking lot. When they approached the door to the restaurant, he took a step ahead of her and held the door open. Her breath caught when she glimpsed the beautiful,

polished, wooden bar, with the liquor bottles stacked in a neat row above. Seeing her look of pleasure, Trevor was glad he had chosen Tomasita's. It wasn't crowded, so they didn't have to wait long to be seated. Trevor asked for a table on the patio. They were led outside, past a large fountain surrounded by beautiful wrought iron tables. He heard her intake of breath. "It's beautiful isn't it?" he whispered.

"Very."

"Thank you." Trevor smiled at the hostess.

They both ordered a margarita along with chile rellenos covered in both green and red chilies. It was delicious. Trevor smiled as he watched her savor every bite like it was the best meal she ever ate.

"Want dessert?"

She laughed. "I'm stuffed." Patting her stomach to emphasize the point, she continued, "I couldn't eat another bite."

"Too bad you are going to have to sit and watch me eat the best stuffed sopapillas around."

When the sopapillas arrived, Trevor moved to the chair right next to her. Using his fork, he broke off a small bite and held the fork in front of her mouth.

"You're bad," Jessie said.

Trevor wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You have no idea."

Just like he had done with his tongue earlier, he ran the luscious dessert over her lips until she relented and opened up.

"Mmmmmm. This is delicious."

Trevor smiled, watching her lick her lips. He took a small forkful for himself. His blood ran hot when he turned back to her and saw that her eyes were fixated on his mouth. Their playfulness was all that got him through the hot long looks that passed between them while they devoured the delicious sopapillas.

When the bill arrived, she reached for it. *Damn, another point for her.* All day he'd looked for something bad about her, but there was nothing. Now, there she was, with little money to her name, and she was going to try to pick up the check.

Leaning over, he placed a light kiss on her cheek.

"I got it, babe."

Taking the check from her, he looked at it and pulled out several bills. When the server returned, he handed the money to her and thanked her for the great service. Grabbing Jessie's hand, they went into the restaurant, which was a lot more crowded than when they'd arrived.

They worked their way through the crowd, Jessie once again stood back with a sweet smile on her face while he signed autographs and posed for pictures. A couple of women snuggled against his side, and he looked up to meet Jessie's eyes. In her eyes, he saw compassion. He felt an overwhelming urgency to get back to her father's house and spend some time alone with her.

Making his excuses to the fans that surrounded him, he put his good arm around Jessie and they made their way out to her Jeep. The ride back to Coach Kirk's house was quiet. He glanced at the clock. It was just after eight. The game still had a couple hours to go, so he knew that he had some time to make the rest of the evening special.

When Jessie came around the front of the car to help him out, he watched her with new admiration. Today, she had proven that she was a strong and understanding woman. He'd given her a little happiness today, and he it was happy about that. When she smiled, she was exquisite. When she knelt down for him to lean on her, instead of putting his hand on her shoulder, he cupped her chin.

Pulling her face up to his, he leaned over and kissed first her forehead, then each of her eyes, her nose, and last, her lips.

"You're beautiful, Jessie. Hasn't anyone ever told you that?" His husky whisper sent visible shivers down her spine.

Jessie looked down at the ground and shook her head. "No."

"They were all fools."

When Jessie looked up at him again, there were tears in her eyes. "I guess I never gave anyone the chance."

"Why?"

"Somehow, people always end up hurting each other."

"Have you never had anyone that was close to you? A boyfriend?"

Jessie shrugged. "I had a couple of friends, but I was never really able to open up to them. I've been with men before, but none that ever really cared about me."

Irrational anger rose up within him. "They were fools."

“Not really. I never really looked for anyone who would treat me better than that. I guess I made my choices.”

“Why?” Trevor still didn’t understand why someone so lonely would want to stay that way.

“I don’t know. I guess when you get used to being alone it’s just easier to stay that way. My mom always told me the only one I could rely on was myself, and that I had to work what the Lord gave me to get what I wanted.”

Trevor bit back a smile. “That explains a lot about why you were the way you were eight years ago. What changed? You’re not that person anymore.”

A tear fell down her cheek. “Right before I went to college, I realized that Momma would never be happy, and she’d probably never love herself, much less me. I wanted something better than that.” Jessie smiled through her tears. “I guess I had also done a lot of thinking about my visit here the summer before my senior year. I didn’t want to be that person anymore. The one everyone hated but tolerated because they had to.”

“It was never like that.”

“Don’t lie.”

Trevor met her eyes and the raw pain in her gaze broke his heart. “Well, maybe back then, but that wasn’t you. If it was, you wouldn’t be who you are now.”

“I’m not so sure who I am now is so great.”

“I think you’re wonderful.” Trevor reached out and caressed her cheek. Jessie shivered. “Let’s go inside.” They stood, and he rubbed against her as they rose. The friction of the movement fanned the flames between them, and he met her mouth with a hot kiss.

Jessie moved away first and smiled at him. Her voice shook when she said, “Thanks for today.”

“Anytime.”

They walked toward the door together hand in hand. Opening the door, she stepped back and allowed him to enter first. The room was illuminated in light at the same time he heard the clicking of the lock in the door.

“What do you want to do with the rest of the evening?”

His mind raced, searching for something to do besides taking her to bed. “Care if I turn on the game?”

“Not at all.”

Trevor settled on the couch and flipped on the game. The Devils were down by three.

“Can I get you anything before I sit down?”

“A pain pill? They’re on the counter in the kitchen.”

He watched her disappear into the kitchen. Seconds later, she reappeared with a glass of water and the pain medicine he’d asked for. It was nice when she settled against him with her head resting on his chest. Although last night he held her the exact same way, somehow, this moment seemed more intimate.

He trailed his hand up and down her back while her hand caressed his chest. With the game almost over, it was apparent the Devils were going to lose. Maybe he’d have to give his replacement a few pointers before he went in for surgery. He didn’t want to see the whole season ruined because of his injury.

Trevor flipped off the TV and Jessie sat up and looked at him. He couldn’t mistake the look of passion in her eyes.

“Want to come to my room with me?”

If it were any other woman, he wouldn’t have to think twice about the invitation. But this wasn’t just any woman. Never mind the fact that she was Coach’s daughter, he respected her, and that didn’t come easy. He didn’t want to hurt her. With his lifestyle, he was afraid that any woman who loved him, would be hurt. *Damn, why did I think that? It’s not like we’re in love*, he reasoned.

“Sure. I’d love to.”

The bedroom was dark. It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw her standing by the bed pulling the green sweater she wore that day over her head. Trevor moved closer to her, and she willingly came into the arm he extended to her. The bare skin beneath his palm excited him. He unclasped her bra, and this time when it fell away, he saw the beautiful creaminess of her breasts. Dipping his head, he pressed tiny kisses to her neck.

His mouth moved down to take her tightened nipple into his mouth. When her hands tangled in his hair, he groaned and suckled harder. Laying her back on the bed, he moved between her legs and leaned over her. Bathing her stomach with his tongue, he moved his hands to the button of her jeans. Slowly, he peeled them down her legs and worshiped the body

spread out before him. Their lips met in a searing kiss that he didn't want to end.

Their tongues met, his good hand moved to her shoulder, and he caressed every inch of bare skin before him. The kiss became hotter. Jessie broke free breathless. She struggled to relieve him of his shirt without hurting him. He didn't help by dipping his head to the swell of her breast and enjoying the taste of her skin.

When she freed him of the shirt and threw it into a pile on the floor, she moved on to the button of his khakis. He stepped out of the pants and pulled her up against him. The feel of her against him was amazing. Trevor lay back on the bed and motioned for her to straddle him. Complying, she came down on top of him, her lips grazing his chest, leaving a burning trail in their wake. Their lips met once again, and he could swear that the stars had fallen out of the sky and now rested just beneath his eyelids.

When she rolled over beside him, he reached for the hem of her panties, caressing the sensitive skin. When his hand crept inside, his passion increased upon finding her wet, hot and so ready for him. Jessie moaned when he pulled her panties down her legs and tossed them off the side of the bed. He worked his fingers in a circular motion against her clit, and she arched against his hand. When she came, her breathless panting and small moans heightened his pleasure. He had never experienced anything like this before. Sure, he liked for the woman he was with to receive pleasure, but never before had a woman's pleasure caused shockwaves of intense desire to run through him.

Jessie sat up and pulled his boxer shorts down. They were added to the pile on the floor and her mouth descended to him. It was incredible. The hotness of her mouth was earth shattering. Trevor felt like he was going to explode. Stilling her with his hands, he slowed down the wave he was on that headed toward a shattering climax. When she looked up at him, the tears in her eyes undid him. In that one moment, she stole his soul, and he knew he couldn't do this. He didn't want her to look at him like just another man out to hurt her or to think that she was just another notch on his belt. He wanted to wait until she was sure and ready—until she loved him.

“Baby, we have to stop.”

Jessie stiffened, her eyes turned cold, and he knew he hurt her.

“It’s not you, Jessie.” How could he explain to her that he liked her too much to have sex with her? It didn’t even make sense to him.

Pulling the blanket up over her naked body, he knew that whatever progress he’d made in earning her trust, he had just thrown away. Maybe someday she would understand why he couldn’t take her tonight.

“Just go.”

“Jessie.”

“Go! Get your stuff and go.”

The sound of her sniffing told him she was crying. Her tears tore at his heart. Wanting more than anything to hold her, his heart ached because he knew she’d just push him away. With his head hung in shame, he gathered up his clothes and left the room. It hurt. He left his heart right there in that room, in the palm of her hand. The revelation scared the hell out of him.

Chapter 10

When she heard the door open, Jessie opened her eyes and looked at the clock. It was three in the morning. When the door closed again, she heard the light footsteps approach her bed.

“Jessie?” Trevor’s voice was a mere whisper.

The breath she had been holding came out in a low hiss. She refused to turn and look at him. The bed sank when he settled down next to her. She wanted him to leave. Hadn’t he embarrassed her enough tonight? Did he have to come back for more?

“I know you’re awake. I can see you wringing your hands.”

Jessie hadn’t even realized she was moving at all. She stilled her hands.

“You don’t have to talk. Just listen.”

Jessie didn’t want to listen to him. But in order to tell him that, she’d have to talk to him. She didn’t intend to do that for a long time to come.

“When I was in high school, I dated a girl named Denise. We were together for my whole sophomore year. I really thought we were in love.”

Jessie listened. She didn’t know why he was telling her all this, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to leave until he said what he had to say.

“The summer after my sophomore year, I turned sixteen. I decided I wasn’t going to play baseball junior year. No one agreed with me, especially Denise. A month after I’d made the announcement that I wasn’t going to play, Denise dumped me.”

Jessie wanted to reach out a hand to him, to offer a word of sweet compassion. But stubborn pride won out and she remained silent.

“She told me that she wanted to date a jock, so I didn’t fit the bill anymore. I was single that entire year. I worked my ass off getting back in shape so I could play senior year. When I made the team, the girls wanted me again.”

Jessie turned over and looked at him. In his eyes, she could see such sincerity that it touched her heart. She didn't want to feel anything for him, but when he was like this, it was hard not to.

"I learned then that women didn't really want me. They wanted what they thought I could be. I played college ball for one year before the Minors recruited me. A year later, Cal Robertson got hurt, and I was called up from the minors to pitch for the Devils. I've been there ever since."

When he reached for her hand, the heat of his touch warmed her entire body. Although she wanted to, she didn't pull away.

"When you play ball in the Major League, people stop looking at you like you're a person. You're a commodity. Women want a superstar, the fame, and the money, not the man. So I learned to accept that, and I didn't put the man out there for others to see."

Jessie searched his eyes. She wanted to believe him but found it difficult.

"But you chose this life." Her words were full of confusion and a little pity. Silence stretched out over several minutes, and she didn't think he was going to answer her.

"I did. And I love it. I don't know what I'll do if I can't play ball. I love the thrill of chasing that perfect game. The fans, the rush I get when I'm on the field. I love the parties and the women. It's a life I couldn't have lived for so long if I didn't love it."

Jessie didn't know what to say? He was so contradictory.

"So why are you here playing nice with me? Was it just so you could see me throw myself at you, and you could laugh as you rejected me?"

"I wasn't laughing, Jess. I didn't reject you. I just decided having sex with you was not the right thing to do."

Jessie let out a bitter laugh. "You don't call that rejection? You've had so many women. Eight years ago, you were with a different woman every night. I remember I used to wonder what they had that I didn't. You can't tell me having sex with each of them was the right thing to do." She was incredulous. The team playboy was talking to her about the right thing to do. She'd made a fool out of herself by throwing herself at him, and he chose that moment to get some morals? God, if he existed, must be rolling in laughter at the cruel joke.

“Maybe I took off with a different woman every night, but I didn’t sleep with them all. You don’t know what it’s like, Jessie. It’s all part of the game. Those women they didn’t want me. They wanted the image and I gave it to them.”

“And you’re just playing games with me too right?”

“No. I like you, Jessie. Not many women really care about the man, only the superstar.”

“But I’m not good enough for the superstar. I’m an intriguing little play toy to occupy you while you recover. But soon, you’ll be back to playing, and I’ll be just a memory.”

Trevor cupped her cheek. “Don’t you understand how wonderful I think you are?”

Jessie blinked back tears. “I’m nothing special. I can’t compete with the game.”

“I don’t even know if I’ll ever play again. Even if I do, the likelihood of me having the same capability as before is slim. My career is probably over.”

Unwanted tears burned her eyes. She turned her head in the hopes he hadn’t seen her eyes fill.

“It’s been so long since I took a good, long, hard look at who I am without baseball. It’s overwhelming. Maybe if I hadn’t spent time getting to know you, things would be different, but you make me think. You see beyond the fame and the fortune.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a hazard of my occupation. I spend my life searching for the truth behind the fronts people present.”

Trevor let out a long deep sigh.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do if I can’t play ball. It scares me you know. I’ve never been good at anything else. People respect me because of the game. Without it, I’m nothing.”

Jessie turned to him and wrapped her arms around him. “You’re not nothing. You talk about everyone else seeing nothing but the fame and the fortune, but how can they when that’s all you see yourself?”

He used his good arm to embrace her. It was awkward but comforting. They said nothing for a while. It seemed they were always comforting each other. She didn’t know why when he was around she was emotionally naked.

“It’s not all I see.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No.”

“What are you going to do if you can’t play again, Trevor?”

Dead silence was her answer. Trevor avoided her eyes and she knew she struck a nerve. Several minutes passed before he spoke. I don’t know what I’ll do. How will I live without it?” Trevor’s voice broke and tears fell from his eyes. Jessie tightened her embrace. He cried for a good long while. She wondered if this was the first time he’d allowed himself to grieve his injury. She didn’t say anything because somehow words just weren’t appropriate. Being there seemed the most powerful thing she could do for the broken man who wept in her arms.

Jessie wasn’t sure how much time had passed when his tears had subsided and he turned to her and said, “You’re beautiful, Jessie, inside and out. Why do you hide that from other people?”

“When no one has ever bothered to love you, you stop expecting it. My mamma didn’t love me. My daddy sure as hell doesn’t love me. I spent most of my life taking care of myself. If I didn’t love me, who would? Everyone else rejected me.”

He caressed her. Jessie pulled away from him. The last thing she wanted was pity.

“I didn’t reject you, Jessie. I just didn’t want you to be one of those women that I took to bed without attaching any emotions to the act.”

“It doesn’t matter, Trevor. I just want to sleep.” Jessie sank farther into the covers and closed her eyes.

“I’ll never just have sex with you, Jessie. When I take you to my bed, we’ll be making love. It will be a hell of a lot more than just a physical act.”

A shiver went down her spine. His tone was sensual yet ominous. Before he stood, he leaned over and kissed her cheek. Relief flooded her when she heard his footsteps moving toward the door. She listened until she could no longer hear his footsteps in the hall. He seemed so sincere. Maybe she should just set aside her pride and accept whatever was developing between them. Having reached at least some sort of conclusion for the night, she fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter 11

Trevor packed the small overnight bag with essentials. With any luck, he wouldn't be in the hospital long. The past three weeks had been filled with apprehension and restlessness. Never in his life had he been one to just sit around the house and do nothing. Sometimes, he had dreamed of being out on the field, chasing that next perfect game. He missed the roar of the crowd, the smell of the night air, and, most of all, the camaraderie of his teammates.

Sitting in front of the TV watching his buddies play the game he was born to play just didn't cut it. When the Devils were in town, he and Jessie headed out the ballpark. He enjoyed those nights the most. In a sense, Jessie was the best thing to happen to him. She was entertaining and sweet. Definitely not the little girl he remembered. Growing up had gentled her, but it wasn't something she let everyone know. In the weeks he'd been living here, he'd seen her at her most defensive and her most vulnerable. He couldn't help wondering what made her tick.

When she came home from work at night, she would regale him with tales of her day at work. After a month, she still loved it, and it showed. If it wasn't for her, he didn't know how he would have gotten through these difficult weeks. He still had a bad habit of pissing her off, but he found she was most forgiving, and he loved that about her.

He heard the front door open and close. After setting aside the overnight bag, he walked out into the living room.

"Hey, Jess."

A bright smile greeted him. *I could get used to seeing that every night.* Never before had he been afraid of losing someone, but with Jessie, it was different. It was odd, but together, they took off the masks and became comfortable with themselves. Around other people, the masks were firmly

back in place. They had a relationship that was so different on so many levels. He didn't want to lose it.

"How was work today?"

"It was good. I'm finally done with shadowing others. I got my own caseload. It's only two people right now, but it's a start."

Trevor smiled at her. It was obvious she was just as passionate about what she did as he was about his own career. No wonder she understood how important the game was to him.

"Did Dad make it back to town yet?"

"No, he'll be here late tonight."

"Is he taking you to the hospital?"

"Yeah. Did you manage to get the day off?"

Asking her to take a day off in her first month on the job had been hard. She made it easy, telling him that she wanted to be there and that it was important to her.

"I got the morning off. I'll be there when you go into surgery. I have to be at work at one for a meeting, but I can leave afterward."

Trevor moved closer to her and took her hand in his. "Thank you."

The sexual tension between the two of them could have been cut with a knife. Since the night he chose not to make love to her, they had flirted with each other like mad, and enjoyed being in the presence of one another, but despite his efforts, Jessie had done her best to avoid physical contact with him. Although sparks flew when they were close, she ignored the elephant in the room, so to speak, opting instead to settle for shameless flirtation and a best buddy-like relationship. Trevor didn't blame her, and it was better than having her shut him out altogether, so he embraced what she offered. But, that didn't stop him from taking opportunities presented to try to steal kisses from her. It had become somewhat of a game. Trevor smiled, ready to see if today he'd succeed in capturing the prize. He leaned forward to brush his lips against hers, and she withdrew her hand and stepped to the side.

"I better go get dinner started."

Trevor watched her walk through the dining room and into the kitchen. Damn, he wanted her. The friendship they had developed over the past few weeks meant a lot to him. Although they had gotten off to a rocky start, his respect for her had grown like a Yucca in the heat of July. There was no way in hell she'd ever be just another conquest to him.

At the door of the kitchen, he stopped and watched while Jessie chopped up a few eggs and tossed them into a salad. Her hips wiggled in time with the beat of the low music that poured from the small radio on the counter. After rinsing the knife, she pulled some shrimp out of the refrigerator and began cutting them down the center.

“What are you doing to those shrimp?”

With a quick glance at him, she smiled. “Butterflying them.”

Once she had the shrimp arranged in a pan, she drizzled olive oil over them, cracked some pepper over them, minced up a handful of garlic cloves, and topped the concoction off with the juice of two squeezed lemons.

“Sit down. Talk to me while I finish dinner.”

“No. I don’t want to sit. I’d rather help you. What can I do?”

Her eyes traveled to his arm, pinned against his body by the tight sling.

“I’m good. Just sit and talk to me.” She said while she stirred something in a big pot on the stove.

“What are you making?” He asked, lowering his body into a chair.

“Shrimp Fettuccini.”

The loud rumble of his stomach generated giggles from them both.

“Hungry, are you?”

“You have no idea.” With her back turned to him, she didn’t see his eyes travel over her from head to toe. She didn’t see the way his eyes flamed at the sight of her shapely ass.

The fast-paced song on the radio ended, and the mellow voice of Barry Manilow crooned out through the speakers. Without a thought, he rose and walked toward her. His hand on her shoulder stopped the whisking of heavy cream, garlic, and several cheeses she had combined in a pot.

“Dance with me.”

Tension crackled between them. The hands-off policy she had implemented was crumbling. The fact was, he wanted to touch her and, more than once, in her eyes, he had seen that she wanted the same. Nothing sounded better to him than having her close to him. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that he cared for her very much. In his opinion, a person should be able to touch someone he cared about. Trevor had accepted the attraction they had, was even willing to embrace it. Jessie was not. He couldn’t help but wonder how long she was going to fight their attraction.

Jessie turned to him. Bright silver eyes searched the depths of his own. A spark of desire flared in her gaze. With his good arm, he pulled her close, and they moved together to Barry Manilow crooning, "Could it be magic?"

When the song ended, Jessie tried to pull away from him.

"Don't. Just stay here with me for a minute."

He buried his face in her hair when she rested her head on his chest. The light citrus scent was intoxicating. With his good arm, he squeezed her tighter, he pulled back a little, searching the beautiful silver depths of her eyes. With infinite slowness, he lowered his head to hers. His lips grazed hers and she groaned. His tongue traced the ridge of her lips, and they quivered beneath his probing tongue.

"We can't do this," she said against his lips.

"We can." He darted his tongue out and traced the sweet crease of her lips. Jessie opened her mouth to speak, and he took advantage of the moment. Mint. That's what she tasted like. He never knew someone could taste so good. With a gentleness he didn't know he possessed, he cupped her cheek and drew her closer to him. Passion tore through his body. He swallowed her throaty moans. Soft feminine flesh pressed against his solid muscle. It was the most erotic kiss he had ever experienced.

A low hiss from the stove had her springing back from him like she'd been burned. Trevor watched her drag the back of her hand across her lips.

"Don't kiss me."

The low whisper held a determined edge. Giving him her back, she moved to the pot on the stove that had interrupted their passion by boiling over. He stared at her as she dumped the pasta into a strainer in the sink and turned to put the pot of cream and cheese on the hot burner.

"You can't deny the attraction we have, Jess."

The whisk she held in her hand, made light clanging noises when it hit the side of the pot. "We're friends Trevor, just friends." It was a lie. If their actions in the past month hadn't proven that, he heard it in the thickness of her voice. He wondered if she believed her own lie. After reducing the heat of the burner, she turned to the cabinets and opened several before she found what she was looking for. Trevor watched her reach up and grab a bowl from the third cabinet she opened. When he saw the almost imperceptible tremble of her hand, it hit him. Jessie was scared to death of her own feelings.

With the sauce mixed into the pasta, Jessie arranged the shrimp on top in a decorative way and carried the dish to the table. Trevor grabbed the silverware off the counter and carried it with him as he made his way to his seat. He waited for her to bring the salad and plates to the table and pulled out the chair right next to him. She didn't argue, and he was grateful. They filled their plates, and an uncomfortable silence settled over them while they ate.

An hour later, the dishes done, the two of them settled onto the sofa to watch a movie. He was about press Play when her words invited conversation.

"Are you scared?"

It was a question that wasn't easy to answer, he realized after a moment of thought.

"In some ways, yes. I mean I've got good doctors, so I don't think I'm going to die or anything."

Her brow furrowed in thought. Surprise filled him when she reached out and covered his hand with her own.

"But you are afraid." It wasn't a question but a statement. She was far too perceptive.

"I've never been one to be afraid of much of anything. My mom used to tell me that one day I'd kill myself from my own daredevil behavior. Being a thrill seeker is one of my many hidden attributes."

He looked at her and smiled at the look of rapt attention on her face.

"What?" The indignant ring to her voice sobered him.

"You are so attentive. I have never had a woman listen to what I have to say the way that you do. It's nice."

Her hand tightened on his and his heart jumped in his chest. *I'm falling in love with you.* He wanted to say it. To look in her eyes and watch them spark with realization that he wasn't playing a game. But that would have to wait. She wasn't ready. To verbalize his thoughts would push her away. Trevor sighed, for now, he'd have to be happy with the knowledge that he loved her and someday, he would make her his.

The desire to kiss her was so strong he had to move away. It wasn't easy. He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable, and complained of pain in his shoulder. The pain pills that sat nearby added the perfect touch to the lie. He popped the cap off and shook two pills into his hand.

Jessie watched him with a look of interest and pity on her face. “So you were telling me why you are nervous about tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah, it’s not the operation that scares me. I can’t help but wonder if this surgery will repair the damage well enough so that I’ll be able to play again. Never playing the game again scares me to death.”

Her features softened. “You’ll play again. In some way, shape or form, you’ll play Trevor. It’s possible you’ll be able to pitch again, Trev. You’re determined. But if not, you can still be a part of the game.”

“How?” he whispered.

“You have to discover that on your own. If I tell you, you’ll scoff at every idea I think of because all you want is to pitch. When the time comes, if you can’t do that, you’ll find what you want to do.”

Trevor appreciated the support she offered. No one else had bothered to ask him how he felt. He was glad she cared enough to ask. It wasn’t that others were insensitive, but for the guys on the team, his injury was the one reminder they didn’t want. Career-ending injuries could happen to anyone at anytime.

* * * *

Trevor woke to Jessie leaning over him. Her lips caressed his cheek. She smelled so damn good, with that intoxicating citrus scent that he thought maybe he had died and gone to heaven.

“Time to get up. We have to be at the hospital in an hour.”

Trevor groaned, turned his face into his pillow, and closed his eyes again.

“Come on sleepy head, it’s time to get up.”

“Okay, I’m up,” he mumbled.

She started to rise from the bed, and he reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Thanks, Jessie.”

A bright smile was her only reply. She extracted her hand and turned, slowly walking out of the room. Trevor swung his legs over the side of the bed, stretching when he sat up. *The sun’s not even up yet*, he thought with disgust. The T-shirt and sweat pants he set out the night before sat on a nearby chair. He pulled the clothes on and left his room with a longing look.

Although the room was sparse and not at all homey, it was preferable to the hospital room he would call home for the next few days.

In the kitchen, Jessie was finishing off a delicious-looking omelet.

“You’re evil. How could you eat something so scrumptious when I can have nothing at all?”

A wide grin split her face and he couldn’t help but smile back. *Damn but she’s adorable.*

An hour and a half later, he was prepped for surgery and waiting for the doctor to come in and take him down to the operating room. Jessie sat in a nearby chair reading a book and Coach stood at the foot of his bed trying to offer up some humor, which was lost in the moment. Several of his teammates had stopped by to offer their support. Trevor realized how lucky he was to be a part of such an amazing family. True, he had lost his parents, he was an only child, so there were no siblings to speak of, his aunt and uncle lived over a thousand miles away, but he couldn’t have been any more loved if any of those people had been there at that moment.

Dylan Sanchez, the Devil’s shortstop and his close friend, stepped into the room and offered up a salute.

“We’ll see you back on the field real soon, buddy.”

“From your lips,” Trevor said when the nurses came in to take him to surgery.

When the bed started to move, he fought to maintain eye contact with Jessie. She was standing there laughing with her hand on Dylan’s shoulder, and it bothered him. When he tilted his head back to catch one more glimpse, he was surprised to see her blow a kiss his way. That was nice. The doctors explained the procedure to him and began to administer the anesthesia. His last thought before slipping into unconsciousness was of Jessie’s beautiful face.

Chapter 12

Jessie tried to concentrate, but couldn't. While her boss talked about activities in the community, she thought of Trevor. Why did he have to be so damn nice underneath that superstar, holier-than-thou façade he presented to the rest of the world? It was damn near impossible to hide the fact that she wanted him. It was getting harder and harder to resist him. Maybe it was best to try to stay away from him when he got out of the hospital. But, how would that be possible when they lived under the same roof? When she was around him, her chest got tight, and the butterflies did a number on her stomach. Although she'd never been in love before, she knew she was on the brink. If he thought she was going to hand over her heart on a platter, he was dead wrong.

The fact was, if she thought he would stick around it would be so easy to hand him her heart. However, his true love was the game. He would move heaven and earth to get back in shape so that, next season, he could pitch again. When that happened she knew it would be adios, Jessie, and he'd turn back into the self-centered jerk she'd met five years ago. What if he couldn't pitch again? Confusion racked her mind. On one hand, if things went wrong and he'd need her, she'd be damned if she'd be selfish like everyone else in her life and just walk away from what they had started. But if things went his way, she risked serious heartbreak, and she'd had enough of that in her lifetime.

"Jessie, are you listening?"

The sound of her boss's voice tore her from her thoughts. "I'm sorry, Marnie, what did you say?"

"I said your case, Malachi Cobb, is here today. Before you leave, I'd like you to introduce yourself to him."

Jessie smiled and nodded.

People began to push back from the table and gather notes they had taken during the long meeting. Standing, she walked toward Marnie and waited for her to finish talking to Briana, another counselor who Jessie liked a lot. She was shy and sweet natured, always putting herself out to help others and Jessie admired that about her. When Briana turned away from Marnie she smiled and Jessie thought how pretty she was. Her coppery hair hung around her chin in soft waves. Blue eyes sparkled and a wide smile formed on her lips.

“Jessie, a few of us are going out Friday night for dinner and some dancing. Would you like to come along?”

It would be nice to have a girlfriend to talk to again. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“Good. We’re leaving right after work so bring something to change into.”

“Okay.” Jessie watched Briana beam at her and she knew this was not a pity offering, but a genuine opportunity to make new friends. It excited her. Making friends had never been easy. Most of her life she had hidden herself from others. Relationships had died due to her inability to open up. Her relationship with Trevor made her crave more, not just with him but others. That scared her. Jessie had never minded taking on the world and its problems, but she’d hid her true self from the world. Trevor saw through that though. She wondered how he was doing. A strong yearning to go to him settled over her, but Marnie put her arm around her, “Are you ready to go meet Malachi?” Going to Trevor would have to wait a little while longer. She was definitely ready to meet Malachi. Out of all the things being a youth specialist entailed, time with the kids was the reason she did what she did. The politics of such a position sucked, but she did it for the kids. Jessie smiled. “I am,” she said.

Marnie began to guide her through the office and out into the recreation area. They stopped in front of the nice-looking young man she had seen the day she came to sign her employment papers. He wore the same sad look that he had the day she’d seen him.

“Malachi, why aren’t you playing?”

He looked up at them “Not in the mood.”

“Did something happen?”

The boy just stared straight ahead. His back was ramrod straight, and he scanned his surroundings. Sitting forward on the bench, he reminded her of someone that was about to run. It was something she'd seen many times and wondered how difficult he was going to make it for her to get to know him.

Jessie lowered herself onto the bench next to the boy. She looked up at Marnie and shook her head when she saw that she had opened her mouth to say something. Marnie raised an eyebrow but said good-bye to Malachi and walked away.

"I bet you're sitting over here because you can't play."

Malachi swung his head in her direction and gaped at her. "Who the hell are you?"

"Jessie Kirk, your new youth specialist."

A grunt was the only indication he gave that he heard her.

Jessie picked up a ball that had rolled their way. Looking around, she saw that no one seemed to be lacking a ball. Bouncing it a couple of times, she looked over at the brooding teenager.

"So can you play?"

"Course I can play. I'm hella good."

Jessie looked at him out of the corner of her eye, with a slight smile she kicked off her shoes and stood in front of him. "Prove it." She bounced the ball right in front of him and watched him eye it as it went up and then down again.

"Lady, you got me fucked up."

"Really? How do you figure?"

He glared at her. "You need to bounce. I ain't balling wit no bee-atch who's all about cake."

"Wow. That's a pretty big assumption about someone you don't even know."

Malachi glared at her for a few moments before he got up and started to walk away from her. Jessie followed.

"Ease up. I ain't down fo' no talkin', fo' real"

Jessie smiled at him. "One shot. You make it and I'll go. You don't, you talk to me."

He started to walk away again. "I'll follow you." Jessie bit back a smile. She watched him turn and stomp back toward her. Holding out the ball to him, she watched him take it with all the suspicion of an angry teen.

Malachi moved over to the three-point line. He took his time lining up the shot. The ball eased off his fingertips, and she watched it hit the backboard and circle the rim before it sank through the net.

“Waz up now? Better up your game.”

When he laughed and walked away, she shook her head. There was no doubt he wasn’t going to make it easy for her. But she’d figure out a way to get through to him. With a deep sigh, she watched his retreating back until she could no longer see him. She caught Marnie’s eyes, who nodded at her. It was gesture of approval. Jessie smiled. She’d made an impression and proved herself to the kid and her boss. Whistling her happiness, she made her way out of the center.

Jessie slammed the door of her Jeep and waited for the air conditioning to cool the interior before she took off for the hospital. When she pulled out of the parking lot, she looked to her right and noticed Malachi standing to the side of the building watching her. *Good, I got his attention*, she thought. She glanced in the rearview mirror one last time, and then she sped toward the hospital.

On a whim, she stopped by the hospital’s gift shop and bought a bouquet of roses and a small teddy bear that said “get well soon” on its tummy. Although Trevor didn’t strike her as a teddy bear loving kind of guy, impulse forced her to buy it anyway. It occurred to her that these were love gifts, but she cared about Trevor and refused to walk in empty-handed.

When the elevator opened, she spotted her father and several guys along with a couple of women in the waiting room. She walked toward the room, but before she made it, Trevor’s friend Dylan intercepted her.

“He’s been asking for you.”

“Is he okay?”

“In a lot of pain, but he’ll recover.”

They met each other’s eyes, each knowing that the extent of that recovery could destroy his entire career. Courage was one of the natural gifts an athlete had. She hoped that very same courage would not fail him in the face of possible devastation. People reacted in strange ways to life’s circumstances. So far, he had taken it well, and though he recognized the potential of never being able to pitch again, in his heart of hearts, he still hadn’t accepted that it was a possibility.

“What room is he in?” Jessie asked.

“Fifth door on the left.”

“Thanks, Dylan.” She started to walk away, Dylan’s hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Are you two dating?”

Jessie stared at him for a moment, not sure how to answer that question. It was true they had been intimate, but they weren’t lovers, and they worked very hard to keep it that way.

“Is that a yes or a no?” Dylan probed.

“No. We’re just friends.”

Dylan’s smile widened. “Good, then maybe I have a chance.”

Jessie smiled. “Maybe.” It was a casual almost humorous flirtation, and it was more comfortable to her than what she had with Trevor. Mostly because it was fake. They didn’t know each other well enough for it to be anything but. Here was a man who didn’t probe too deep and look at her like he could see into her very soul. Maybe she should give him a chance. He was nice looking, red hair cropped close to his head and shiny green eyes that were warm and bright. He was skinny, but not wimpy, and he wore a never-ending smile that was endearing. Jessie looked over her shoulder at his retreating form. He was a man any woman would want—but he wasn’t Trevor—and deep in her heart, Jessie knew he had no chance.

The small bed sat in the center of the room. A couple of tasteful pictures hung on the wall. The TV that hung in one corner of the room played quietly. On a small dresser, a toothbrush and toothpaste sat near a bottle of cologne and mouthwash. The bathroom door was ajar. Jessie walked closer to the bed and saw that Trevor was asleep. She moved to the window and set the flowers on the wide ledge. His raspy voice startled her.

“I thought you were going to be here when I woke up.”

Jessie looked at him. “I got caught up with a client. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ve been so groggy I probably wouldn’t have known you were here anyway.”

Jessie moved closer to him and pressed the teddy bear in the crook of his good arm.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Trevor grasped her hand in his good one and squeezed. Although the squeeze was weak, it felt good. It was reassuring to her. The look in his eyes

tugged at her heart. Apprehension mingled with resignation. She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“It’s going to be okay Trev.”

He blinked almost like he was trying to hold back tears. “What if it’s not okay?”

“Life is full of what-ifs. You won’t know until you try. You’ll regret it if you don’t.” She looked at him then leaned over and kissed his full lips.

The complexity of her emotion confused her. Never before had her emotions been this intense. It frightened her more every day. Jessie bent over backwards to help people, and she had always been nice. People took to her. It was just once they realized that getting through to her was like beating their head against a brick wall, they always left. People came and went in her life regularly. Very few people lasted long in Jessie’s world. Not a fact she was proud of, but a fact just the same. It was an unfortunate side effect of feeling like she needed to spend her life protecting her heart from pain. After the humiliating experience of throwing herself at every member of her father’s team years ago, she had decided she needed to change her ways. She stopped trying to be nice and just became distant. The cool, aloof attitude she displayed kept most people, especially men from even befriending her.

It never bothered her until now. Her thoughts traveled back to Dylan and his friendly flirtation, and her heart became heavy. She had missed so much in an attempt to either be loved or protect herself it was overwhelming. The joy of young love and laughter. School football games and dances, she had missed them all. It was so strange to her. The light pitter-patter of her heart that Dylan’s attention had caused reminded her of all she’d wanted as a teen but never had. The all-encompassing passion that Trevor ignited in her spoke of what she wanted now but was too afraid to take.

“What’s wrong Jess?” Trevor interrupted her thoughts.

She turned wide eyes to him. He was focused on her face and he looked concerned.

“You look sad,”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

Jessie was uncomfortable. His uncanny ability to read her was going to get her into trouble if she didn't put some distance between the two of them. Although she wanted him more than she ever dreamed she could want a man, she knew that soon, he'd be focused on getting back to the team, and his infatuation with her would be forgotten—she'd be just a memory. Trevor would go back to his life of partying and forget all about the coach's daughter. Jessie wouldn't allow herself to be hurt that way. She had to let go of this fantasy—one created by fluke circumstances that made him vulnerable. If not for his injury he'd have never gave her a second look—just like last time. The thought of her last visit sent a wave of shame coursing through her. Remembering her overt overtures for attention made her cringe. Protective instincts took over and she pasted a fake bright smile on her face.

“Yes I am.” She drew out each word for emphasis. “Don't presume to know me just because we spent a few nights together at my father's house. You don't know me.” The icy words made an impact. His warm eyes of moments before turned cold. She knew she made her point, but to underscore her point she said, “I'm going to go see if Dylan wants to go to dinner. I'll see you when my dad brings you home.”

Without a second glance, she walked out of the silent room. Outside the door, she took several deep breaths for composure. Squaring her shoulders, she walked toward Dylan.

Chapter 13

Trevor waited for the door to close behind her before letting out the expletive. Like he didn't have enough to deal with, why did she have to do this now? After just a few weeks, there was no doubt in his mind that he was falling in love with her. It boggled his mind. Jessie wasn't going to make this easy, but perhaps she'd forgotten he loved playing the game. The prize this time was sweeter and more important than anything he'd ever strove to win. It surpassed even the thrill of seeking that perfect game. He would have her.

Trevor shook his head. Her attempt to make him jealous was laughable. He and Dylan had been best friends for a long time. Trevor would need to talk to him, but he'd see to it that Dylan knew she was off-limits. In fact, it was quite possible that her befriending Dylan was the best thing that could happen. Dylan had more experience with this love stuff. He was a mad flirt, but when he found a woman he liked, and settled into a relationship, he was a one-woman man and gave his all to the women he dated. Aside from giving him guidance, perhaps he could convince Jessie to stop running and give her heart to him. It was a lot to ask for, but like she always said, "You won't know until you try."

* * * *

That week in the hospital was the longest of his life. True to her word, Jessie did not come back and see him. Although many visitors had stopped by, the one person he wanted to see remained stubborn and stayed away. He had called her several times, but she wouldn't answer the phone. Messages he had left for her went unreturned, and not seeing her or talking to her was driving him crazy.

Coach stopped by often, checking his progress and making sure he was following doctors' orders. Trevor knew Coach cared about him. But he also knew that part of the excitement and anxiety had to do with his pitching arm. Coach had a team to see through to the end of the season, and with luck the playoffs. Although Trevor wouldn't be back this season, he was smart to be thinking about Cage Lawson and whether he should be thinking about making the rookie a permanent fixture. A lot of the decision hinged on Trevor's prognosis.

A couple of the women he had dated stopped by to keep him company, but he couldn't get into their idle chitchat and incessant giggling. He found himself comparing them to Jessie, and they just didn't measure up. He had smiled and tried to keep up his end of the conversation, but after an hour, they had apparently gotten tired of trying to entertain him and left.

Dylan visited at least once a day. Trevor told him in no uncertain terms, that although Jessie may have taken to him, she was hands-off. It irked him to see the hesitation on his best friend's face, but like he expected, the amicable, "You got it bud," assured him that Dylan would regard her as nothing more than a friend. That didn't stop him from ambling in with a goofy smile on his face spewing tales about Jessie's antics. It seemed they got along well and he brought out the wilder side in her. Trevor wasn't so sure he liked that. But Dylan assured him they were just friends and nothing improper had happened. Jessie had kept a distance from him and he from her. Trevor knew Dylan wouldn't lie to him and he felt appeased.

The door opened, and he turned. The doctor's face lit up in a smile when he spotted Trevor packing the little bag he brought with him.

"I see you're ready to go."

"More than ready."

"Remember, you have to take it easy on that arm. It needs to stay in the sling until I see you again in six weeks. After that, we'll consider taking it out of the sling and getting you into some therapy if you're up for it."

Trevor sighed. Six weeks seemed like forever. The sooner he got into therapy, the more likely it was he'd be ready for the spring training. It was a long shot, but Trevor intended to give it his all. It wasn't time for his career to end. If it were, he would know it in his heart. He was sure he would.

"Okay, Trevor, here are your release papers. As soon as someone is here to take you home you can go."

“Thanks, Doc, for everything.”

The doctor took Trevor’s extended good hand and shook it. “Don’t thank me until you’re back out on the field pitching better than you ever have.”

“From your lips, Doc.”

The doctor smiled and left the room. Trevor turned on the news and sat down on the bed to wait. Coach said he’d arrange for someone to come and get him since the team had a game that night, and neither he nor any other member of the team would be there when he was released. It was almost three in the afternoon, and he hoped that the arrangements Coach made, involved Jessie taking him home.

An hour later, he learned that he wasn’t to be so lucky. Michael, Assistant Coach Max Devin’s son, walked through the door, and he had to stop the groan that welled up inside him. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Michael. It was just that he had wished that Jessie would be the one to pick him up.

“Hey, Slider, what’s up?” It had been so long since anyone had called him by his nickname it sounded good. It gave him hope that one day he’d be back on the mound listening to the chant of the fans. He imagined that day, and that when it came, Jessie would be there in the stands cheering him on.

“Ready to blow this pop stand?”

Michael laughed and swung an arm around Trevor’s shoulders. Together, they walked down the hall to the elevator. As he walked out of the hospital, he grimaced when he saw the press that surrounded the entrance.

“How’d they know?” He asked out of the corner of his mouth hoping no one but Michael would hear.

“You’re big news--in the sports world anyway. Everyone wants to know what your plans are.” Michael answered him in the same manner the question had been asked.

Trevor groaned and pasted a bright smile on his face when the reporters tossed questions at him.

“What are your chances of playing again?”

“With physical therapy, the doctors are optimistic.” Trevor answered with more confidence than he had.

“Will you be ready by spring training?”

“With luck” Trevor said.

Trevor smiled wider and waved while he pushed his way through the nagging reporters. Once he was ensconced in Michael's car, the smile disappeared. Michael sped out of the parking lot and headed toward Coach Kirk's house. The ride was silent. His mind was tormented by his thoughts. Uncertainty clouded his mind. Everyone wanted an answer that he couldn't give. They wanted to know if he could play again. He thought about how different life had become in just a few short weeks. At first, he thought his life was over. Playing the game meant everything to him. That hadn't changed, but Jessie had planted the seeds in his mind that even if he couldn't play, he could still be involved in the game. The question was, how? Was it something he even wanted to consider? Pitching was what he wanted, but if he couldn't?

Being with Jessie gave him peace of mind. It calmed the fear that bubbled up inside him when she wasn't around. If anyone had told him at the start of the season that he might never play again and that he would fall in love with Coach's daughter, he'd have laughed in that person's face. But he'd be damned if that isn't what happened.

"Need help in?"

Trevor looked up, startled to realize that they had already reached the coach's house.

"Yeah, I don't think I can get my bag, and I know I can't open the bottle of pain pills they gave me."

"Okay, I'll see you settled Slider, and then I have to get to work. I know the team misses you, Trev. It will be nice to see you back on the field in a couple of months.

Trevor shook his head. He wished he had Michael's confidence. Maybe, once he got into therapy, he'd start to feel better about things. All he knew right now was that his damn shoulder hurt more than the time he'd gotten a splinter in his dick. And that had been damn painful.

Trevor fought the dizzying exhaustion that the pain pills caused him. A glance toward the clock showed that it was ten minutes after seven. Jessie should have been home an hour ago. He was worried. He grabbed the phone, dialed her cell phone number, and cursed when he didn't get an answer. Disgusted, he turned on the TV and listened while the announcer talked about Cage Lawson and how well he'd been doing since taking over for Trevor. Someday the kid would have a great career—with another team.

When he was well, Trevor would be taking back his spot on the Devils. The thought made him smile. The game had just started when he drifted off into a deep sleep with the smile on his face still in place.

Chapter 14

Jessie laughed when Briana and her flavor of the month, as she described him, danced by. It was so nice to have a girlfriend here. She remembered the times Chrissy and Carly had dragged her to Nina's for drinks and dancing. When Bri asked her to come to Catamount with her tonight, she had been hesitant. Trevor was coming home tonight and although she hated to admit it, she missed him. The invitation had been a wonderful treat, and needing to put some space between her and Trevor, she had accepted. To her surprise, she was having fun. In Kansas, she had always hung off to the side, more like the outcast despite Chrissy and Carly's best attempts to include her. Tonight, the doubt that had always plagued her in social situations like this did not exist. Bri had gone out of her way to be welcoming and treat her like she was just one of the girls, and Jessie accepted it for what it was and enjoyed the night.

It was different for her. The new start in Santa Fe was turning out to be more wonderful than she could have ever expected. People with the exception of her father's team didn't see her for the girl she once was. The one who was either too forward or too reserved, she was just Jessie, and that was nice.

"Would you like to dance?"

Jessie turned and smiled at the man who stood just behind her. His blond hair hung in his eyes. He was about the same height as she, and rather skinny for her taste. She thought of the dance she and Trevor shared in the kitchen and wished it were he who stood there beaming down at her. Jessie pushed the thought from her mind, and nodded. The man took her extended hand and led her out on the dance floor.

"The band is good tonight," he said louder than was necessary for her to hear him.

“Very!” They danced their way through the crowd until they were almost right in front of the band. When the song ended, she started to thank him for the dance but was pulled up against him when a slow song began to play.

“I’m Adam.”

“Nice to meet you, Adam. I’m Jessie.”

“I’ve never seen you here before, Jessie.”

She took in the kind features of his face and she relaxed a little when he moved her across the floor. He was a good dancer, but she was a little uncomfortable with the familiar way in which he held her. With a slight pull, she drew herself back from him until she put a comfortable space between them, but they were still close enough to continue the dance.

“I’m new in town. Been here a little over a month.”

“I see. Well, I guess I’m lucky that you chose Santa Fe.”

Confused, she gave him a half smile. “Why is that?”

“Well, if you’d moved anywhere else, I never would have met you.”

She laughed at that and relaxed again while they danced. He had taken her hint and did not try to hold her any closer. She was grateful for that.

Several dances later, Briana danced up beside her and said, “Hey, Chickie, we need to get outta here. My babysitter has to get home and we have to get up early. Remember we have the field trip we’re supervising.”

Jessie had indeed forgotten about the day trip to the park they had planned and knew that five A.M. would come sooner than she wanted it to. A bright smile lit her face when she turned to Adam and said good-bye. He raised her hand to his lips and looked up at her through his sexy sky blue eyes.

“Until we meet again, Jessie.”

Jessie laughed and pulled her hand back. With a final wave, she turned and hooked her arm through Briana’s. They made their way out of the club.

“He was good looking,” Briana gushed while they drove toward their office so Jessie could get her Jeep.

“Yeah, but he was so affected. I don’t know, Bri, he was nice enough but he was one of those guys that think they are so great, a woman should just fall at their feet.”

Jessie caught the wayward glance that Briana shot at her. “You think I should have given him my number?”

“Would it have hurt? If nothing else, you’d have gotten a night of great sex out of it!” Briana laughed when Jessie turned several shades of red. “Girl, I never would have guessed you were so shy.”

Jessie was uncomfortable again. Talking about sex wasn’t her idea of a good time so she said nothing at all. Several minutes later, Briana swung the beat-up Camry into the parking lot and turned to Jessie.

“Thanks for coming tonight. Tanya’s little girl is sick and Laura had a date.”

A little twinge in her chest had Jessie drawing back. She took in the other woman’s dark hair and round face. Her brown eyes rounded when she realized what she said.

“Oh, Jess. I didn’t mean it like that. I wanted you there because I like you. I didn’t invite you just because no one else could go.”

Jessie saw the sincerity in her eyes and relaxed. Both times, she’d gone out with Bri she had been very welcoming and kind. *It was just a slip of words*, she reassured herself.

“It’s okay, Bri. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Jessie leaned in and hugged her new friend. Brianna waited and watched while Jessie got into her car and started it. Jessie let it run for a few minutes to warm it up and then swung the Jeep out of the parking lot toward her father’s house.

The lights were off, and Jessie was careful to be quiet when she entered the house. She didn’t want to wake Trevor. Jessie tiptoed through the house, glad that Trevor was asleep. It was hard to hide her growing feelings for him. She was almost sure her father had noticed the look in her eyes every time he mentioned Trevor, but she tried to act nonchalant. His knowing grin had spoken volumes though. She just hoped that her father didn’t take a notion to play matchmaker.

The living room was dark, and she cursed when she tripped over something in the middle of the floor.

“I’m sorry. I knocked that off the table and couldn’t find the energy to get up and get it.”

Trevor’s voice cut through her string of curses. Jessie turned her head toward the sofa.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t asleep.” Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she could make out his form on the sofa.

“Can I get you anything before I go to bed?”

It was silent. She didn’t think he was going to answer her, but the whispered word reverberated through her.

“You.”

Jessie’s eyes teared. It was the one thing she couldn’t give him. Ignoring the statement, she asked, “Can I help you into your room?”

“That would be nice, Jess. Thank you.”

Jessie moved around the sofa and knelt down in front of him. When his good hand came to rest of her shoulder, she felt like she’d been shocked. The heat between the two of them amazed her. It was almost as if she had stepped into the middle of an inferno and couldn’t find her way out. He pushed himself up, and she got lost in the depths of his deep blue eyes. It was like being in a trance, watching his head moving closer to hers. Although she had seen the contact coming, when his lips settled on hers, she was surprised. His tongue searched the crease of her lips, but common sense prevailed before she acquiesced.

If she could have seen herself, she’d have probably laughed at the way she jumped back, but in the moment, it was awkward and a bit stifling. Jessie couldn’t breathe, and the arm he had tossed around her shoulders was not helping. The words he had used that day at his house popped into her head, and she uttered them before she could think of how rude they sounded.

“It’s your shoulder that’s broken, not your feet.” He stiffened, and she winced in regret at the bitchy remark. “I’m sorry, Trevor.”

He stared at her for what seemed like a long time. “It’s okay.” Together they walked without a word to their rooms. In the hallway outside her door, he turned to her.

“I missed you, Jessie.”

A smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “Really, and here I thought I was totally forgettable.”

She had meant for her flippant remark to bring humor to the moment, but when he touched his lips to her nose, the moment turned sensual.

“You are the most unforgettable person I’ve ever met.”

His whispered words created a shiver deep within her. The shiver reverberated through her, causing goose bumps to appear on her bare arms. She watched his good hand move up and down her arm and in its wake

creating a heat she had never experienced before. Jessie closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensuality of the moment.

“I want you, Jessie.”

Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked at him. She was not sure of what she saw in his eyes, she wanted to run. There was more than lust in those shining blue eyes, and she couldn’t handle it.

“We don’t always get what we want,” she mumbled and turned and reached for the handle of the door to her bedroom. Once she entered, there was an invisible barrier erected between them and it was safe to turn around despite the fact that she knew he could step over the threshold at any moment.

“Good night, Trev.” The words sounded seductive, and she could have kicked herself. Before she closed the door, she glimpsed him standing there with a goofy grin on his face, and somehow, she knew he’d won this round. *When in the hell did this become a game?* she thought when she slipped her clothes off and pulled the T-shirt she slept in over her head.

* * * *

Jessie watched Malachi play one-on-one with Anthony. There had to be a way for her to get through to him. Every day that week, she had tried to talk to him, and every day he had blown her off like she was nothing.

“Hey, girl, I really hope you’re not mad at me. I didn’t mean what I said the way it sounded.” Jessie turned her head to look at Briana.

“It’s forgotten,” she said and realized she meant it.

She searched for another staff member close to the park. Seeing Tanya, she took Briana’s arm. With a glance at Malachi, she and Bri headed off toward the pool where several of the kids that had come with them today were engaged in a game of pool volleyball.

“Hey, Miss Jessie. I bet you look hella good in a swimsuit,” Rico called out with a laugh.

“That’s totally not appropriate, Rico,” she admonished him.

“Come on! We need an extra player.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. It never failed to amuse her when the kids tried to flirt with her. It was their way of smooth talking her in hopes that she’d get

so flustered she'd forget about asking them personal questions about their lives.

"You know I can't get in there with you, and if I could...I wouldn't, so knock it off, knucklehead."

"Awww Miss Jessie, you wound me." Dramatically, he held his hand over his heart. Jessie threw back her head and laughed.

The shouts from behind her drew her attention. Seeing Malachi and Anthony on the ground swinging at each other, she left Bri by the pool and took off running toward the basketball court.

Tanya wormed her way between the two boys, but Malachi pushed her backward so that she fell into Anthony. Jessie picked up her pace and grabbed his arm while he was about to swing.

His strength almost knocked her to her ass, but she hung on managing to maintain her balance.

"Malachi, stop!" She screamed.

His narrowed brown eyes glared at her, angry, Jessie had never seen such utter hate in one look. "He insulted my momma. I ain't gonna let that go."

"Malachi, calm down. You're not going to fight him."

"Yeah, you think so. It's on. We gonna bang."

Jessie took his arm and led him away from the basketball court where Tanya was working on calming Anthony down. Jessie led Malachi to the track, which sat about a hundred feet away from the pool. A glance at Bri told her that she was being watched while she took the angry teen away from the rest of the group. It wasn't that she was afraid, but she hadn't had that breakthrough with Malachi where she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would not hurt her.

They walked side by side, neither saying a word. Jessie could sense the tension in his body though he was not touching her. Knowing that until he calmed down he would not be receptive to anything she had to say, she remained silent. The more they walked, the calmer he seemed to become. Jessie decided to take the plunge.

"Did your momma teach you that is the way to solve your problems?"

Malachi bristled but didn't say a word. They continued to walk at a brisk pace.

"If I was your momma, I'd be ashamed to see my son out there using his fists instead of his mind."

"You don't know nothin' 'bout my Momma." Malchi balled his fists but kept them at his sides. Jessie watched him struggle to regain control. His shoulders heaved with heavy breaths the effort to find calm brought him. His jeans rode low on his hips, boxers showing above the waistband. His shirt had been discarded somewhere along the way. Sweat glistened off him, and Jessie was reminded of watching an animal in a cage. Wanting to ease the tension, Jessie walked toward him. Malachi, not bothering with an acknowledgement, he walked away from her. Sighing, Jessie picked up her pace and fell into step beside him.

"I know it takes a lot more effort to use your mind to fight back than it does your fists. I know that fighting doesn't solve a damn thing, and I know when someone uses anger to hide who they really are."

"Lady, you don't know shit. Not about me, not about my momma. You did your good deed. Now why don't you bounce? You've earned your cake for the day."

Jessie changed her tactic.

"Okay, Malachi, you're right. I don't know shit. I don't know what it's like to grow up feeling unloved and unwanted. I don't know what it's like to feel like there is no one in this world I can trust, and I sure as hell don't know what it's like to feel so angry that all I want to do is walk into a room and smash everything and everyone in it."

Taking a deep breath, she looked at him. He wore a bored expression, and his dark eyes glinted with a trace of something, perhaps humor? She pressed on.

"My life has been one big bed of roses, and I've spent most of it lounging in luxury. Did you know that the less than thirty thousand dollars a year I make here is actually play money for me? All I have to do is, put up with smart-mouthed, little ingrates like yourself. That's what I do for kicks, don't ya know?"

Jessie stopped. This time, Malachi stopped, too, and turned to her with a glare.

"So if you hate us so much, why do you do it? Besides, you ain't supposed to be talking to me like that. You ain't no real professional." He smirked at her.

Jessie kicked a rock and sighed again. “No. You’re right. I’m not supposed to be talking to you like that. Sometimes breaking the rules is the only way to get through to you knuckleheads.” Jessie looked at him to see if he was calming down at all. His breathing seemed to be evening out so she continued. “Look, Malachi, “I love what I do. I love you kids. Sometimes you guys frustrate me. But I love what I do. But life’s been no picnic for me. We’re not supposed to get overly personal, but sometimes it’s the only way. Let’s just let it stand at I know heartache the same as you. You can bank on that.”

Jessie let the silence hang in the air as Malachi digested what she had said. The rustling of the leaves was all that kept them company for quite some time. But after a while Malachi spoke. “My momma works a lot. My brothers, sisters and I try our best to help out, but it’s hard, ya know. My momma is good. She loves us, but it’s hard.”

Jessie wanted to cry. It wasn’t a huge declaration, but it was something.

“What about your father?” .

“He’s been in jail since before I was born.”

Jessie chose her words carefully because she didn’t want to say the wrong thing, something that could damage the tentative trust he had just placed in her.

“Do you ever talk to him?”

“Nawww, my pops don’t want nothin’ to do with me. But I still see my stepdad every now and again. He and my momma split three years ago. Drugs were more important, I guess, but when he wasn’t geeked up on something, he was aiight.”

Jessie wanted to reach out and pull him close to her, but it was too soon for a gesture like that. Physical contact between youth specialist and clients wasn’t allowed, but like most youth specialist, she believed in the power of a good hug. She settled for a half smile before she turned and began walking again.

“Why you care, Miss Jessie?”

“I care because there was a time when I’d have given anything to hear that someone cared.” It was the honest-to-God truth. Although sometimes giving those tiny bits of personal information provided ammunition for them to use later, she had always believed in giving it to her clients straight.

“Thanks, Miss Jessie.” His face was so serious, and she sensed that tomorrow would be another battle of wills and trust, but for today, she knew she’d gotten through to the stubborn angry kid beside her, and it made her happy.

“So you’re gonna drop it? I don’t want to hear nothing about you banging with Anthony.”

“Miss Jessie—“

She cut him off with a gesture. “If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for your momma. Think about how she’d feel seeing you come home all beat up or worse arrested for assaulting another kid.”

“I wouldn’t be the one beat up. He’s the one that’s gonna get beat down.”

Too late, she realized her mistake. He stared off toward the basketball court where Anthony was engaged in another game of one-on-one, it hit her that she’d made it seem like he was the one who would lose.

She placed a gentle hand on his arm. “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

“You don’t come from where I do. Living on the streets, you ain’t got nothin’ but your pride. You let someone take that and you ain’t got nothin’.”

Jessie watched Malachi stalk across the field in the center of the track. He flopped down on a bench next to the pool. She ambled toward the rest of the group. It was up to Malachi now to make the right choice. If she pushed, she would push him right into what she had tried to talk him out of.

* * * *

Malachi watched Miss Jessie walk by him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sad look she aimed at him. He didn’t want or need anybody’s pity. Who in the hell did she think she was, making assumptions about him? She didn’t know shit about him or where he’d come from. His Momma didn’t raise him to fight, but she didn’t raise no fool neither. The one thing that stopped him from going over there and pounding the hell outta Anthony right now was that he didn’t want to put no more stress on his Momma. Malachi sat there brooding, and realized that without knowing it, Miss Jessie had made her point. He glanced over at the lady in question and saw she had joined in with Anthony and Diego on the court.

Malachi dragged his heels while he walked toward them. Without a word, he got into position and caught the ball that came toward him. He turned and tossed the ball at Miss Jessie. She lined up for the shot and missed, he knew she would. They met each other's eyes, and a bright smile lit her face. Malachi decided he liked her.

Chapter 15

Trevor shook his head in disgust when the physical therapist left the house. Six weeks had passed since his surgery. Today, he put aside the sling for good. During his therapy session, he realized just how weak he had become. It pissed him off. Doubt filled his mind about whether he'd ever be able to pitch again and the thought was depressing.

He turned in a circle taking in the massive living room that was so bare it was almost uncomfortable. Coach needed a decorator to spruce things up a bit. God knew he could afford to hire someone to make his house a home. He stopped at the single addition to the house in his time there, a lone picture of Jessie. He smiled at the picture. She borrowed one of his jerseys for the night and wore a Devil's cap with her hair pulled through the back. She stood on the pitcher's mound and was aiming a smile down at home plate. He imagined she could strike out more opponents with just that smile than he could with his best pitch.

The addition of the picture had been nice. It was a show of the progress Coach Kirk had made with his daughter. The season had come to a not so exciting end when the Cardinals knocked them out of the playoffs, a tough team to beat even for the most seasoned pitcher. As it stood, the night they went into their final game, Cage Lawson was up to pitch, having had three days of rest. He was no match, for the first-rate pitcher on the Cardinals. The Devils lost by a landslide.

With Coach Kirk home so much more often, the dynamics between he and Jessie had improved dramatically. With a sigh, Trevor walked down the hallway to his room. It was time for him to go home. He was no longer incapable of managing on his own, and it seemed silly to let his own home sit empty just so he could stay there, close to Jessie.

Trevor was bored when he was alone which was far too often for his taste. Jessie was loving her job and spent a great deal of time there. It

seemed she was even enjoying making new friends. She spent a lot of time with Briana, and occasionally she and Dylan went out. A few times, she even went out with some guy named Adam that Trevor did not like at all. He was a short, blond-haired man who looked at her with eyes full of lust, and Trevor had a hard time controlling his temper every time he came by to pick her up. Jessie seemed to like him though, so he kept his mouth shut. The sexual tension between Jessie and himself continued to mount when they were together, and he wondered when it was going to explode. They continued to maintain a wonderful friendship, but the tender moments, and near-intimate caresses came far more often these days.

Exhausted, he could think of nothing better than a nap. He sank down on the sofa, closed his eyes and soon a smile dawned on his face while he slipped away into a fulfilling dream. He dreamt of the roar of the crowd, the high of chasing the perfect game, and of Jessie's smiling face as she watched him with pride shining in her eyes from the stands behind home plate.

Laughter woke Trevor from the satisfying sleep he had drifted into. He could hear Jessie's excited chatter coming from the kitchen. Sitting up, he stretched and got to his feet. When he pushed through the door of the kitchen, the beauty of the woman who had stolen his heart and locked it up tight sat there talking to her father. He wanted to sweep her up into his arms now that he had use of them both, but restrained himself. He looked at Coach Kirk and it was so nice to see him smiling and paying rapt attention to the girl who believed she was his daughter.

"What are you making Jess?" Trevor asked

"Just sandwiches and cucumber salad, would you like some?"

"Absolutely, I'm starved."

Trevor pulled out a chair next to Coach and sat down.

"What'd your therapist say?" Coach asked him.

"It's time I start putting this arm to use again." Trevor answered.

"You say that as if you are afraid."

Jessie's voice drew his attention. The look on her face was tender, almost loving. One would have to be a fool not to see that she cared very much about him. The last time he had tried to talk to her about it, she insisted that they had to continue to be just friends. He sensed her fear of her feelings and left it alone, wanting her to come to terms with it on her own.

"I guess I am." He sighed. "My ability to use or not use this arm is a big factor in my future."

Jessie stirred vinegar and sugar into a bowl of cucumbers, sprinkled some kind of spice over it, and brought it to the table. He watched her reach up, grab three plates out of the cabinet, and move back to the table to set the plates in front of them. After pulling out a drawer, she grabbed three of the silver forks with gold tips that she had bought and set those next to the plates. Turning back to the pan on the stove, she flipped the sandwiches one last time before placing them on a plate and setting them in the center of the table.

He was surprised when she pulled out the seat next to him rather than her father. He laid his arm around her shoulders. When she turned her face up to his, he smiled. "Thank you for lunch, Jessie." It was a simple gesture, but the tenderness of the moment had her turning a light pink.

Coach cleared his throat and reached for the bowl of cucumbers.

"So Coach—"

"Season's over now, call me Dan," he interrupted.

Trevor looked at him in surprise. He'd been on the team for years and even in the time that they had spent together off the field; he'd never been invited to call Coach Dan. It made him feel welcome and, in an odd way, eased the fear he had about what might happen if he couldn't play. Somehow, just the simple request to call him by his first name, seemed to say that he was his equal and Trevor an intense pride filled him.

"Okay, Dan, what do you have planned for this afternoon?"

Dan said nothing for several moments. Trevor became uncomfortable when the silence stretched on.

"I am going to take a look at some video footage sent up from the minors."

Air whooshed out of him, like he'd been punched. He didn't need to be told that Coach was looking for a new pitcher to replace him. Just in case. A drive deep inside him pushed at him to work harder. He wouldn't sit back and do nothing while his spot on the team was in jeopardy.

"Trevor—"

"It's okay, Dan. I understand. You have to be ready for next season. I'm going to work my ass off to get there, but you need to be prepared, just in case."

Dan Kirk eyed Trevor and the respect in his eyes was not lost on Trevor. Coach nodded at him, he was glad that he was at least being told the truth. It gave him a sense of stability to know what was going on in this one most important aspect of his life.

“Jessie, do you have plans this afternoon?” Coach addressed his daughter.

A ten-thousand-watt smile lit her face. “I’m taking Malachi to the zoo.”

Trevor adored the fact that she so obviously loved her job. It made her even more endearing. It was hard work, what she did. He admired her for it.

“Care if I tag along?” Trevor asked.

Jessie looked at him and shrugged. “If you want to.”

He thought about it for a moment. A trip to the zoo would be nice. He hadn’t been for a long time. Jessie was going to be with him, and he was sure it would be the most spectacular day he’d had in a long time. “I’d love to,” he said.

* * * *

Malachi was a great kid. Trevor now knew what it was that Jessie saw in the young man. When they had picked him up, he was almost in awe of Trevor’s presence, and it was humbling to Trevor. The hour-long drive had seemed more like ten minutes while Malachi inundated him with questions. Jessie laughed and said, “How come you didn’t take to me like that? You made me work for even a smile.”

Malachi responded in an almost bashful voice, “That’s because you want to get all up in my biznezz, he don’t.”

Trevor grinned at her and could imagine young Malachi in the back seat sticking out his tongue at her.

“It’s a man thing.” Trevor added holding back a laugh at the look of mock outrage that crossed her face.

They walked through the entire zoo at least twice, and he felt sorry for Jessie, who looked more than a little exhausted as she sat on a bench sandwiched between him and Malachi.

“Malachi, you really need to try out for the youth center’s basketball team. You’re good.”

“Nawww, man, I ain’t that good.”

“You sell yourself short way too much, ‘Chi,” Jessie said using the affectionate nickname she had given him. “You can be whatever you want to be. All you have to do is try.”

Jessie looked at Malachi, and Trevor would be damned if the sincerity in her eyes couldn’t convince a nympho to become a priest. It was the first time he’d seen her at work, and he admired her for it.

“I can’t. Just drop it, Miss Jessie. It ain’t all that anyway.”

“Why can’t you?” She was persistent. Trevor had to give her credit for that.

“Let’s bounce. I gotta go see my boo.”

Jessie sighed, but appeared to give up when she rose to her feet. He saw the unsteadiness of the first step she took, but he was one step too many behind her and couldn’t catch her when she started to fall.

“Miss Jessie! You okay?” Malachi shouted. He reached out and caught her before she hit the ground.

Trevor rushed to her side and put his good arm around her to help her stand. He looked at her with concern.

“It’s just the heat. That’s all. I’ve been out in the sun too much.” Trevor didn’t buy that. It was warm for mid-October, but it wasn’t outright hot.

“Jessie, are you sure you’re okay? It’s not that hot out here.”

“I’m sure. It’s just the sun, and all the walking. I’m afraid I’m feeling under the weather.”

Trevor looked at Malachi and they nodded at each other. They moved into place each on one side of her.

“This is silly, I’m fine.”

“It’s not silly, Miss Jessie. You always up in my biznezz tryin’ to help me. Now it’s my turn to do one li’l thang for you.”

Trevor almost laughed aloud when Jessie rolled her eyes. The woman was difficult. She gave so much to others but had such a hard time accepting others wanting to give to her. Gingerly, they made their way to her Jeep and settled her into the passenger side.

Trevor held the door for Malachi while he climbed in behind her, and then he climbed behind the wheel. Although he hadn’t driven since his injury, he had little choice now, and he was anxious to see just how well he could handle the task.

Pain shot through his shoulder when he shifted into reverse, and then into drive, but once the car was moving, the pain was minimal.

Jessie sat next to him, and he placed a hand on her thigh. Her eyes traveled down to the hand on her thigh then back up to his eyes. He saw the spark of desire in the grey depths, but ignored it. She was in no condition for the passion he was sure would explode between them if he let go of his emotions.

Malachi gave him directions back to his house. While they drove, Trevor tried not to let the condition of the houses shock him. It made him sick though, that some people had to live like that. Run down houses, and thick metal bars gracing the windows and doors of nearby stores. When he stopped in front of a dilapidated brick building that looked like it needed to be condemned by the health department, he turned to Malachi and reached out his good hand.

“Good to meet you, Malachi.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, ’Chi.” Jessie said. “Think about what we talked about. You can do it.”

Malachi’s eyes traveled to Jessie. “No disrespect, Miss Jessie, but look around you. Do you think my momma can afford all the extra costs that would come from me playing on an organized team? I got brothers and sisters that need things too. My momma works hard enough for just what we got. She don’t need no added pressure of me trying to ball with that center.”

Jessie met his eyes and shook her head. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. If you want to play, you just let me know and I’ll take care of it.”

“I ain’t no charity case, Miss Jessie. You’re the nicest lady I ever met. I don’t know why you care so much, but I ain’t takin’ no money from you. I’ll do just fine on my own.”

“You call fighting and stealing doing fine? You like running for your life while your enemies shoot at you? You like your momma having to worry about whether you’re coming home that night or not?”

“Stop, Miss Jessie! I ain’t got nothing but the hood. It’s who I am, and nice as you is, you ain’t gonna change that.”

“You could have so much more. You just have to decide to take it.”

Trevor realized she had tenacity. He didn’t think he’d have the kind of courage it took to tell it straight without sugar coating it. He realized in large

part, that's what made Malachi listen, when he probably would have closed the door on another.

"Feel better, Miss Jessie." He slammed the back door before Jessie could utter a word. A crooked smile turned up the corners of her mouth, "I'm actually getting through to him. It may not seem so, but when I first started working with him, he wouldn't even talk to me."

Trevor smiled at her. "If anyone could get through to him, I know it's you."

Jessie seemed even more exhausted when she reached down and shifted the car into drive for him. His hand inched up a little higher on her thigh while he drove. He was right, today was magnificent. Not just because he enjoyed Jessie's company, but the young man she was so fond of had made a deep impression on him. All his life things had been handed to him. Not that his family had been rich, but they hadn't been poor either. When his career in the Majors began, he didn't fear failure. Baseball was something he'd done all his life. More important, he knew he had people that would support him if he did fail.

He thought about the things Malachi had said before leaving, he began to think that maybe Jessie was right. Not being able to pitch didn't mean his career was over. It just meant it had changed direction. The wheels started to turn in his head, and by the time they pulled into the driveway, he knew what he would do if he couldn't pitch anymore. It wasn't the time to share that with this precious woman beside him though.

His eyes traveled to her and met her droopy eyes.

"It's time for me to go back home, Jess."

Her eyes widened at his announcement. Trevor laughed. "Don't look so surprised. You knew the time would come."

"It's just that, well, I..." He watched her struggle to find the words and his heart soared. She'd miss him. "I got used to you being here that's all." She finished.

Trevor leaned in and kissed her lips. "You know you're welcome at my place anytime, Jess."

Her hand shot out and cupped his cheek. "How come I can't get you off my mind? I have more of a life here than I ever did in Kansas, you'd think I'd be thrilled, but even when I'm out having a good time, there's always

this nagging thought in my mind wondering what you're doing or how you're feeling."

The seriousness of her eyes disconcerted him. It occurred to him to admit that he loved her, and ask her to accept it and give in to what her heart was telling her, but the desperate tone of her voice told him she wasn't ready.

"Promise me that we won't lose this closeness. Promise me you'll still come see me, and that we'll talk every day."

She looked at him. "I couldn't imagine not talking to you every day."

It wasn't a promise, but it was just as good. Although she didn't realize it, she just admitted how strong her feelings for him were. He'd be patient and bide his time until she was ready for the full impact of the tender love that was blossoming between them.

He opened his door, and made his way around the front of the car to help her out. Hand in hand, they entered the house and he kept his arm around her while they walked to her room. Trevor pushed the door open for her, and watched when she disappeared inside. With the door shut behind him, he walked toward the kitchen to see if there were any delectable leftovers from one of Jessie's infamous meals.

"Hi, Dan," Trevor said when he entered the kitchen and saw Dan Kirk at the table looking drawn and seeming exhausted.

Trevor pulled out a seat across from Coach and met his eyes.

"I'm going to be going back home soon. It's time."

Dan raised his eyebrows, "You're ready?"

"I'm ready. You can't look after me forever. It's time I get back to my own house and my own life. But I'll keep you updated on how I'm doing."

Silence stretched out for several minutes, both Trevor and Dan were lost in their own thoughts.

"I have faith in you, son. I know I'll see you back out on that field come February."

"I hope so. I'm going to work hard to be there."

Trevor respected his Coach. He'd stuck with him through the good times and the bad. Many Coaches would have counted him out after an injury like his. Trevor was grateful. Taking a deep breath, he decided to say what was on his mind.

“Dan, I know it’s none of my business, but don’t you think you should tell Jessie the truth?”

“Why? What good is it going to do her? Finally, she has the chance to know the man she’s always called Daddy. I’ve worked hard to forget all the bitterness and get to know the little girl who was cruelly taken from me.”

Trevor sighed. “I know that, Dan, but Jessie deserves to know why she was deprived of a father’s love all her life. Don’t you think she deserves the chance to know who her father is?”

“I’m her father!” Dan ground out. He breathed heavily as he stared hard at Trevor. “I’m the only one she’s ever known. Why would I go and hurt her by telling her the truth?”

Trevor knew he was overstepping his bounds, but he wanted Jessie to know the truth. He didn’t want to see her get things sorted out here, only to have the illusion be shattered some time down the road.

“Do you really think you can keep it hidden the rest of your life?”

“I’m her father, damn it! Maybe it wasn’t my sperm that created her, and maybe I’ve spent a lifetime resenting her, but she asked me for a chance. I gave it to her. That little girl doesn’t need to know any of this.”

“Maybe, Coach. But maybe the strain that is still there between the two of you, the bitterness over years that can’t be taken back, could be repaired by simply telling her the truth.”

Dan looked at him through narrowed eyes, “Just because you’re in love with her, doesn’t give you the right to dictate to me how to deal with *my* relationship with her.”

Trevor nodded. The man was right, and he knew it. “I just want her to be happy.”

Trevor stood and walked toward the refrigerator. He had no sooner turned his back then Dan gasped and the kitchen door hit the wall with a loud bang.

When he turned toward the door, it seemed like a fist was crushing his heart. He stared at Jessie, who was pale and exhausted, yet rage was written all over her face. Trevor couldn’t help cursing himself. Why couldn’t he have saved the conversation with Coach for a time when there was no chance Jessie would over hear? Warily, he watched her advance toward the table where Coach sat.

Chapter 16

Jessie couldn't believe what she'd heard. *It can't be true. I would know if he wasn't my father*, she thought. Her eyes couldn't leave the face of the man she'd always believed was her father. Searching for some similarity, a trace of denial, love--she didn't know.

"Is it true?" The rasp in her voice gave away her distress.

Unwanted tears fell down her cheeks when her father opened his mouth but snapped it shut without a word. His steel grey eyes filled with sadness. His confirming nod was slow. His voice was almost an affront to the silence that stretched between them "It's true."

She closed her eyes, and she shook her head as if to make the truth of his confession go away with the motion. Opening her eyes, she came back to reality and sank to her knees. Deep wrenching sobs tore from her chest. "My whole life is a lie." She cried, unable to meet the eyes of the man she had always called father.

The gentle arms that settled around her were comforting. Jessie wanted to push him away, but at that moment, the one thing that seemed real to her was Trevor Malone, and she relished the strength that he gave her. Her tears subsided when he stroked her back and cooed loving words in her ear.

"Why?" The vehemence in her voice surprised her. Resting her head against Trevor's chest, she turned and looked up at Dan Kirk. She had never seen him look so broken.

"Your mother threatened to ruin me if I ever told."

Hatred filled her. She stared at him. "Oh yes, your precious career. I always thought that was why you didn't come to see me. In my mind, I made excuses for you. I made you out to be some kind of hero who would one day come riding in and save me." A ragged breath escaped her. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks. "But it wasn't your career that kept you

away. You hated me because I'm not your daughter. Why didn't you just tell me? Let me find my *real* father so I wouldn't have spent my entire life wondering why the one man who should love me the most didn't!"

"I did love you, Jessie. You were the light of my life. Even when I found out you weren't mine, I wanted you—"

"Spare me your lies. I don't want to hear anymore."

Jessie moved away from Trevor, walking closer to Dan, searching for some sign that this was all just some sick joke. She found none. Drawing in a ragged breath that burned her to the core, she whispered, "I guess you don't have to pretend anymore now. Go back to your bland, boring life alone. I never want to see you again."

Jessie turned on her heel and stalked out of the kitchen. When she entered the room she had come to think of as hers, she closed the door and sank against it. Breathing deep, calming breaths, she looked around at the personal touches she had added since moving in. *I shouldn't have bothered. I knew I didn't belong. I've never belonged anywhere*, she thought. She ignored the knock on the door. Her mind was made up, and no amount of explanation could change it. After pulling out her suitcases, she packed her belongings. When she was done, she took one last look around the room and opened the door. Trevor stood there waiting, his face drawn and tired. Lines of worry creased his brow. He reached out and cupped her cheek.

"Where are you going?" he asked

"I don't know. Anywhere but here." Her voice was cold and steely, unwavering with her determination

"Come home with me."

The pity she heard in his voice had her drawing back her shoulders. "I don't need pity Trevor."

"Good because I don't give pity. I care about you, Jess. You're upset, and I'm not letting you leave here with nowhere to go. I have a big enough house. You can stay there with me, just until you find somewhere to go. No strings, no expectations. You'll have a room of your own just like here. It's not like we haven't been cohabiting anyway. We're just changing location. "

"It's not the same. Here, there was my dad—"

"Who was hardly ever here. Don't act like you are afraid to be alone with me, Jess." Sincerity showed in Trevor's eyes.

Jessie sighed. "I suppose you're right. But it's only temporary," Jessie said, knowing there wasn't anywhere else she could go at the moment. She'd start looking for her own apartment tomorrow. But for tonight, what was the harm?

Maybe it wasn't the optimal solution, but she didn't know that there was any other. There was no way in hell she was going to run back to Kansas and let those people that called themselves her family rub her face in how wrong she had been. She didn't have any friends anywhere else in the country, she wasn't all that close to Chrissy and Carly anymore. All she had was the fragile friendships she had made with a few people here, and she certainly didn't want to put them out with her trauma.

"Will you help me pack?" Trevor asked, his tone a bit lighter now that a decision had been made. She nodded and followed Trevor into his room.

A heavy knock on the open door disrupted the silence that had settled over them while they packed. Jessie didn't bother to turn. Her movements became more rushed. She paid less attention to avoiding wrinkles in Trevor's clothes and more to just getting the hell out of there.

"You can't just walk out of here without discussing this."

"Coach, I think—"

"Trevor, I think you've said enough today. I'd like to talk to Jessie." Coach's voice was cold.

Jessie looked at Trevor out of the corner of her eye. Catching his gaze, she saw the glint of anger pass through him, but it disappeared quickly.

"You can't make her talk to you."

Jessie couldn't help but fall in love with Trevor just a little more at the supportive and protective stance he had taken. She knew that it would have been easier for him to side with Dan. Trevor was taking a big risk in angering his coach while he was still disabled and unsure of his future.

"Please, Trevor." Dan's voice was strained and pleading.

"I have nothing to say." Jessie spoke up for herself. "It's all too much. My whole life was a lie! I can't deal with this—with you right now. I'm leaving, and there's not a damn thing you can do to stop me." The hurt she tried to hide came through in her voice. Clearing her throat, she picked up a pile of clothes Trevor had laid on the bed and stuffed them into a duffle bag.

"Jessie, you can't just walk away," Dan pled with her.

"Watch me," Jessie countered. Finally, she turned to face him and pinned him in place with an angry glare. "You've had my whole life to tell me the truth. To make things right! You chose not to. Now I make the choices, and I choose to leave!" Anguish near to boiling over within her pushed out each hateful word.

Before she made a real fool of herself and lost control, like a little child, Trevor was there, wrapping an arm around her. Jessie drew strength from the contact.

"I won't give up," Dan said with determination.

"And *I* won't give in." Jessie held back bitter tears as she watched the play of emotions cross Dan's face. Using his better judgment, he turned and walked away, giving her the space she needed. Some of the tension left her and she moved back to the bed, picked up the remaining clothes, and with all her might shoved them into the duffle bag.

Jessie slung the bag over her shoulder, and grabbed the handle of the small rolling suitcase. Without a word, she walked from the room, out of the house and to the Jeep. The cool night air did nothing to diminish her heated anger. Seconds later, Trevor joined her and helped her settle into the passenger side. It was silent on the way to Trevor's house except for low hum of a sad country song on the radio. It was fitting she thought.

When they pulled into his driveway, Jessie turned to him and said, "Thanks." She saw tenderness and understanding in his eyes but not an ounce of pity—it warmed her heart.

"You're welcome, Jessie."

* * * *

Jessie stood alone in the room that Trevor had shown her to. Surprise had filled her when he opened the door and she saw the canopy bed decorated in peach and white. The frilly pillows arranged in the center made her smile. The dresser against the wall looked ancient, its scarred wood told stories of years of use. The pretty peach of the walls made the room seem bright and cheerful, a contrast to the blackness inside.

With the few possessions she owned unpacked and put away, Jessie rocked back on the bed and let the tears come once again. For years, she had protected her heart from hurt. *Why couldn't I have just left well enough*

alone? I was just fine on my own. Even though she told herself that, she knew it wasn't the truth. Not that she wasn't capable of taking care of herself, but she was tired of being emotionally dead.

These past few months in Santa Fe had taught her that she could allow herself to be close to others and enjoy their company. Jessie thought about what they were doing. Were they happy? She should call them. It had been a while since she had heard from them. In the back of her mind, she wondered if they had decided life without the town misfit was much better for them. It was nice to be able to dispose of that label and not feel branded. Here in Santa Fe, people didn't see the town misfit, they just saw Jessie, and she wasn't alone anymore. There were no expectations for her to live up to and she had enjoyed the slow relationship she had been developing with her father. *He's not my father! Is my real father out there somewhere? Should I look for him?*

The knock at the door tore her from her thoughts. "Come in," she called wiping the tears from her eyes. Trevor pushed the door open but did not take the steps that would invade her space. Even though it was his house and he could go where he pleased, he seemed to respect that this was her space while she was here.

"Come in." Her voice was pathetic and weak. She cleared her throat in an attempt to continue in a stronger voice. "Please," she said a bit louder, firmer, and more sure of herself. All of her life she had rolled with the punches, taken life the way it came and dealt with it. She had never been a fainting daisy, and she had never been one to sit around sniveling while wallowing in misery. She was shell-shocked that was all. Once the moment passed, she would be fine just like she always was.

The weight of Trevor's body settling next to her drew her eyes to him. "How is therapy going?" she asked trying to sound cheerful.

"Jessie, don't pretend that none of this happened. It's okay to be upset."

Jessie cupped his face in her hands and leaned forward kissing his cheek. "You're sweet, Trevor, you really are, but I'm fine. It was a shock that's all." As if to prove her point, she pasted a smile on her face and hoped that he'd leave it alone. It had been a mistake to let him get so close to her in a few weak moments of need. It was one thing to be glad to have friends, but that didn't mean she had to make herself vulnerable did it?

"I should make dinner."

“Jessie--”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I appreciate you giving me a place to stay, but my personal life is just that, personal. Please respect it,” she snapped.

Jessie watched the corners of his mouth tip up in a smile, “It’s not funny,” she began, but she was cut off by his laughter.

“Damn you’re cute when you’re mad.”

“Trevor!” She was exasperated. He had been there. He knew there was nothing funny about her situation. *What the fuck is he laughing at?* She wanted to ask the question aloud, but she was tired. Provoking a fight with him, though their sparring was always a treat, did not appeal to her.

“Jessie, I was only going to tell you that I don’t know how much food I have here. I told my housekeeper to take the perishables home and enjoy them. I told her I would call before I came home and she could go get groceries for me. I never made the call.”

“Oh,” she said snapping her mouth shut.

His renewed laughter had her smiling, and in time, she was laughing right along with him. It was nice. No one had ever been able to break through to her in times of trouble the way he just had. Although she had become a master at hiding herself, she wasn’t quite sure she had hid from him well enough. The time she spent with him was comfortable and more intimate than she had ever experienced with anyone in her life-ever.

Even the time she spent with Dylan, Briana, and Adam, or the girls she had befriended, she could never take her thoughts far from the man who sat next to her. When she had mentioned it to Briana, her friend asked her why she didn’t just give in to the passion that was so obvious and go with the flow. A question she had often asked herself, but Trevor was a star. However down on his luck he was now, he was still a star, and come February, he’d be all about the game again. It wasn’t his profession she had a problem with. It was the man he was when he was in the spotlight. She loved the sweet, gentle, and compassionate person he was now but was sure he would turn back into the ostentatious, womanizing man she had met five years ago. How could she go with the flow when she was sure he would break her heart? She had never been in love before, but she didn’t doubt that she was in love with Trevor Malone. *Why did I have to lose my heart for the first time to someone who will hurt me?* she thought with a deep sense of regret.

"This room is beautiful." Jessie looked around trying to shake away the dark thoughts that plagued her mind.

"It belonged to my mother. She moved in here with me when she got sick."

"It must be nice to have been so close to your parents. I never had that." The words were out before she could stop them.

"It was nice. My parents were my biggest fans and my best friends, right up until they died."

"I've never had anyone that cared about me." Jessie turned her head to gauge his reaction. He wasn't laughing at her and she continued. "I had two friends, Chrissy and Carly. They are great girls who were always there for me. But I was the town misfit. People weren't breaking down my door to try and get to know me."

He cupped her chin and massaged her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"It was my fault, really it was, but there wasn't a single person who made me want to be different."

"Have you met someone that makes you feel that way now?" His eyes lit up in some unnamed emotion and a flutter stirred in her belly.

"It's different here," she answered evading the question. "I don't have a reputation here. Other than the guys on the team and my father, no one here has any expectations of me and how I'm supposed to act. There's no one here waiting for me to make my next big fuck-up."

"So the real reason you came here was for a fresh start?"

Jessie met his eyes. "In some ways. I came here because of my father." She let out a bitter laugh. "Or should I say Dan. My mom and I were never close. I mean we didn't hate each other. I learned to accept her, but I never felt that closeness that a girl should for her mother."

He continued to massage her cheek with his thumb. It was a relaxing sensation that made her let her guard down. It was hard to talk about these things, but somehow, Trevor made it easier. The heady sensations he caused in her made her want to keep talking, for fear of exploding into flames of passion. She wasn't ready to go there. Her voice trembled, but she continued.

"I never really had the chance to get to know Dan. I'd heard stories about him from my mother and her family. Even when he did come and visit, he was cold and aloof. So when Mom died, I thought, 'This is my

chance to get out of here and start over.' What better place was there to go than the place than where a man I had always secretly admired lived."

Jessie leaned forward until her forehead touched his chin. In a breathy whisper, she said, "I didn't understand why my father hated me, but I grew up loving him. Or the image of him the media presented. I wanted so much to find a home here."

His arms settled around her shoulders, and she sighed into his shoulder. The gentle stroking of his hand at her nape comforted her.

"You have found a home here."

The words were spoken with such tenderness she knew he wasn't referring to Santa Fe, but rather the home that she had indeed found in his arms. The confusion in her mind would not allow her to voice her gratitude or love.

"I'm hungry," she said, pulling out of his arms.

"Want to go to La Casa Sena?"

Jessie smiled. "Sounds delicious."

Trevor stood and grabbed her hand. "Let's go, beautiful"

A while ago, Jessie had thought her world had ended, and now, here she was strolling out the door with Trevor, more light-hearted than she'd ever been in her life. It was a nice. Maybe it was the night that she should stop fighting the crazy attraction to him and let herself enjoy him, even if it would break her heart in the end.

Chapter 17

Trevor admired the beautiful, traditional Southwestern architecture when he and Jessie strolled toward La Casa Sena. He reached out and pulled the door open, holding it while Jessie stepped in front of him. The spicy aroma of the delicious regional food made his mouth water. It was late, and the usual dinner crowd had already diminished. Right away, the host led them to a small table in front of the stone fireplace. The high ceilings in the restaurant made the dining room seem huge, though in reality it was small and cozy. Trevor smiled as he watched Jessie look around at the high-end paintings that adorned the walls. The place was classy, owned by the same man who owned the nearby art gallery. It was tasteful and immaculate in its decorum.

A few fans stopped by the table and wished him a speedy recovery. Trevor thanked them and signed a few autographs before turning his attention back to Jessie. She looked beautiful sitting there in the sunset orange dress she had changed into before they left the house. Her long hair fell in waves around her shoulders. The candlelight illuminated the red tones, and it gave her cheeks a rosy glow. Trevor had been with some beautiful women in his lifetime, but none compared in his eyes to the pretty woman who sat before him. He wondered if it was because he loved her, an admission that came easier each time he made it.

“May I get you a drink?”

“A bottle of Chateau Margaux nineteen ninety-five, please”

The waiter disappeared to prepare the bottle of wine he ordered, and Trevor studied Jessie while she perused the menu. “Do you know what you want, babe?”

Jessie looked up at him a look of wonder upon her face. Trevor loved that about her. She never seemed to expect anything, especially his kindness. It was an endearing quality. He studied her face, his erection was

starting to grow. The attraction between them was becoming stronger, and harder to resist he wanted nothing more than make love to her. Seeing the flush in her cheeks and the spark of desire flare in her eyes, he wondered if it was the night to take their relationship to the next level.

“Trevor, I don’t know how to thank you for changing this night from one of the worst, to one of the best I’ve ever had.”

The gentle smile that lit up her face was special. He took pride in the fact that he’d put it there. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

The waiter appeared at their table again and set a wine glass in front of each of them. With their glasses half full, Trevor waited for the waiter to leave, then picked up his glass, “To you, Jessie.”

She hesitated, but picked up her glass and clinked it against his. The sweet liquid was delicious. Trevor smiled when Jessie licked her lips after her first sip.

“This is delicious. I’ve never had wine this good.”

Trevor smiled and thought how nice it would be to give her many of the things she’d never had. He enjoyed watching her appreciate the finer things in life. It was something most women who went out with him took for granted, but not Jessie.

“Have you thought about what you’d like to eat?”

“Mmmm, I’m going to have the chorizo stuffed, grilled pork tenderloin.”

Trevor lifted his hand to signal the waiter that they were ready to order. He watched the waiter hurry to the tableside. “To start, we’d like the Dungeness crab appetizer; the lady would like the chorizo stuffed, grilled pork tenderloin; and I would like the trout baked in Adobe.”

“Yes, sir, thank you,” the waiter said. He took their menus from them.

Jessie picked up her glass of wine and finished what was left in her glass. Trevor picked up the bottle and refilled her glass. When he set the bottle back in the ice bucket, he began the conversation he knew she didn’t want to have.

“You know you can’t leave things the way they are. You have to talk to him.”

Her face screwed up in distaste and he knew he didn’t have to clarify that the *him* he spoke of was Dan Kirk.

“I don’t.”

Trevor sighed. "Jessie, you should really hear him out. I know it's difficult, and maybe his reasons aren't good enough for you, but he did have reasons."

"Selfish ones." Trevor watched her drain her glass. Anger and coldness had replaced the warmth of moments ago. He wished he had saved it for another time. He had been enjoying the sweet woman she was without all of her defenses raised. He looked at the bottle of wine and lifted her glass, filling it with more of the sweet wine.

"Jessie, maybe they were selfish reasons, but it was a long time ago. Your father is not a bad man. He made bad choices, but I believe him when he says he always loved you."

Jessie just made a muffled snorting noise and picked up her wine. This time, she didn't drain the glass but took a dainty sip like she had done when he made a toast to her. When she met his eyes, he saw the tears that glittered, threatening to fall and he saw her pain. He wanted nothing more than to put the beautiful smile back on her face.

"Malachi is a nice kid. I enjoyed spending the afternoon with you guys."

As he predicted, that put a smile back on her face. "Yes. He tries to act all tough, but once you get beyond that, he's a really sweet kid."

Just like you, he thought.

The waiter reappeared at their table and set their food down in front of them. A comfortable silence settled between them while they enjoyed their meal.

"It's yummy!" she said just before she tucked another bite between her lips. Trevor could have sat there forever watching her savor every bite.

"I agree, sweetheart. It is yummy!" Trevor said smiling

When they finished their meal, the waiter placed the bill in the center of the table. Jessie reached for it, once again impressing him by her willingness to pay, but he settled his hand over hers just before she lifted the black leather folder from the table.

"My treat." It was a simple gesture, but judging by her smile, he could have sworn he'd given her the moon on a silver platter. He leaned in, kissed her full lips, and smiled. He took her hand and led her out of the restaurant.

* * * *

Trevor lay in his bed tossing and turning. His shoulder was killing him. He debated about getting up and taking the pain medicine he knew would help him sink into the elusive slumber he sought. After a few more minutes, he gave up hope of sleep. He rose from the bed and slipped down the stairs. Shrugging on his jacket, he slipped out into the yard and began his warm up exercises that Kyle, his Physical Therapist had taught him. When he was done with warm ups, he grabbed a bucket of baseballs that sat near the door. and moved to the center of the yard and winced as he wound up and threw the ball in the gentle childlike way Kyle had approved of at the thick blue mats hanging on the fence.

Trevor rolled his shoulder back and forth, ignoring the searing pain it caused, then reached down into the bucket to retrieve another ball. Thirty minutes later, the bucket was empty and Trevor walked around the yard picking up the balls and depositing them back in the bucket with disgust. He was throwing like a girl, and he knew it. It had been years since he'd been this green.

With all the balls back in the bucket, he moved back to the makeshift mound, grabbed a ball, and stared down the path at the center of the mat. He wound up and let it go. The ball was in the dirt, and Trevor cursed Kyle had told him to stop at a half hour and he'd pushed himself beyond that. Maybe he should have listened. He hadn't been throwing harder than he should have been though. Surely this girly style of throwing wouldn't damage him more than he already was he thought in disgust. He reached down into the bucket and pulled out another ball. His hands closed around it and he tried to imagine himself as one with the ball. Tossing it back and forth, from hand to hand, he stared at his target. What would his dad say to him? The question stiffened him. It had been so long since his father's death. He had gotten over the pain of the loss long ago, but at that moment, the sense of grief was keen.

Trevor stared off into the distance trying to picture his father's face. The wind blew, and with its howling, came a vivid memory of long ago. Trevor had been injured during a game and had missed half the season. Before the start of his first game after the injury, his father had taken him aside and said, "Son, I know you can do it. You can't let a little pain stop you from what you were destined to do. You love this game and an injury doesn't change that. I want to see your dreams come true, son. Now you go out there

and make it happen.” His father had always had so much faith in him. Trevor wound up again and aimed for the center of the mat. He watched it travel in a straight line toward the mat, excitement welled up within him. Seconds later, the ball hit—dead center. He’d done it! For the only time that night the ball hit that mat, bulls eye, strike zone, even with the pansy ass way he had to throw, it was an accomplishment, and pride swelled inside. Trevor thought he heard a deep chuckle followed by a lone applause and he looked around the yard with a shiver. His eyes caught a glimpse of blue silk near the door of the house and he turned. Jessie stood watching him from inside the sliding glass door. She opened it and stepped out onto the patio when he caught her eye.

“Is there anyone in particular you’re thinking about beaming with that ball?”

She looked damn sexy standing there in that blue silky nightgown with her hair loose and falling in waves over her shoulders.

“No. I couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d start working on my pitching. The therapist says it’s time to put it back to work.”

“I see.” Her voice was husky. “I just heard noise and decided to come and investigate.”

Trevor smiled at her and took another ball from the bucket. He aimed it at the center of the mat. The pain was unreal, but he pushed himself to keep going. He heard the legs of the chair scraping against the concrete and he watched her sink down into the seat, draw her knees up to her chest, and rest her cheek against her knee. She looked like a little pixie sitting there watching him.

When the bucket was empty again, he moved closer to her, rubbing his shoulder while he walked. “It’s cold out here, you must be freezing.” Before the words were out of his mouth, he was drawing her out of the chair and into his arms. Their lips met in a scorching kiss that set him on fire. His hands skimmed across the curve of her waist and he groaned when she pressed her body into his. When she pulled back, he looked into her desire filled eyes and knew that he had to have her. Without a word, he took her hand and led her upstairs to his bedroom. When the door shut behind them, he drew her against him and caressed the sensitive flesh of her earlobe with his tongue.

She pulled at the hem of his shirt, and he moved back just enough to allow her to tug the shirt over his head. She giggled when she tossed the shirt on the floor. Trevor took her hand and led her over to the bed. He caressed her neck with his mouth, his hands wandered to the hem of her nightgown. Ever so slowly, he pulled the gown up over the enticing curves of her body. He groaned when he realized that she was wearing nothing underneath the silk gown. He laid her back on the bed and worshiped her body with his eyes. With a hungry growl, he covered her body with his own. Their mouths met in hot, hungry passion. Her hands settled at the button of his jeans, and his engorged manhood begged for her touch. When the jeans slid down his hips to his thighs, he shifted his position and shook them off in the process. He reached for the band of his boxer shorts, she placed her hand over his, stilling his progress.

“Trevor?”

He tried to get his brain to work. He didn’t want to be a callous ass, but his erection pulsed hot, heavy, craving her touch. It was hard to think of anything beyond that. The frantic pushing at his shoulders stopped him dead. He was horny but he wasn’t dead, her body was stiff. With a groan he dragged his mouth away from her intoxicating skin and rolled off her. He met her eyes but said nothing.

“We need protection,” Jessie said. So caught up in the moment of passion, Trevor hadn’t even thought about using protection. The tentative look in her eyes touched him, and he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I’m glad one of us was thinking right.” With a deep sigh, he moved off the bed and walked to the window. “There’ll be a right time for us, Jessie, I promise.” Trevor lifted the window and allowed cool air to surround him, cooling his desire.

Chapter 18

Jessie stared at the broad, naked shoulders of the man at the window. She hadn't meant to ruin the moment, only to ask him if he had any condoms. Having not expected things to go this far, she had been unprepared. Looking down at her nakedness, she said, "This was a bad idea."

Trevor turned to her and she saw that the fire of desire that still burned bright in his eyes. "It's okay, baby. You were right to stop us." His statement was gentle.

"Look, I didn't expect this to happen. I vowed that it wouldn't. With everything that happened tonight, I guess I just got carried away. I'm human--"

"Jessie, I'm not a randy youth who can't control himself. You were right. Out of all the things we've talked about, we haven't discussed this. I want you to be comfortable." Trevor's voice shook and Jessie could sense his frustration despite his kind words.

Jessie was uncomfortable, she pulled her gown down and wrapped a blanket around herself. Rising from the bed, she moved next to him at the window. "I've been with other men, but it's been a long time for me. Despite the impression I might have given you years ago, I don't and never have slept around."

Trevor slipped an arm around her. "I don't know what made you decide to give yourself to me, when you've fought so hard against it. What you are offering me is a gift and I want it, Jess, I really do—"

"But?" Jessie heard the self-doubt in her voice, and she hated it. Emotional attachments sucked. Why hadn't she had the good sense to run when she knew that this—whatever this was—with Trevor had gone further than she'd ever imagined.

“But right now, you are hurting. You’re angry, and you are looking for validation. Reminding me to use protection was a cold reminder that you are not just some groupie looking to score with the star pitcher.”

Jessie stiffened. “So if I was one of those groupies, you’d have had no problem having sex with me? I don’t understand.” Her voice was tinged with hurt. She couldn’t help it. Jessie was humiliated, and her throat ached with defeat. He’d never want her. Soon, he’d go back to being Trevor Malone, superstar, and she’d be nothing. He’d have a different woman in his bed every night, and she burned with jealousy at the knowledge that he’d not stop himself with them.

“Jessie, I want you.” He took her chin in his hand and forced her to meet his eyes. “God, I want you.” He sounded tortured.

“Then why do you keep rejecting me?” Jessie tried to keep her tone even, her temper had begun rising.

“I’m not rejecting you.” Trevor shoved his hands through his hair. “Jessie, I won’t lie. I’ve had sex with a lot of different women.”

Jessie pulled the blanket closer around her, like she could shield herself from the pain of what he had to say. Forcing coldness into her voice, she said, “You think I didn’t know that?”

Trevor sighed. “Not one of those women mattered to me the way that you do. It’s easy to have sex for the sake of sex, Jess. It’s a lot different when you care about the woman you’re with. I don’t want to hurt you. When we have sex, we will be ready and protected.”

She struggled to comprehend what he was telling her. It was a matter of respect, but she couldn’t help the lingering feelings of rejection. She studied his eyes. “You don’t have to explain, I understand.”

“Jessie, it’s been an emotional night. Until today, you fought tooth and nail against our physical attraction. We both know it was there. You have flirted shamelessly as have I, but you never let me get too close except in rare moments.” Trevor took a deep breath and a couple of steps away from her. Jessie watched him struggle with his composure. He gulped in another breath and then continued. “We have gotten so close emotionally, and I love what we have, but still, up until tonight, you have not allowed me to cross the line you drew in the sand. I just want you to be sure. No regrets. When I take what you are offering, it won’t be a temporary thing. It will be forever.

I want more than just your body. I don't want you to give into temptation because you're hurting and needing to be held."

Such honesty and compassion shone in his eyes, it deflated her temper. With a slow nod, she moved back and sat next to him. "Will you hold me?"

Trevor lay back on the bed and pulled her down next to him. Jessie put her head on his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. It didn't take long for the exhaustion to overtake her and she fell into a deep sleep wrapped up in the safety of Trevor's arms.

* * * *

Jessie turned the radio up and sang along to the Eminem song that blared from the speakers. It had been a bad day, and she couldn't wait to get home. She'd been staying with Trevor for a little over a week now and was surprised by how at home she felt there. Although she'd discussed getting her own apartment, neither one of them seemed to be in any hurry for her to leave.

When she pulled up into the driveway, she groaned at the sight of her father's truck. It was to back away and find something to do on her own for the evening, but she knew the meeting with her father was inevitable. A steady pounding began just behind her eyes, and she knew that before long, she'd have a full-blown headache. Jessie needed to ask Briana to recommend a doctor to her. It had been a while since she suffered from severe migraines, but the recent dizziness and faint feeling was indicative of a new onset of the troublesome headaches. Of course, it didn't help that her medication had run out weeks ago, and she had yet to find a doctor in Santa Fe to treat her.

Jessie pulled her briefcase out of the backseat and took her time making her way to the front door. Taking a deep breath for courage, she unlocked the door and pushed it open. Two sets of eyes focused on her when she crossed over the threshold and shut the door.

"Hi, Jessie."

She wanted to ignore him, however, the commanding presence of the man she had called dad for twenty years demanded that she answer, but she didn't have to be nice about it.

"What do you want?"

“A chance.”

“Fresh out, sorry.” Jessie glared at him.

“Sweetheart, what harm will it do to listen to him?”

Her eyes flickered to Trevor’s face. It occurred to her that it was the first time he was asking something of her. After all he’d done for her, she couldn’t say no.

“Fine,” she grumbled. “But it won’t change anything.”

Trevor moved closer and kissed her cheek. “I’ll be out back tossing around some balls.” She watched him walk to the sliding glass door, shrug on a jacket, and walk outside. Once they were alone, her father didn’t waste any time getting started.

“Jessie, there are some things you need to understand.”

Jessie sank down onto the sofa and stared straight ahead, trying not to let any emotion show on her face.

“I loved your mother when we married.”

Jessie gave him a look of disbelief, how could someone who loved her mother have abandoned her the way her mother said he had.

“When we married, I was an up-and-comer in the majors. I wasn’t home a lot of the time. I traveled a lot with the team, and when I wasn’t traveling, I was busy practicing so I could achieve my dreams.”

Jessie shook her head. So it was true, his own stardom and reputation meant more to him than his family ever had.

“I won’t degrade your mother to you, but I will tell you that she wasn’t faithful to me. I didn’t find out about it until after you were born. I came home one day and caught her in the act. It was then that she told me that you weren’t mine.”

Jessie didn’t find it hard to believe that her mother had been unfaithful. She’d had plenty of relationships before she died, all of which she trashed with her cheating ways. It surprised her that he didn’t trash her mother to save himself. In a way, it earned him a little of her respect. But she would never let him see that.

“I wanted you anyway. I’d spent a year loving you, and I didn’t want to lose you. But your mother wasn’t having it. She wanted to leave, and she told me she’d tell everyone that you weren’t mine.”

“Yeah, I know and you were afraid it would hurt your reputation.” Her snide remark cut him off. Jessie looked up at him, daring him with her eyes to deny it.

“Yes. But I knew I didn’t have a legal leg to stand on,” he finished in a strained voice.

“Well, you didn’t try now, did you? Too risky for your career to try and fight for a daughter you supposedly loved.” It was impossible to keep the hurt out of her voice. “Out of curiosity, what kind of proof did she give you that I wasn’t your child?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean did she give you DNA results? Did you think to ask? Or were you too concerned about your career that it was easier to just accept it?”

Jessie saw his face light up with renewed hope, and she groaned. She’d meant to goad him, not give him an idea. She could see the wheels turning in his head, and she wanted to turn back the clock and take the words back. She didn’t care if he was her father, she honestly didn’t. He’d given her up without a fight, she had known that all her life, but to know that it was to protect his reputation just pissed her off.

“Jessie, I didn’t ask for proof. I know that makes you mad, but I can’t change it. Maybe that is something we should consider.”

Tears welled in her eyes. *Yeah now he wants to give a damn. I don’t think so.* “We could, but there’s one little problem.” She paused and met his eyes. Dan Kirk looked at her, waiting, expecting. “I don’t give a damn if you are or you aren’t. You are dead to me either way.”

With that, she slipped into the kitchen and yanked open the refrigerator. Jessie pulled out the chicken breasts she had left marinating and placed them in a baking dish. She cut several slices of bacon in half and placed them in a deep frying pan. The bacon began to crackle, she minced up some garlic, chopped some mushrooms and onions and poured beef stock into a pot. It was nice to get lost in something that took her mind off things. Maybe she should go to culinary school after all.

The sliding glass door opened in the living room and Jessie glanced at Trevor when he came into the kitchen. Seconds later, he wrapped an arm around her from behind. “Mmm. Smells delicious. What are you making?”

Jessie finished stirring the sour cream into the beef stock and turned to face him.

“Fettucine with a mushroom cream sauce. Is he gone?”

Trevor nodded, and she breathed a sigh of relief. While she finished preparing their meal, she sensed him watching her movements. When she pulled out plates and took them to the table, he took her breath away when he pulled her down into his lap. The look in his eyes spoke volumes, and the emotions that welled up inside her almost choked her.

Their lips met in a heated kiss. Jessie loved when he kissed her. It always seemed so right. Here, in his arms, she knew a safety she’d never experienced before. But she still couldn’t tell him how she felt. Admitting it to herself was hard enough, but he was working hard to be ready for spring training. It wouldn’t be long before he would be done with her, and she would be left picking up the pieces of her life.

The bubbling of the sauce behind her drew her attention, and she laughed when he held on to her hand, pulling her back to him before she could reach her destination.

“I have to stir the sauce.” She giggled.

Twenty minutes later, the steaming pasta sat on their plates. They did a lot more staring at each other than they did eating. The flutter in her belly made her feel warm and fuzzy on the inside. She could get used to these little flutters, she decided, while they both halfheartedly picked at the meal she had prepared.

Chapter 19

Trevor winced in pain when Kyle, the therapist whom he had a love-hate relationship with for the past five weeks stretched his arm above his head. Trevor was getting better with every day that passed, and he was hopeful that in the two short months, which remained until spring training began, he would become strong enough to play.

“Got any plans for tonight?” Kyle asked him.

Trevor smiled, “I’m going to pick up Jessie’s Christmas present.”

Kyle pulled harder, and Trevor made a soft sound of protest. “Think I’ll be ready?” he asked, concentrating on keeping his arm limp and malleable for Kyle.

“To be honest with you, I don’t know. The progress you’ve made is amazing, but I don’t know if it’s enough to get you back out on the field.”

“When will we know?”

“When you go back out on the field and are told to either sink or swim.”

Trevor almost choked. It all seemed so simple, but it wasn’t simple at all. His career was at stake. Although he had figured out what he would do if he couldn’t play anymore, it didn’t make swallowing that bitter pill any better. Trevor smiled as he imagined the look on Jessie’s face when he finally had all the kinks in his plan worked out, he had backing from some heavyweights in the sports industry, and a location mapped out to build the Malone Sports Complex for Underprivileged Children. He had already hired contractors and construction was set to begin after the first of the year.

It excited him to think of the dreams he could make come true through the project. Whether or not he continued to play, this was something he would see through. It was important to him. What was more meaningful was that it would mean the world to Jessie and Malachi.

Jessie and Malachi had formed a very deep bond. Jessie bent over backward to help him, and the kid was so appreciative of her efforts. Every

weekend, she tried to take him out and do something special with him, and often, Trevor tagged along. Malachi was a good kid. Hell, all the kids she worked with whom he had met were good kids. They just needed a break, and he intended to give it to them.

“So what’d you get your girlfriend?”

Trevor rolled his eyes backward to look at Kyle. “She’s not my girlfriend. But I got her a tennis bracelet, a necklace, and some cookware.” A longing formed in Trevor’s chest at the admission that Jessie was not his girlfriend. He wanted nothing more, but she was adamant about not making any kind of commitment to him. Trevor knew there wasn’t another man. Adam and Dylan were the only men she went out with, and Adam had recently started dating Gabriella, who more often than not was with him when he and Jessie went out. And Dylan would never betray him that way.

“That’s a lot of money to spend on someone who’s not your girlfriend. By the way is she still living with you?” The humor in Kyle’s voice drew Trevor’s gaze. He gave him a look that said, “Fuck you!” and Kyle laughed. “I think it’s got all the earmarks of the old ball and chain.”

“Knock it off,” Trevor responded. Kyle massaged his shoulder in silence. Trevor could handle good-natured teasing, but when it came to Jessie, he was one hundred percent serious. What bothered him was that Kyle was right. They lived and behaved like two people in love, but since the night they’d almost made love, there was a definite line that he had not crossed.

“Okay, ten minutes with a heat pack and you’re done for the day,” Kyle said interrupting his thoughts.

On the way home from the therapist’s office, he decided he wanted to surprise Jessie with a nice, romantic dinner. Swinging his car into the lot of the grocery store, Trevor made a mental list of all he would need.

* * * *

Trevor pulled into his driveway with a couple of hours to spare before he expected Jessie to come home. It was enough time for him to get dinner ready for her. Cooking wasn’t something he did a lot, or well, but even he admitted that he made a mean lasagna. He leaned into the trunk of his

Mustang and pulled out the two bags containing everything he needed to prepare his specialty.

As he walked to the door, he wondered if Jessie would enjoy his cooking for her as much as he enjoyed her cooking for him. When he opened the door, he inhaled the scent of coconut and cherry, and he liked it. Jessie had placed incense sticks in the windowsills, saying they drew scent from the heat of the sun. He'd argued that in December, it was too cold, and it was a waste of good incense, but she'd insisted. Trevor wasn't sure if the light scent that wafted through the air was from the sticks or from the bowls of scented dried flowers that she had placed in various places throughout the house. Whatever its source, he enjoyed it.

Trevor moved to his stereo and popped in his favorite CD. The harmonious sound of the Cranberries poured out of the speakers. He gave the volume knob a turn so he could hear it from the kitchen and then headed into the kitchen with the bags of ingredients he had thought to buy.

Trevor was putting the final touches on his lasagna when Dylan walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, man, what's up?"

Trevor turned in surprise. "Hi, Dylan. What are you doing here?"

"On a mission," Dylan chuckled.

Trevor finished sprinkling cheese on the dish and popped it in the oven.

"Want a beer?" Trevor asked opening the refrigerator.

"Yeah, thanks." Dylan answered.

Trevor grabbed a beer for his friend and a bottle of Gatorade for himself. When he turned back around, Dylan had taken a seat at the table, and he moved to join him, pulling out a chair across from him he sank down and met his friend's stare.

"So who sent you?" Trevor asked.

"Coach."

Trevor wondered why. It wasn't like it had been a long time since he had talked to Dan. In fact, he gave him an update on how he was doing at least once a week. "Why?" Trevor asked puzzled.

"I think it's just paranoia. He hasn't seen you in a while, and he wants to make sure you're telling him the truth."

Trevor rolled his eyes. It sounded like Coach.

"So how's the shoulder?"

“Still attached.” Trevor grinned.

“I can see that, smartass. Think you’ll be ready in two months?”

Trevor didn’t know if he would but he couldn’t offer the answer Dylan wanted, when he was still so doubtful himself.

“I don’t know, man. I hope so. I had therapy today.” Trevor paused and took a deep breath before he continued. “Kyle says I won’t really know until I get back out on the field and see how I do.”

Dylan didn’t say anything. It was uncomfortable. It wasn’t like all they had in common was baseball, but it was a big part of their bond. Birds of a feather, he guessed. He knew that his friend didn’t want to upset him by talking about the game when it was something that Trevor wasn’t sure he’d ever play again, but Trevor couldn’t help his frustration. Why couldn’t Dylan just be himself around him anymore? It was the same with all his friends. Every time they came, they tiptoed around him as if they thought his mental stability had been broken rather than his shoulder. Trevor thought about how comfortable he felt with Jessie, and he wished she were there with him now.

“What do you say we go out and toss the ball around?” he asked breaking the uncomfortable silence that had settled between them.

“I’d love to,” Dylan responded. He pushed the chair back and stood up. Trevor followed his friend who led the way to the sliding glass door in the living room. Stepping outside, they each grabbed one of a dozen gloves that sat near the door and the bucket of balls that sat beside the single step.

An hour later, Trevor saw Jessie standing at the window watching the two of them with a bright smile on her face. Jessie turned away from the window and he watched her move toward the kitchen.

“You’re getting sloppy,” Dylan told him when he threw the third ball in a row that missed Dylan’s glove. Trevor grabbed another ball and watched Dylan crouch back down and put his glove in the ready position. He wound up for a curve ball and threw the best pitch he’d thrown in the whole hour they’d been out there.

“You should have started taunting me an hour ago.” Trevor laughed. “Come on, let’s pick up these balls, and go in.

“I’m good for a while longer,” Dylan said.

“Jess, just got home, I need to get inside, but you are welcome to come by anytime and toss the ball around with me.” Trevor fell into step beside Dylan. They picked up the balls that were scattered around the yard.

“Are you making any progress with Jessie?” Dylan asked.

Trevor looked off toward the house. “Some. I know she cares about me, but we get to a point where it seems like we’re about to take the next step, and then she cools things down. Way down.” Trevor looked back at Dylan. “You spend a fair amount of time with her. Any ideas?”

“I hate to break it to you, Slider, but we have better things than you to talk about. And besides, even if we did, I value my friend’s trust so I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Point taken.” Trevor sighed. “Want to stay for dinner?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” The two men laughed as they walked back toward the house. When they walked into the kitchen, Jessie was slicing the lasagna and the aroma of garlic tantalized his taste buds.

“Mmmm, smells wonderful.” Dylan said.

Jessie turned and smiled at him. “Thank you. The garlic bread will be ready in a minute, go wash your hands and by the time you two are done, I’ll have dinner on the table.”

Trevor leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Yes, ma’am,” he teased.

Five minutes later, Trevor and Dylan sat at the table, and Jessie filled their plates with food. Once she served them, she filled her own plate, sat down, and dug in.

“How was your day, Jess?” Trevor asked.

Jessie looked up at him, and the fork in her hand paused midway to her mouth,

“It was okay. A couple of kids got into a big fight first thing this morning, and it kind of set the tone for the day. It seemed like everyone was angry about something today.”

“I bet you’re glad to be home,” Dylan chimed in.

Trevor watched a soft smile play at the corner of her lips.

“I live for the excitement that comes with my job,” she joked. “I went to the doctor about the dizzy spells today too.”

“What did he say?” Trevor asked concerned.

“The migraines I suffered years ago are making a reappearance it seems.”

“Does he know why?” Dylan asked.

“Could be the change in climate,” Trevor suggested.

Jessie nodded. “That’s what the doctor suggested, but there is no real way to tell. He gave me some medication and wants to see me in a couple of months.”

“Good. I’m glad you went.” Trevor smiled at her.

Jessie met his eyes and the look she gave him was deep and full of unspoken love. It sent shivers down his spine. It was so intense he had to look away. He fumbled with his fork and began to eat and the spell of the moment was broken. Dylan cleared his throat and followed suit. Jessie giggled and launched into a tale about something one of the kids had done that afternoon. It was nice. Trevor could definitely get used to dinners like this—family dinners.

The three of them were slow to finish eating, in no hurry to end the friendly banter. Trevor filled his plate a third time and raised a questioning brow at Dylan.

“No, man, I really need to get home. It was delicious, thanks a lot.”

Jessie pushed back from the table and stood taking Dylan’s plate along with hers to the sink. With everyone else leaving the table, Trevor no longer wanted the food he had just put on his plate and he pushed it away.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” Jessie said. She set the dishes in the sink.

Dylan put an arm around Jessie, and Trevor watched while they walked out of the kitchen laughing over something Jessie had whispered. Trevor hated the comfortable camaraderie Jessie and Dylan shared. Of course, he and Jessie shared their own closeness. But he wished for the easy, relaxed familiarity he had just witnessed between her and Dylan. When he stepped out into the living room, he became irrational and jealousy filled him when Jessie didn’t hesitate to move into Dylan’s tight embrace. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear that there was intimacy in that simple hug. But he knew better. *Don’t I?* he thought.

Trevor raised an arm in a salute when Dylan released Jessie and waved at him. Jessie reached out and locked the door before she turned and headed back into the kitchen to clean up.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said. When they moved past each other, their shoulders brushed against each other, and an unexpected wave of heat rushed through him. All of his senses came alive and his erection

strained against the jeans he wore. Maybe he'd make it a cold shower, he thought climbing the stairs.

Thirty minutes later, when Trevor walked into the kitchen, he couldn't resist the temptation to touch Jessie. Standing at the sink finishing the dishes, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. Without a word, he moved toward her and didn't stop until the front of his body molded to hers.

"Mmmm, you smell good." He whispered, allowing his lips to graze her ear. Her muscles tensed and he caressed her from the tip of her fingers up to her shoulders. Under the attentive fingers that dug into her shoulders, she began to relax and he smiled. Trevor wanted to voice the feelings inside but was afraid that she would shut him out. Since the last time they had almost made love, she was determined to keep their relationship out of the bedroom, but he was just as determined to take her to his bed. Every time she succumbed to his kisses, he knew he was getting closer to having her completely. He knew she thought she would just be another in a long list of conquests. He was determined to prove her wrong. Trevor had fallen in love with her. Someday she'd acknowledge she loved him too, he only needed to be patient.

When the tension that had filled her moments ago began to ease out of her, he moved his lips to the tender skin of her neck just beneath her ear. A low moan escaped her and her body sagged against his. His left hand cupped her jaw and he tilted her head back so he could seize her lips in a soul-searing kiss. When they broke apart, he searched her eyes. In the shiny silver depths, he saw a flame of desire. It was all the encouragement he needed.

"I want you, Jessie."

"Trevor—"

"Don't argue," he interrupted her. "I know you want me. I can see it in your eyes, feel it in your touch. I told you that when the time was right, we would make love. I can't think of a better time than now."

Trevor cupped her cheek and watched the play of emotion cross her features. She was losing the battle she had waged within herself. Trevor didn't want to be the conquering hero. He wanted her—her body and her heart.

“I want you, but I can’t do this. I don’t want to do something we can’t take back. It’s not just about using a condom. If it was, we’d have already done this. I need protection from you.”

Trevor was taken aback by her quiet admission. Never before had someone meant so much to him. To hear the slow tremble of her voice and to see her lip quiver while she tried to regain composure broke his heart. She believed he would just forget about her when he went back to the team.

“I will never hurt you, Jessie. I love you.” Trevor’s voice broke on the admission.

A thick silence hung over them as they gazed at each other. Surprise entered her eyes. “Don’t say that just to get what you want. Please don’t say that,” Jessie whispered.

Trevor crushed her to him. “I’ve never said those words to a woman, Jessie. I love you. All my life it’s been me and the game. That was my love. Somehow, you have stolen my heart, and none of it matters without you. The game, none of it.” The desperate pleading he heard in his voice was foreign. This was all new to him, but with her there in his arms, the prospect of having her completely, he couldn’t help but fear losing her even more than he feared losing his career.

He dipped his head and teased the corner of her lips with his. When his tongue came out, seeking entrance, he reveled in the low moan of her acceptance. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and he knew that he had won her complete capitulation. Trevor wanted this moment to last forever. He tightened his grip, and he kissed her passionately. When the contact was no longer enough, he broke the kiss. Breathing deep and heavy, he said, “Are you ready?”

He watched her for what seemed like forever, but after several seconds, she gave a slight nod, and he took her hand in his and gave a light tug before leading her out of the kitchen to the stairs. While they climbed the stairs, he could sense her hesitation, but he couldn’t stop himself. He tightened his hand around hers. If he didn’t know better he’d think he was floating on air as they moved to his bedroom. Happiness, desire and anticipation carried him.

“Trevor, I--”

He silenced her with his lips. His tongue plunged into her mouth, and her sweetness intoxicated him. Without losing contact with her mouth, he

moved her to the bed and gave her a light push. The sound of her laughter urged him on, and he covered her with the weight of his body. She fit him perfectly.

When her hands caressed the bare skin of his low back just above the waistband of his shorts, he moaned, a distinct primitive sound. He toyed with the hem of her sweater and grazed the hot skin of her midriff. He pushed up the sweater, exposing the tiniest bit of her tanned flesh.

Trevor broke their kiss and pulled away from her just enough to pull his shirt over his head. He delighted in her hands when they caressed each inch of his flesh. It didn't take long for him to become frustrated with the barrier of her clothes that shielded her body from his heated gaze. Arching his body away from hers, he gave her shirt a hard tug up over her head. The pale green silky bra that cupped her breasts was sexy. He hardened at the sight.

An intense desire to know if her panties matched the bra had him reaching for the button of her jeans. Her body glowed in the pale moonlight that filtered through the window. He sat up and studied the beautiful woman beneath him. He chuckled when she reached for him and tried to pull him back against her. Trevor started at her shoulders and ran his hands down the length of the heated skin beneath his palm. Her sharp intake of breath encouraged him to lower the jeans over her hips.

To his delight, the pale green scrap of silk that hid her secret haven from him matched the pretty bra he had admired a few moments ago. He took in every inch of her, he saw her try to cover herself with her hand, and he met her eyes.

"You're beautiful," he said. It was a compliment he'd paid many women, but never had he meant it as much as he did at that moment.

He could see her shyness when she reached for the waistband of his shorts. Her hand fell just short of the rough fabric that separated them. Trevor guided her hand to his erection. He wanted to go slow. This was their first time, and he wanted to make it special for her. He groaned when she applied more pressure to the hardness that was restrained by the fabric covering him. In her eyes, he saw so many emotions. There was a tightening in his chest while he watched her. Her hands moved to the waistband of his shorts, and she tugged them down. Trevor kicked them off when they reached his knees. Sinking into her again, he devoured her mouth. *God she's sweet*, he thought.

Trevor rolled to his back and pulled her on top of him. Pain seared in his shoulder, and he gasped. Jessie broke their kiss and stared down at him.

“What did I do? Are you okay?”

Trevor saw the uneasiness enter her eyes, and he was quick to wipe away all traces of pain. He had a lot of practice pushing through pain, and he called upon all of his training to ignore the gnawing ache and put her at ease.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered. His hands moved to the clasp of her bra. When he succeeded in unhooking the confining garment, he pulled it off and tossed it aside. It took mere seconds for his mouth to attach to her left nipple. The light purring sound she made in her throat was sexier than anything else she could have done. Jessie surprised him when she tugged his boxers down over his hips and sat back to admire the muscular contours of his body.

He rolled with her and tucked her beneath his weight. She lifted her hips when he sought to remove her thin panties. He delved a finger between her sweet folds. Her wetness excited him. He dipped his finger inside of her and allowed her to get used to the invasion. He found her most sensitive spot with his thumb and massaged it. Her fingers knotted into the sheet beneath her and her breathing came out in short pants. When he sensed she was about to come apart, he reached for the condom in the drawer on the nightstand, tore it open and rolled it on. He smiled at her, and came down to settle between her legs and met her eyes,

“Are you sure?” His voice was husky.

Jessie hesitated, but her eyes sparkled with passion as she nodded. That was all it took. Trevor drove himself deep inside her with one long stroke. Jessie cried out when he entered her. Trevor watched the knuckles that held tight to the sheet turn white, and her eyes closed tight. The passionate expression on her face told him she had wanted this as bad as he. When her eyes fluttered open, he saw they glittered with tears, and he started to withdraw. Her hands flew to his butt and clutched him like a vise pulling him deeper within her depths. Trevor groaned and leaned in to nibble the sensitive flesh beneath her ear.

“Ahhh, baby, you feel so good,” he whispered.

Trevor withdrew the tiniest bit before pushing his hips forward. He repeated the movement, withdrawing a little more each time. When Jessie

began to move with him, he let go of his restraint. Trevor's throbbing climax loomed just beyond his reach and he increased his pace. While he drove himself into her, he searched her wide silver eyes, and he knew what she gave him was a gift.

A fierce possessiveness filled him with each thrust. It made him stroke her harder, he was striving to achieve the bliss of emptying himself into her. He may not have been her first man, but he vowed he would be her last man. It was that thought which pushed him over the edge. At the exact moment, he cried out with his release, the phone rang. Their movements stilled, but neither made a move to answer it. Trevor moved his mouth back to hers. He wanted her to find her own release, but again the phone rang.

"You should get that," Jessie said in a whisper.

Trevor growled and yanked the phone out of its cradle.

"Hello?" He paused.

"It's for you, Jessie."

Jessie took the phone from him, "Hello?"

Trevor loved the husky tone of her voice and leaned in to nibble on her neck while she listened.

"Okay. I'll call him." A pause. "No, thanks, I have the number."

Jessie clicked the Off button, and Trevor noticed that her eyes had clouded with concern.

"What's wrong, Jess?"

"It's Malachi. That was the answering service. He called needing to talk to me. They said he was very upset and said it was urgent."

Jessie was already dialing the number when she finished the explanation. Jessie clicked the phone off and back on again. She hit the redial button. After several seconds, she hung up again, and dialed the number once again. Trevor rolled off her when she hung up the phone.

"I'm going over there."

"Not alone," he said. He rose along with her, each of them searching for carelessly discarded clothes.

"I'll be fine, Trevor. It's part of my job."

Trevor didn't like it, but he sensed that after what had just happened, she needed her space. He respected her and understood that.

"Call me when you get there and before you leave."

He knew he had pushed too far when she gave him a withering stare. He backed off and sank down on the bed. Trevor watched her pull her clothes on and was surprised when she leaned down and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“I’ll be back,” she said as she moved to the door. When she disappeared through it, he smiled to himself. He took in the rumpled sheets with a feeling of heated desire. *Damn the phone*, he thought, but he felt bad for it. He hoped Malachi was okay. When Jessie got home, Trevor was determined to pick up where they had left off.

He heard the front door open and close and a terrible feeling of worry came over him. He should have gone with her. There was no way he was going to sleep until she was in his arms again.

Chapter 20

The flashing lights of the numerous police cars and solitary ambulance blinded her. Jessie pulled her Jeep behind the ambulance and shifted into park. Ignoring the catcalls of the curious onlookers when she stepped out of the Jeep, she hurried into the apartment building and up the stairs. A uniformed officer blocked her way. “You can’t go in there, miss.”

Jessie understood it was procedure, but when the cop placed his hands on her shoulder and pushed her in the direction of the staircase, she became livid.

“Look, Officer...” She paused to peer at the nametag he wore. “Officer Hernandez, I received a frantic call from my client who lives there.” Jessie pointed to the door of the apartment he was blocking. Seeing that she was not making any progress, she mumbled “Oh for God’s sake.” She searched through her purse for one of the business cards she always kept on her. Finding one, she thrust it at him. He eyed the card and shrugged, still refusing to move from the front of the door. Frustrated, Jessie reached over his shoulder and grazed the door with her knuckles before his hands settled on her shoulders, this time using more force to guide her toward the steps. Just when she was about to give up, the door opened and Jessie was relieved to see Officer DiCarlo pop his head out.

“What’s going on?” He had directed the question at Jessie, but Officer Hernandez was quick to jump to his own defense.

“This woman refuses to leave, though I’ve told her that no one is allowed in this apartment right now.”

“I know this woman,” Office DiCarlo answered.

Jessie had never been more grateful to see someone in her life. “Hi, Mike. How’s Malachi?”

“You two know each other?” Jessie turned back to Officer Hernandez who looked at her like she had just murdered his mother.

“Jessie works at the Youth Center. You know I spend some of my time there.”

“So what. That doesn’t mean she can come in during an investigation.”

“Sergeant, need I remind you who’s in charge here?”

“No. Lieutenant,” Officer Hernandez said through clenched teeth.

Jessie smiled at Officer Hernandez after he stepped aside and allowed her access to the apartment. Jessie heard him mumble, “Too damn easy on these hoodlums.” Mike DiCarlo must have heard it too because he said, “Sergeant, I suggest you remember who you’re speaking to.”

Jessie laughed when the door slammed, leaving the offensive officer out in the chill of the night. Jessie looked around the tiny apartment. It was clean but cluttered. Malachi had told her that in addition to him and his mom, four other people lived in this tiny cracker box. It always made her sad to see people live in such horrible conditions. Jessie glanced at the pictures on the wall. A sea of smiling faces looked at her from the various cheap, but decorative frames. Somehow, no matter how squalid the conditions, the families she worked with made the best of their circumstances and for the most part, they seemed happy.

Jessie’s eyes settled on Malachi, and she knew whatever had prompted him to call her was bad. Although, seeing the cops and the ambulance outside, she hadn’t needed to see Malachi to know that. His mother sat next to him so absorbed in her grief that Jessie wasn’t sure she was aware of her presence.

Jessie moved to Malachi and sat down next to him. She didn’t say anything. She sensed that she needed to let him open the door on whatever had happened here. It seemed a long time they sat there not saying anything. The only sounds that could be heard were the police working in another room and his mother’s quiet sobbing. When the medics rolled a stretcher out into the living room, the crying grew louder. Jessie watched in shock while a body covered by a sheet was carried out of the apartment. A few minutes later, several police officers filed out of the room.

“We’ll call you if we have any questions.” Mike DiCarlo said.

Jessie watched Malachi look up at him and nod. The officers made their way out of the apartment closing the door behind them.

“That was my brother they took outta here.” Malachi said sounding deflated.

“What happened?” Jessie asked.

Malachi didn’t answer, and she didn’t push.

The front door opened again, and a black woman stepped in the apartment. Jessie watched the woman move over to Malachi’s mother and wrap her in an embrace. With her friend encouraging her to get some rest, the two women retreated to the bedroom.

Once they were alone, Malachi continued. “My momma, moved us here from New York so we could make a new start. Back home, Tyrell was heavy into getting doped up maryjane, smack, crank—you name it, he did it. When he started boostin’ cars and banging, my momma done cried so many times thinkin’ he was gonna get his self smoked.” Malachi stopped. His breathing became ragged. Jessie put a comforting hand on his arm and waited for him to continue.

“Tyrell was gettin’ straight. There was even this gal he wanted to holla at.”

Malachi shook his head, his disbelief obvious. Jessie couldn’t imagine his pain. A tear slipped out of her eye but she didn’t bother to brush it away.

“My momma was so worried ’bout all them gangstas in New York, but I guess Tyrell was his own worst enemy.”

Malachi rose and began to pace. With her eyes, Jessie followed his back-and-forth motion across the room.

“I should have known everything wasn’t all gravy, Miss Jessie. How could he kill hisself?” Malachi asked, grief warring with anger in his every word, every movement. He continued to pace like a caged animal.

Jessie rose and stilled Malachi’s nervous movements with her hands. “There’s no way you could have known, Malachi. It’s not your fault. You can’t hold yourself responsible for what your brother did.”

Jessie felt the shoulders beneath her palms begin to shake. More tears slipped from her eyes and she wrapped her arms around the young man.

“He was my ace boon coon, man.”

It wasn’t a term that Jessie was familiar with, but because of the emphatic way he stated it, she understood what he meant.

Jessie stayed until Malachi had insisted she go. It was late, and there was nothing more she could do. He’d be okay, he said. Barely restrained tears glittered in the boy’s eyes, but Jessie sensed he’d said all he planned to

say for that night. With a promise to call tomorrow, Jessie gathered up her belongings and made her way out the door.

* * * *

Malachi watched Jessie leave the apartment. He felt more alone than he'd ever felt in his life. Moving to this town was supposed to be a new start for them all. How could his brother have done this? Was there no other way? Tears streamed from his eyes. Pain ripped through his gut. His brother had been his best friend. How was his momma gonna survive this? Malachi heard a scream. He moved closer to the window and glanced down at the dark street.

* * * *

Jessie was deflated when she walked out of Malachi's apartment. She hadn't been in the social work profession long, but she had never faced a situation like that one before. It had shaken her to the core and her heart had broken right along with Malachi's.

Jessie took the first step outside of Malachi's apartment. She sensed someone behind her just before the hand clamped down on her mouth. She struggled but his strength far outweighed her own. Her attacker dragged her to the side of the building and threw her to the ground in a small alleyway between the buildings. The weight of her attacker sickened her.

When the hand came away from her mouth, she screamed, a blood chilling sound. A fist crashed into her jaw in reward for her efforts. Her head was spinning. Tears flooded her eyes. Her jeans and panties were roughly shoved down her legs and removed with one hard yank.

Jessie did her best to fight, but for each blow she landed, it seemed her attacker struck back harder. With her arms pinned beneath her and her attacker holding down her legs with the weight of his body, she lost the ability to defend herself. When he shoved himself into her, Jessie couldn't resist the need to vomit. In disgust, the hand came away from her mouth and she let out another blood-curdling scream. Seconds later, the weight of her attacker was removed from her. Through the haze of tears and swelling in her eyes, she saw Malachi attacking the man who'd just raped her.

* * * *

Malachi landed blow after blow into the man's face. "Sick fuck," he growled. How dare he lay a hand on Miss Jessie. Grief and pure fury spurred him on as he pulled back and struck again. His fist landed square on the man's nose, making the most sickening crunching noise he'd ever heard. Blood spurted out of the orifice. A gasp came from the man and he went limp. Malachi shoved him hard to the ground and ran to the beaten and crumpled woman he had only just realized meant so very much to him.

* * * *

Jessie tried to cry out but she choked on her own vomit. Tears slid from her swollen eyes. She saw the man fall at Malachi's feet and Malachi leaned over her. Strong arms picked her up, and she knew someone was carrying her up the stairs.

"You're going to be okay, Miss Jessie." The low, broken whisper against her ear comforted her.

"What happened?" A woman asked. Jessie's eyes focused on a bright light in the corner of the apartment.

"She was raped." Malachi answered. Jessie glimpsed Malachi's mother before he laid her on the couch. The look of sorrow on the woman's face brought the hard reality crashing down around her. Jessie began to whimper in renewed terror.

"Shhh. Miss Jessie, don't cry. I'm going to get you some help." Jessie heard the trembling in the boy's voice. She wanted to be calm for him, but hysteria was closing in fast.

"Call nine-one-one." It was a demand.

"Momma, I think I just killed him."

Jessie cringed at the words. Why did this happen? When she had left Trevor's house, she was happy and determined to try to make things work with him. In the short time since, her world, along with Malchi's, had forever been altered. It was tragic.

“Call nine-one-one.” Malachi’s mom sounded so sad. Jessie wished she had spoken more to the woman before. So much had happened in one night, to all of them. It didn’t seem right they had only barely been introduced.

She tried to sit up, but the woman appeared at her side, pushing her back down and tucking a blanket around her.

“We’re going to be okay. We’re all going to be okay.” Jessie admired the woman’s strength and courage. Her son had died tonight and she was trying to comfort another. It was admirable, but Jessie wasn’t blind to the hard edge of determination in the woman’s eyes—determination to survive. She met and held the woman’s eyes. Malachi called nine-one-one. After he hung up, he came and sat with her.

“I’m sorry, Miss Jessie.” Malachi put a hand on her shoulder and the brave look on his face warred with the fearful look in his eyes.

“Malachi, I--”

“I did what I had to do, Miss Jessie. I love you, and I’d do it all over again to protect you.”

Jessie let a tear slip from the corner of her swollen eye. That was twice now in one night that someone had said “I love you” for the first time. Both incredibly meaningful and now without a doubt heart wrenching.

“I love you too, Malachi.”

A loud knock startled her, and soon, the police and the medics entered the apartment and demanded Malachi move away from her. Jessie couldn’t see him, but she heard the click of handcuffs and she wanted to cry out.

Medics appeared at her side, and she was overwhelmed with a flurry of activity. When she was carried to the ambulance and placed in the back, she saw the yellow tape surrounding the sidewalk.

The last thought she had before she slipped into a blessed sleep was of Trevor. Oh how she wanted him with her.

Chapter 21

Trevor glanced at the clock. One o'clock in the morning and Jessie still wasn't home. He couldn't shake the sense of trepidation he had. Something was wrong. He knew it. Trevor punched his pillow before he tossed it aside. With a deep sigh, he rose from the bed and pulled on a T-shirt. Although he had intended to go to the kitchen and get a drink, his feet carried him two doors down from his room. The door was closed. He should have respected her privacy but he needed to better understand who she was. That need pushed him to reach out and turn the knob.

He chuckled at the sight of a variety of more than a dozen stuffed frogs arranged in a row on her bed. A pair of pajamas hung over the headboard, and a small collection of makeup and perfume sat on the nearby nightstand. He inhaled the light, sweet scent that hung in the air and it made him smile. Sweet, just like Jessie. He moved to the dresser and scanned the few pictures in ornate frames that were arranged in a semicircle. It warmed his heart to see the picture of him in his Devils uniform that he had given her in a place of prominence in the center.

Trevor reached out and picked up a small notebook that sat on the corner of the dresser. He opened the cover and saw that it was a journal. The first entry was dated for the day she arrived in New Mexico. He knew he should put it down, but he couldn't help the desire to get closer to the woman who had stolen his heart.

Trevor didn't get past "Dear Journal" when his phone rang. Trevor snapped the notebook closed and looked around the room as if he had been caught red-handed sneaking a peak at her personal thoughts. When the phone rang again, he sighed and set the notebook down. He was somewhat relieved for the interruption. He wanted to have the patience to wait for her to open up to him. *Snooping is not the way to her heart*, he thought. He took the steps needed to get back to his room where his cordless lit up with the

fourth ring. Picking up his pace, he moved to the nightstand and grabbed the phone out of its cradle.

“Hello?”

“It’s Dan.”

“It’s late. Jessie’s not here.”

Coach sounded like he’d been drinking. The last thing Trevor wanted was to deal with his drunken coach.

“I know. I just got a call from the hospital.” Trevor’s heart skipped a beat. The air was thick. He couldn’t breathe. “Jessie was rushed there, I don’t know the details.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Trevor?” Dan’s voice cracked. “Do you think it’d be okay if I went to see her?”

“It might be a step in the right direction.” Trevor said.

“Okay. I’ll see you there.” Trevor heard the click before he could respond. Trevor grabbed a pair of jeans from the nearby laundry basket. He stuffed his legs into the rough fabric and grabbed his team jacket. He raced down the stairs, grabbed his keys that sat on the table near the door, and ran out the door into the cold night. It was snowing, and the air had that distinct smell that it has when it snows.

He hoped that the roads were clear. He wanted to get where he was going and didn’t need the elements of weather slowing him down. Trevor’s teeth chattered as he climbed behind the wheel of his silver Mustang. Once he had turned the key in the ignition, he turned the defroster on high and waited while the windows thawed. Impatient with the amount of time it was taking, he reached into the back, grabbed his scraper, and flung the door open. Trevor stepped out into the frigid air and made quick work out of clearing the windows of snow and ice that had accumulated. Shaking from both the cold and fear for Jessie, he got back in the car and closed the door. Able to see now, he put the car in gear and backed out of his driveway.

Thirty minutes later, ten minutes longer than it usually took, he pulled up in front of the hospital. Trevor didn’t bother to lock the car. He just took off at a run toward the entrance to the emergency room. The nurse behind the desk gave him a bored look when she peered up at him.

“Can I help you?” Her voice was low and irritated.

"I got a call that my friend was here." He said, frantic. *I should have gone with her. This wouldn't have happened if I had been there with her*, he thought. He searched the heavyset nurse's features for some sign of helpfulness.

"Am I supposed to be psychic? I don't know who your friend is unless you give me a name," the nurse snapped at him.

Trevor glared at her. All he wanted was to see Jessie. He didn't even know what had happened to her, but she was here and it scared the hell out of him. Before his accident, he'd have used his name and his fame to charm the woman to a friendlier stature. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized. He wanted nothing more than to get to Jessie.

"Jessie Kirk," he said just as rudely as the nurse had spoken to him

The nurse picked up the phone and pressed four buttons. Her eyes looked beady in her puffy face. He wondered if it was possible for the woman to smile. The frown was so tight and the lines surrounding her mouth told him that it was perpetual.

"Do you have a Jessie Kirk back there?" The unkind woman barked into the phone.

Trevor rolled his eyes at the woman who glared at him. When she set the phone down without responding, he raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Room sixteen. Go through the double doors, make a right, and it's the fourth door on your left." The nurse heaved a heavy sigh like making that one phone call had sapped all of her energy. Trevor smiled at her.

"Thank you so much for your kindness." His voice was tinged with heavy sarcasm. He enjoyed watching her jaw drop and then snap shut once again. Trevor walked off in the direction he'd been told to go. He stopped outside room sixteen and steeled himself for whatever condition he might find Jessie in. He wished someone had told him what had happened. It would have made this so much easier. He didn't want to upset her by looking shocked at whatever was wrong. But then again it could be something simple like a broken bone. A gut instinct told him different, but he would hope for the best until he got up the courage to push through that door.

He reached out and placed his hand on the knob of the door, heavy footsteps from behind him drew his attention. Trevor turned and saw Coach approaching the room. Trevor was taken aback by how haggard he looked.

He hadn't shaved, and it seemed he had lost a significant amount of weight. It hadn't been that long since he had last seen Coach, so seeing him like that was a shock.

Coach's red-rimmed eyes were proof of the love he had for Jessie. In all the years he had known the man, he'd never seen him cry. Perhaps he had made mistakes, but he was paying for them now. Trevor wondered if he had been right in keeping Dan away from Jessie. There had been many opportunities to invite him over. Perhaps he should have done so and forced Jessie to confront issues he knew she was running away from. She had spent a lifetime loving and admiring this man from afar. Coach had spent twenty years missing the little girl who had been taken from him. Somehow, it just didn't seem fair. A cruel twist of fate brought the little girl back to him, except now she was all grown up. That same twist of fate had disillusioned Jessie of everything she had ever believed.

Trevor knew that the only way either of them would have peace in their hearts was to confront each other. While he stood there studying Coach's slumped shoulders and resigned face, he resolved to do what he could to bring father and daughter back together again.

Trevor placed a hand on Coach's shoulder and squeezed. Coach raised sad eyes to his own and Trevor wondered how Dan Kirk had hidden so much pain for so many years.

"Let's go see our girl," Trevor said.

Trevor pushed the door open and took a tentative step in the room. From where he stood he could see dark bruises on her face but the rest of her was covered. *What the hell happened?* he thought. He moved closer to the bed. Tears formed in his eyes to see her swollen eyes and dark purple cheeks. Trevor reached out and caressed an unbruised part of her face with the back of his hand.

Trevor wanted to kill whoever had done this to her. His fury increased when her eyes flew open, and he saw pure terror in the beautiful silver depths. A hot tear coursed down his cheeks and he dropped to his knees and pulled her hand to his lips.

"Daddy." It was one whispered word but the childish quality to it broke his heart. Jessie was a fiercely independent woman. But lying in this bed, body battered and spirit broken, it seemed she had regressed to a child reaching out for her father's love and protection. Whatever had happened to

her had not been good. Trevor hoped that he and Coach had the strength to endure the repercussions.

Chapter 22

Jessie hated the bitter tears that fell from her eyes when she recounted the horrible attack. An hour ago, she had been moved to the fifth floor, where she would remain for at least forty-eight hours. Her father stroked her hair while she talked, and the gesture was calming. Less than twelve hours ago, she hated this man, but now all she wanted was her daddy to hold her and make the pain go away. It seemed amazing to her that he was there. The simple loving gesture fulfilled every fantasy she'd ever had about her father, except he was not her father. Did that matter anymore? Somewhere out there was the man who had given her life, but she didn't know him. She didn't want to know him. There was no one she wanted by her side more than the man she had considered her father her entire life, whether or not she had his genes or not.

She glanced at Trevor, who had begun pacing the room while she talked. His presence brought so many mixed emotions to her heart. She had allowed him to get closer to her than any other man, given him the gift of her body. Hours later, she had been brutally violated, and she wasn't sure she would ever be able to be with him like that again. When he looked at her, Jessie saw a flicker of something she'd never seen in his eyes before. It seemed like disgust. She was dirty now. Weak and soiled, that is how she was sure he viewed her. When his gaze flickered to her again, she couldn't take seeing that look in his eyes anymore.

"Get out!" she screamed.

Trevor's eyes met hers, and she saw them fill with surprise. "Jessie, I'm not leaving you."

"Get out! I don't want you here. I don't want to see you. Not now, not ever!"

She turned away and closed her eyes. Her father moved away from her, and she heard the door open and close. When she opened her eyes, she was alone. Relief flooded her.

* * * *

Jessie stared out the window while her father drove toward his house. Every bone and muscle in her body hurt, and it served as a reminder of what had happened to her. Like she could ever forget.

“I had Trevor bring your stuff over and put it in your room, honey.”

“Thanks,” Jessie mumbled. Hearing Trevor’s name brought an ache to her heart. She closed her eyes and saw nothing but the look of disgust she had seen in his eyes. In the two days that she had spent at the hospital, he had come by to see her several times each day. Every time, she refused to see him.

It shouldn’t have bothered her, but it did. After a lifetime of depending on no one but herself, she should be able to handle her emotions on her own. But inside she was crumbling, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

Her father swung the car into his driveway and shifted the car into park. “Do you need some help, Jessie?” Dan Kirk turned to her and asked.

“No.” It was a simple, quiet reply. It was a lie.

When she opened the door to her father’s house, she was surprised by the smell of cinnamon. She looked around the living room. It was plain. Just the way it had been when she left, but the smell was inviting, less sterile than the hospital had been.

“Looks like Trevor put out that potpourri stuff he said you liked,” her father said from behind her. The thought warmed her heart, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to smile.

“I’m going to go lie down,” Jessie said over her shoulder, not waiting for a response from her father.

Jessie walked toward the bedroom she had used before she left, and upon entering, she shut the door behind her. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks and she sank down against the door.

* * * *

Dan picked up the book from his nightstand and sighed. He leaned back against the pile of pillows. He opened the book, and he scanned the first two sentences over and over again. With another deep sigh, he closed the book and let it fall to his lap. Jessie hadn't been out of her room since he'd brought her home. He wanted to help her, but didn't know how. He'd accepted long ago that he would never be a father. Although he had always missed the baby girl his ex-wife had ripped away from him, he believed he had done what was best for her by staying away. Since Jessie came back, he knew that was not the case. He wanted desperately to comfort that same little girl, and he had no idea how.

Screams tore through the night and Dan jumped up out of bed and followed the screams to Jessie's room. Dan turned the knob and cursed when he found it locked.

"Jessie, open the door."

The screaming continued broken up by deep sobs. Dan curse again and backed away from the door. Using all of his weight, he flung himself against the wood. He heard a crack when the door gave way and pushed open.

Dan's eyes focused on the total darkness of the room, and he saw Jessie on her knees in the corner of her bed. He moved closer speaking to Jessie in a gentle tone.

"Jessie, it's Daddy."

Her eyes looked wild as she scanned the room.

"Jessie, come on now. You're okay. You're home. It was just a bad dream."

"Leave me alone. Go away!" she screamed.

"Jessie, calm down now, honey. It's Daddy. I won't hurt you."

Dan knew when she understood him because the frantic look in her eyes disappeared and the screaming stopped. She sagged against the wall. deep sobs racked her.

"It's okay, baby. No one is ever going to hurt you again."

Dan leaned back against the headboard and held out a hand to her. Jessie's eyes lowered to the hand, and she stared at it for several long minutes.

Dan wanted to take her pain away. It wasn't fair. Jessie had been through so much pain already. It was his fault. He should never have let

Melody take her away from him. Jessie may not have been his own flesh and blood, but she was his daughter nonetheless and he loved her, had always loved her. How could he have been so selfish? Lost in his own thoughts of self-pity, he didn't see her inch closer to him. When her hand touched his, he lifted tear-filled eyes to hers.

Seconds later, Jessie flung herself into his arms, and he held tight. He cried right along with her for all the pain that she had ever suffered, or ever would endure. No words were spoken, he just held her. When Jessie closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, he said a silent prayer of thanks for Jessie's life, and a second chance to be her dad.

Chapter 23

Trevor knocked on the door to Coach Kirk's house. In the two weeks Jessie had been home, he made it a point to come by and see her every day. It was killing him to see her so sad all the time. He didn't know what to do for her, and it seemed she didn't want him anywhere near her. But that didn't stop him. Jessie needed him and he was going to be there. It was her pain speaking, he knew that. He wouldn't push her, but he wasn't going to bow out either. Jessie was too important to him. Eventually, she'd trust him again—he had to believe that.

The door swung open and Jessie stood there in a pair of baggy jeans and a green sweater. Braids hung over either shoulder, and her eyes shimmered with tears.

"Can I come in?" he asked in a mild voice.

Jessie met his eyes, and he could see the distrust in her own. She stared at him for several seconds before she nodded in an unsure motion.

"Is your dad here?"

"No. He had some errands to run." Her voice was almost childlike.

He shut the door behind him, and an awkward silence settled between the two of them. Jessie turned away from him and he watched her walk into the kitchen. Trevor waited a few minutes, and then followed the path she had taken. When he entered the kitchen, Jessie was whisking something in a bowl and skinless chicken breasts sat nearby.

"Can I help?"

Jessie looked at him. The wariness in her eyes broke his heart. He wanted nothing more than to love her. He wondered if he'd ever get the chance again.

"No."

The whisk in her hand moved faster. He moved closer. Trevor stopped just shy of touching her. The whisk stilled, and he reached out and placed a

hand over hers. Jessie stiffened, but she didn't pull away. Trevor was encouraged by that. *Don't push too far too fast*, he thought.

"You know I would never hurt you," he said, moving his thumb in over her silken skin in a massaging motion. Wide silver eyes met his. She turned her head. "We'll get through this, Jessie. I promise you we will. But you can't shut out the world. There are people here who love you and want to help you. But you have to let them."

Tears formed in her eyes, and he watched them fall from her lids and down her cheeks.

"I can't, Trevor."

"I know it's hard, Jess, but you can't do this alone."

"It's all I know. I've never depended on anyone Trevor. No one has ever cared enough to be there."

"I care enough to be here. I'm not going to let you go through this alone, Jessie."

The doorbell rang, and in his opinion, whoever it was couldn't have had any worse timing. He wasn't sure if he got through to her, but the wary look in her eyes was now gone.

"I'll get that." Jessie said moving away from him."

He watched her walk through the door into the living room. Trevor cursed. Never before had he wanted so much to take away someone else's pain. But he knew that he would gladly take her place if he could. He'd take on every bit of that pain without complaint if it meant he could have his Jessie back. In that moment, he knew there would never be another woman for him. Somehow, some way, he was going to get her to trust him.

Jessie came back into the kitchen followed by a short, thin black woman. The woman's shoulders hunched, and Trevor thought she looked like she held the weight of the world on those shoulders.

"This is Jeanette Kennerly, Malachi's mother."

Trevor smiled and held out his hand to the woman. "It's so nice to meet you," he said. He pulled out a chair at the table for her.

"Just let me get this chicken in my marinade," Jessie said already tossing the breasts into the bowl of liquid she had been mixing.

"I don't mean to disturb you, Miss Jessie. I asked Briana if she could tell me where you lived. She wouldn't do it, said it was against the rules."

Trevor gave the woman an encouraging smile. “So how did you know where to find her?” he asked with curiosity.

“Briana did tell me that Jessie was staying with her dad...” Jeanette’s voice trailed off.

Jessie put the chicken in the refrigerator and then sat down across from her. “So how did you find me?”

“I work for the phone company. I know your father’s name. I’m ashamed to admit I used the resources at my job to find you.”

Jessie smiled. “It’s okay. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I can’t stay long. I gotta get home to my boys. But I wanted to stop by and see how you were doing.”

Jessie’s gaze dropped to her lap. “I’m okay.” Her voice lacked the animation of moments before.

“I am glad to hear it, Miss Jessie. Malachi’s been real worried about you. He blames himself, ya know.”

Jessie seemed to shrink into the chair. An uncomfortable silence settled over them. Trevor cleared his throat. “Can I get you some coffee?” he asked Jeanette.

“No, thank you. I really can’t stay. I just wanted to stop by.”

She started to rise, but Jessie’s hand shot out and stopped her. Trevor watched Jessie lift her eyes and meet those of Jeanette. “Please tell Malachi...” Her voice faded and she choked back a sob.

Trevor continued for her, “Please tell Malachi that it wasn’t his fault.”

Jessie pushed away from the table and almost ran from the room. Trevor smiled at Jeanette. “It will take time.” She nodded at him and rose. Trevor walked with her to the door.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs. Kennerly.”

“I don’t know as I did anything, but I can at least tell my son that she’s mending. He really cares about her, ya know.”

Trevor took the woman’s hand and squeezed it. “I’m sure she’ll be back real soon.”

Trevor watched Jeanette walk to her car, get in, and drive away. He shut and locked the door. He didn’t want to crowd Jessie, but he didn’t want her to be alone. He had to try at least. Turning off the lights on his way, he walked to Jessie’s room. He stopped outside the door and remembered that not long ago he had been comfortable enough to go in without knocking.

Things had changed, though, and he didn't want to scare her. He raised his hand and knocked on the door. He stood back and waited for her to answer. She didn't. He knocked again. "Jessie, let me in. You know I won't hurt you. I just want to talk to you."

A few minutes passed, and he knocked again. He was about to give up and go watch some TV when the door crept opened.

Chapter 24

Jessie took a deep breath and counted to ten in her mind. She stared at Trevor. He had never given her a reason not to trust him. Trevor had been so gentle and loving when they made love. She didn't want to believe that he could be cruel and violent like the man who'd attacked her. Somehow, in her mind, the two events bled together, and she couldn't see Trevor as just the man he'd been the night he made love to her.

It broke her heart, but she saw him as a threat and he scared her.

"Can I come in?"

The question made her shiver in uncontrolled anxiety. Embarrassment at the emotions she didn't want anyone to see overwhelmed her. Jessie shook her head and reached out to close the door.

"Please."

It was one word, but the pleading in his voice stopped her. She looked up into his eyes, and she saw compassion, understanding, and love. Jessie stepped back from the door granting him entrance to her safe haven.

"What can I do, Jessie?"

She sat down on the bed and looked up at him. He looked like a lost little boy who desperately wanted to please her. Jessie wanted to give him some hope, but she didn't know if she could. Willing herself to focus on his gentleness, Jessie lay back. "Can you just hold my hand?" His eyes never left hers when he moved closer to the bed. She held her breath. He lowered himself down onto the mattress. He lay back and turned to face her. Jessie was grateful that he had left plenty of room between them so that their bodies did not touch. He placed his hand between the two of them and Jessie lowered her eyes to it. She hesitated and then moved her hand to his. When it settled in his warm palm, she took comfort in the light squeeze he gave her.

Jessie closed her eyes and flinched when the horror of her attack came back to her. She trembled. Trevor must have felt the tiny movement because his hand tightened on hers. Never before had she been so afraid. It was paralyzing. Her whole life she had wondered if she'd ever find happiness. Now she had, and she was too fearful to reach out and grasp it.

Before her attack, she had been sure that when he returned to his career he would forget all about her for the buxom blondes she knew him to be fond of. Now, it was the man himself that terrified her, and that made her sad.

"Jess, I know this is hard. I promise you, I won't hurt you."

Jessie turned away from him. It was too hard to see the optimism in his eyes and not be able to give anything in return. When Trevor moved closer to her, she used every ounce of willpower she had not to move away. His weight shifted, and when he leaned over her, she bit back the scream that welled up within her.

"Can I put my arm around you?" The tenderness in his voice broke the dam that held back her tears. Sobs shook her, and a strangled cry escaped her lips. Trevor's arm slipped around her waist and pulled her close to him. Instinct told her to pull away, but she didn't have the strength to fight him.

The light circular motion of his palm against her stomach soothed her. When her sobs quieted, she tried to pull away but Trevor held tight to her.

"I don't know what to do, Jess. All my life I've been in control. But now I'm not. If only I could take your pain away. If I could cry those tears for you, I would. I've never felt this way Jessie. I'd die for you. I'm so sorry I wasn't there." His voice was a hoarse whisper, and Jessie was stunned when a teardrop fell on her cheek. She'd seen his eyes fill with tears before, but somehow, the act of them falling onto her flesh, mingling with her own bonded them in a new way. His tears, the grief he shared with her over her attack, gave her a glimpse into the life she could have if only she would allow herself to get past this. A tiny bit of hope entered her. "I know you are in a place where the sun doesn't shine and there are no smiles and laughter. I wish I could take you away from that place, but I can't. All I can do is be there now, and I will be here always, Jessie. I love you."

Jessie held her breath. She didn't know what to say. Until the night of her attack, no one, not even her mother had ever said those words to her before. When Malachi had made the claim, it was easy to see the truth of his

words. With Trevor, it was different. It seemed odd to her that he had never told her he loved her before. Jessie didn't need or want pity and she feared the heavy claim was just that. She wanted to believe him. But in the back of her mind, she still worried that in time he'd go back to his career and forget all about her. Then where would she be? After all, he was Trevor Malone and she was...nothing.

He said nothing more but he didn't let go of her. Safe for the first time since her rape, she closed her eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Jessie pulled on a pair of worn jeans and a black sweater. Moving to the mirror, she studied her appearance. The bruises were starting to fade and she wished it were so easy for the memory to disappear. Jessie looked past her reflection to the bed. Trevor still slept, and she wondered what he dreamt about. She used to cherish sweet dreams, now she was lucky if she could close her eyes without visions of violence dancing behind her closed lids. *Give it time, Jessie. It's only been a couple of weeks.* Jessie tried to hold on to hope as that thought passed through her mind. It *had* only been days.

She dabbed a little bit of makeup over the bruises and gasped at the pain was still there when she massaged it into her skin.

"Are you okay?" The sleepy words came from behind her. Jessie turned to face him,

"The bruises...they're still sore." She wanted to say more. To say thank you for being there for her, but the words wouldn't come. Turning back around she moved her hands back to her face and again began to massage in the makeup. The bruises disappeared beneath the creamy tan liquid, and when she was satisfied, she picked up a light pink eye shadow. When she raised her eyes, she saw that Trevor was still studying her, and she became uncomfortable.

"Will you please stop staring at me?" The words had more bite to them than she had meant.

With a deep sigh, she moved to the bed and sat down. "I'm sorry."

Trevor reached out and took her hand in his. "Don't be. I understand."

"I don't want to be like this." Tears welled in her eyes.

"You have a right to feel the way you do."

Jessie shook her head. "All my life I've tried to be strong. Letting people see how I really am has only led to hurt for me. Nobody has ever really known all of me and I've always dealt with things alone. I'm trying, but I don't know how to get through this. It's like I'm going to break down at any minute, and I'm afraid. One minute I feel like I can make it, and the next I'm just not so sure." She sighed.

"You're not alone, Jess."

"A part of me wants so bad to believe that. For the first time in days, I felt safe when I slept last night. It was because of you, Trevor. But a larger part of me knows that when you're healed you'll go back to your life." Jessie stopped and looked at him. She thought, *The one that didn't include me*, before she continued. "I can't let myself rely on you because what I've learned very well in my lifetime is that the only one I can really rely on is me."

"Jessie, I didn't *really* know you before now. I knew who you were, the coach's crazy daughter who was nothing but trouble. That's how I saw you. Hell, babe, that's how we all saw you." Trevor cupped her chin and tilted her face up to his. His blue eyes sparkled. She could get lost in those eyes if she'd just allow herself to do so.

He continued. "I know you now, and I love what I see. You are talking about a life that existed before you. Whether I go back to playing baseball or not, I hope that I'll never have to live a life without you in it."

Jessie squeezed his hand in acknowledgement. It was all she could give right now, and she could see he understood that.

"You haven't put makeup on since you left the hospital. What's the occasion?"

She could tell he was trying to lighten the mood. "I'm going to work."

"Jessie. You're not ready. Give yourself some time."

"I can't stop living forever. I have to get back to some semblance of normal or I'll go crazy."

"I'm sure your boss would understand."

"She does. But it's time." She studied him. He didn't understand, she could tell. "I've got to talk to Malachi," she whispered.

"Is it okay if I meet you here after work?"

"I don't know, Trevor."

"I just want to spend time with you, Jess, nothing more."

“Okay,” she whispered.

* * * *

Jessie swung her Jeep into the parking lot of the youth center. She turned off the Jeep and just sat and stared. That morning, she thought she was ready. Now she wanted more than anything to be back in her bed hiding under the blankets. She started to turn the key in the ignition once again when out of the corner of her eye she saw a movement. Turning her head, she saw Malachi and another boy she didn't recognize walking toward the basketball court. The angry look that Malachi had when she first met him had replaced the smile she had become accustomed to, and she knew she had to do this.

When she stepped out of the car, an irrational fear creep through her. Taking several deep breaths, she looked over her shoulder several times before she was capable of moving forward. Her steps were small, and the short walk seemed to take a long time. She couldn't stop scanning the space around her. When she came to a stop at the basketball court, she stood and watched the two boys engage in a game of one on one. She didn't know why she didn't make her presence known, but she just stood and watched.

It wasn't long before the ball came toward her, and she could no longer pretend to be hiding in plain sight.

“Miss Jessie!”

The happiness in his voice wasn't lost on her. “Malachi, it's good to see you.”

“You shouldn't be here. It's too soon.”

Jessie tried to smile but it wouldn't come. She knew tears loomed in her eyes. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer for strength. When she opened her eyes, the boy she did not know bent over and grabbed the ball that remained at her feet. He walked off toward the other end of the basketball court leaving her and Malachi alone.

“Can...we go to my office?” Jessie asked, hesitating for a moment.

Malachi nodded and walked past her, she fell into step beside him. When they entered the building, several people called out greetings to her. She waved but she didn't miss their pitying looks. Her pace quickened as she made her way to her office. It was uncomfortable to have everyone

staring at her. Turning on the light, she motioned for Malachi to have a seat. Closing the door, she turned and moved behind her desk.

“I don’t know how to thank you—” she began.

“Thank me? Miss Jessie, I shoulda known better. I shoulda walked you down to your car. It’s my fault. If I had just left you be that night, none of this would have happened.”

“I’m glad you called me.”

“You is?”

Jessie ignored his question. How could she explain? Malachi had needed her that night and she couldn’t help being grateful she had gotten him through tough times. But being there had led to her attack, so how could she be glad of that? She was so confused.

“They arrested you that night. What happened?”

“The guy that hurt you...”

He looked at her like he expected confirmation that she remembered who he was, as if she could forget. She nodded and waited for him to continue. Whatever it was that he had to tell her was bad. She could see by the hard set to his face and the thin line of his lips that it was eating away at him.

“I killed him.” He said the words so quietly that Jessie almost didn’t hear him.

“Malachi—”

“Miss Jessie, don’t think bad of me. I didn’t think. I never killed nobody before. Even with all the bangin’ going on in da hood, I never killed nobody.”

Jessie wanted to reach out and comfort him, but how could she when she didn’t know how to comfort herself. She remained silent and he continued.

“I told you ’bout Tyrell, but he wasn’t the only one getting into trouble back home.”

Jessie knew that from his file. When his family moved here, his mother had enrolled both of her eldest sons in the at risk youth program. Malachi was the only one to come.

“I tried to be straight, but I kept getting in trouble right along with my brother. That’s why we came here. My momma wanted to get us away from

trouble so we had a chance. Now I shamed her, shamed myself, and I shamed you because I killed that man.”

“Where is the shame in protecting someone you care about?”

Malachi dropped his eyes, and she could sense his struggle. She allowed a few minutes to pass. When he looked up at her again, she asked, “What did the police do when they arrested you?”

“The interrogated me for hours. Then they put me in a holding cell with other kids. It wasn’t until morning that I heard anything more. The officer who released me said that they had gotten evidence off your body to prove my allegations that the man had attacked you, but I can’t leave the state because I might still be charged.”

“I’m sorry. If there is anything I can do, I will.”

“You didn’t do anything, Miss Jessie. You did nothing wrong.” Jessie looked at him and understood what he was trying to tell her. Tears ran down her cheeks as she stared at him.

“Neither did you, Malachi.”

“Miss Jessie, are you going to be okay?”

She asked herself the same question every day. However, while she watched the young man in front of her, she could see that he blamed himself. It was up to her to show him that she could get through this. If she didn’t learn how to be a survivor instead of a victim, all she had tried to do for Malachi would be for nothing.

“We’ll get through this together.” Jessie rose and walked toward him. She held out her hand and when he took it, she pulled him to her. Together, they cried for all that had been lost on that fateful night.

* * * *

Jessie walked into her father’s house, and Trevor looked up at her expectant. She should have known that he would be there waiting for her.

“Are you okay?”

She moved toward him, stopping just out of his reach. Trusting him would not be easy, but she was going to try. “I need your help.”

He stood and she had to look up to meet his eyes. She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat.

“I’ve never asked for help before. Ever.”

“Jessie I’m here, whatever it is I’ll be here to help you.”

His sincerity and willingness to do whatever she needed was touching.

“I need you to help me get past this. I don’t know what it will take, but I know I can’t do it alone.”

Tears spilled over her eyelids, and he crushed her in his embrace. Jessie sighed into his chest. It was good to know she wasn’t alone.

Chapter 25

Trevor pushed the doorbell at Coach Kirk's house and stood back to wait. Jessie had been back at work for two weeks now, and she seemed to be getting stronger every day. But when he looked at her, he'd sometimes glimpse her sad look. Although she wasn't isolating herself anymore, he didn't see the spark or enthusiasm in her that he had become accustomed to. He wanted to do something to bring back her bright smile.

Today, he was taking her Christmas shopping, and he was thrilled. It had taken a lot to convince her to go, but he had and he intended to make it one of the best days of her life. With two days until Christmas, he was excited. He couldn't wait to show her the sports complex. Nothing made her happy anymore, and he hoped that would earn him a smile.

When Jessie answered the door, she looked better than she had in weeks. Her snug jeans clung to shapely legs and a green sweater clung to her curves. A pair of black heels brought her almost to his height. Her auburn hair hung in braids over her shoulders, and the lightest touch of makeup made her features brighter than they had been in recent weeks.

A breeze blew but he didn't notice the cold air. The scent of her perfume captured his attention. She smelled good.

"You look beautiful."

Jessie eyes rounded, and he knew he shouldn't have said anything. Although they had spent a lot of time together in the past weeks, she continued to keep him at a comfortable distance. Coach Kirk appeared behind her in the door. Trevor held up a hand in greeting and Jessie turned.

"Trevor and I are going shopping. I'll be home in a couple of hours."

"Okay, sweetie. I love you."

Trevor's jaw slackened. He'd been watching the dynamic between these two for months. It was the first time that he'd ever heard Coach say those words to her. An uncomfortable look passed Jessie's features, and she

nodded. Taking the single step needed to get outside, she walked past him toward his Corvette. Trevor looked at his coach and smiled. He admired the man. It hadn't been easy to get past Jessie's anger, but when she needed a father most, he had been there. There was still a lot for the two to overcome, and Trevor hoped that in time they would lay their demons to rest and have what they both had missed out on for her entire life.

With a wink at Dan, he turned and smiled at Jessie. When he reached her, he leaned forward and opened the door. Once she was settled inside, he shut the door and rounded the front end. He folded himself into the driver's seat and closed the door, and then he turned to her.

"Everything okay?"

Jessie's bright silver eyes met his and he bit back a gasp. It was almost like he could see her soul.

"I don't know. He's trying so hard, and he has been there for me. But my whole life I've always wondered why my father didn't love me. Now I find out that Dan Kirk lied to me all of my life. And, I don't know who my real father is."

Trevor reached out and tucked a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. "If you knew, would you look for him?"

Jessie looked thoughtful. The play of emotions that crossed her face touched him.

"I wish that my mom and I had been close. Maybe she would have told me that Dan wasn't my father. Maybe she would have taken the secret to the grave no matter when she died." Jessie looked away and studied the tree in her father's front yard. Thinking that she was done talking, he buckled his seatbelt and turned the key in the ignition. He shifted the car into reverse and was stopped by her quiet words.

"I don't think I've ever been loved." She reached out and her hand hovered just above his thigh. He watched her move her hand lower settling it on the rough fabric of his jeans. His heart soared. It was the first time she had initiated a touch between them since her attack. Her next words nearly stopped his heart. "Until you." The words were whispered so he almost didn't hear her. But they were strong and sincere, and he knew that he had just been given a precious gift.

Trevor shifted the car into drive and moved back into the driveway. He couldn't let that go without a reaction. When he shifted the car into park, he

leaned closer to her. Watching her eyes, he saw no fear. His hand settled over hers on his thigh and he saw a teardrop fall from her eye.

“Dan’s the only father I’ve ever known. Though he wasn’t there for me, I worshiped him from afar for so long. I don’t know how to handle him being there and being...loving. It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

Trevor stroked her hand with his thumb. “Can you forgive him?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head.

“Can I kiss you?”

Her eyes widened and she stared at him. Seconds later, her whispered “yes” brought a low growl from deep within him, and he reached up and cupped her chin. He was careful to be gentle so he wouldn’t frighten her. He watched as she allowed him to guide her lips to his. Her lips settled on his own, and he sighed. It was so right.

Moving his hand from her chin to her neck, he cupped her neck and pulled her closer in an attempt to deepen the kiss. Her body stiffened and he pulled back a little. “It’s okay, Jess. It’s just me. It’s Trevor and I would never hurt you.”

Her hands came to rest on his shoulders. By the stiff set of her spine and the light push she gave him, he knew that memories of that horrible night were assaulting her. “I love you, Jessie. I won’t ever force you to do anything.” Jessie began to relax, and he snaked out his tongue to trace her lips. He used his thumb and index finger to massage her neck, while resting his other hand on her leg. When her lips parted, he sighed into her mouth and he deepened the kiss. It was a simple kiss, but it meant the world to him. When she pulled away, she looked up into his eyes and the total trust he saw in her wide silver eyes nearly shattered him.

Trevor wanted to say something, but he couldn’t. He was afraid that she’d hear his sheer vulnerability. It shook him to the core. He straightened in his seat and put the car in reverse again. When he pulled away from Coach Kirk’s house, her hand came to rest on his thigh once again. He reached down and linked his fingers through hers.

* * * *

Hand in hand, they walked through the mall toward the Santa Fe Bar and Grill. He had never enjoyed shopping as much as he had today. Jessie

had held tight to his hand while they moved from shop to shop searching for the perfect gifts for her father and friends. As usual, fans hovered around him asking for autographs. He tried to keep moving because the first time he was stopped, a crowd began to form, and although Jessie tried to brush it off, he sensed her apprehension. Sensitive to her feelings, he smiled and thanked the crowd for their well wishes and took Jessie's hand moving on. Despite his attempts, the crowd followed, although most were respectful, and when they made it to the restaurant, they dissipated, allowing him and Jessie some privacy.

When they were seated at the table, he took her hand in his. She looked up at him with bright silver eyes. "Thanks, Jess."

"For what?"

He studied her. She looked so beautiful with her braids hanging over each shoulder. Her soft features and bright silver eyes made her look almost childlike. "For being you," he said when she raised her eyebrows in question.

"I'm nothing special. I'm—" Whatever she had been about to say was cut off by the appearance of the waiter.

"Welcome to the Santa Fe Bar and Grill. I'm John, your waiter. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'd like a Gold Margarita. Jessie?" Both the waiter and Trevor looked at her.

"Raspberry Margarita, please."

"Are you ready to order your meal?"

"Give us a few minutes, please," Trevor responded.

Before the waiter walked away from the table, Jessie opened her menu and he studied her while she looked over the offerings. He wondered if she'd ever be the same. Of course, she wouldn't. What she had endured was a life-altering event.

Jessie interrupted his thoughts. "What's good?"

"The penne pasta with house-made chorizo and roasted peppers is delicious."

"I think I want chicken enchiladas."

"Very good choice."

He grasped her hand again. "I just want you to know, you're someone very special. Don't ever think you're not." He watched color climb up her neck and into her cheeks.

The waiter appeared with their drinks before she had a chance to respond. "Are you ready to order now?"

Trevor spoke up. "Yes, I would like the penne pasta with house-made chorizo and roasted peppers and my friend would like the chicken enchiladas."

"Very good choices. Thank you."

He moved away from the table, and Trevor smiled at Jessie. A crowd of carolers could be heard in the hall, and Jessie's happy look of a moment before faded. She watched the carolers and he wondered about the look of longing on her face.

"What is it, Jess?"

She swallowed hard. "Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. The decorations, the excitement, the carolers have always brought me a joy and peace that I didn't have at other times of the year."

"I love Christmas, too."

Her eyes fluttered closed, and he sensed she had something heavy on her mind. He massaged the inside of her wrist with his thumb, and he waited for her to speak again. The last thing he wanted was to pressure her. She knew he was there, and she had opened herself up to him this morning. There was no way he was going to jeopardize that.

"I don't think Christmas will ever be the same again." Her whispered words were broken with emotion. Tears began to course down her cheeks. "I need to use the ladies' room," Jessie said. She rose from the table and he followed her with his eyes while she made her way toward the back of the restaurant.

Trevor reached into the pocket of his leather jacket. He had planned to put the necklace and bracelet he bought her under her tree before he left today so she'd have something from him to open on Christmas morning. But what was the harm in giving them to her early. He still had the cookware to give her and the sports complex. He pulled the wrapped packages from his pocket and set them next to her drink.

Jessie returned to the table and took her seat. Her eyes were red from crying. His heart was heavy. He wished the man who had attacked her were

still alive so that true justice could be served. Death was too good for him. He should be suffering, and instead, Jessie was the one who suffered, and she didn't deserve it.

"What's this?" Her words drew his eyes to her. He smiled at the package she held in her hand.

"An early Christmas present."

"Trevor you didn't have to—"

"I know I didn't have to. I wanted to," he said, cutting off whatever protest she had been about to make. "Open it." Trevor heard the excitement in his own voice and remembered years past when he would sit next to his mom and well up with excitement while he waited for her to open whatever gift he had gotten her that year. It was a sobering comparison. He had loved his mother and promised himself that whomever he settled with would be someone his mom would approve of. He was sure his mother would approve of Jessie. In many ways, Jessie was just like her.

Trevor watched her eyes and she carefully took the paper off the first package. She flipped the lid of the jewelry box and he heard her gasp. "It's beautiful."

"Just like you."

"Trev. I can't accept this."

"You can. It's not polite to return a gift." He nodded, trying to look serious. A spark of humor entered her eyes and he was glad that he had decided to give the gift to her today. "Hold out your wrist." He took the box from her and unhooked the bracelet from its clips in the box. Just when he finished clasping it on her wrist, the waiter walked toward their table with their lunch.

They stared at each other as the waiter set their food down in front of them. When he stepped away, tears formed in Jessie's eyes. "Thank you. No one has ever given me a gift like this."

"There's another one."

"I know, I saw. It's too much, Trevor."

"No. Nothing is too much. I love you and I want you to know it."

Jessie's look softened, and in her eyes, he thought he saw a spark of desire.

“You don’t have to buy me things for me to know that you love me. I see it in your eyes when you look at me. I wish I could say it back, but I’m not ready.”

“You don’t have to say it back. I understand, Jess. I just need you to know how I feel. I’ll wait for you forever if I have to.”

Jessie picked up her fork and took a bite of her enchiladas. He watched her eat for a moment before he picked up his fork and dug into his pasta.

They didn’t talk while they ate, but they didn’t need to. Even in total silence, he was comfortable with Jessie. He wondered if she felt the same.

Their plates were cleared, and Trevor picked up the package and handed it to her. Using the same, careful motions she had done with the first, she removed the paper. When she saw the necklace, the tears she had been holding back through most of dinner fell from her eyes. The two hearts joined at the center of it were symbolic of the love he had for her. He stood and moved behind her. He took the necklace from her. “Let me put it on you.” His voice was husky. Jessie lifted her hair. When he clasped the necklace, his fingers brushed against the nape of her neck. Heat surged through him at the contact. He saw her slight tremble and he knew she felt it too.

“I think we should go,” Jessie said.

Trevor leaned over and kissed her cheek. It’s been one of the best days of my life. Thank you, Jessie.”

Chapter 26

Jessie stood in the kitchen chopping onion for a vegetable soup. The onion gave her reason to cry, and she took advantage of it. Every time Trevor told her he loved her, she wanted so much to believe him. Part of her thought it was pity speaking and part of her believed that he imagined himself in love with her just because she was there.

“Hi, Jessie. How was your day?” her father asked her.

“It was okay.” Jessie didn’t turn around. She used her knife to scrape the chopped onion into a bowl. Grabbing the zucchini, she began to slice.

“Did you get all of your shopping done?” her father asked.

“Yeah, I found—” Her words died when the knife she was using sliced through her finger.

“Jessie?”

Her father came to her side. Seconds later, her father had a cool cloth and wrapped it around her finger. He grasped her finger in his hand. Their eyes met in silence. She remembered all the scrapes and bruises that she had wished her father were there to kiss away.

“What are you thinking?”

The question seemed odd to her. She was standing there with blood dripping down her arm and her finger was starting to throb. But the interest and compassion she saw in his eyes prompted her to answer.

“I was thinking about how often I wished you were there to fix the cuts and bruises when I was a kid.” She didn’t mean for her voice to crack but it did.

“Jessie—”

“Don’t say you’re sorry.” Jessie shook her head. The intense sorrow overwhelming her as she stared into this man’s eyes made her want to run. But she couldn’t run forever.

“So many times I needed you. I wondered where you were and if you were thinking of me.”

“I thought of you every day,” he put in, his voice full of emotion.

“Why? I’m not even your daughter.” The quiet force in those few words seemed to shake the room. The play of emotions that crossed his face was touching.

“You may not be my biological daughter, but I didn’t know that when you were born. I didn’t stop loving you when I found out you weren’t mine. Maybe I hated your mother for it, but I couldn’t stop loving you.”

The room was silent while Jessie took in what he had just said. Desperately, she wanted to believe him.

“Why weren’t you there then? Why did you let more than twenty years go by? If momma hadn’t died we wouldn’t even be having this discussion because you still wouldn’t be involved with me.”

“I can’t take back the times I wasn’t there. I loved you so much. You were my world for the first year of your life. If I could turn back time, I’d fight for you, baby. Consequences be damned, I’d fight.”

A tear coursed down his cheek and her resolve to keep a cool distance from him broke. “Then why didn’t you?”

“Oh, Jessie. I was young, at the height of my career and too stupid to realize that the real consequence was losing you.”

Dan stepped forward, and Jessie stepped to the side to avoid his touch. It wasn’t that she didn’t want him to touch her, but she was overwhelmed. For years, she had not given voice to the anger and hurt inside. Jessie trembled, her stomach felt like it was doing backflips, fear made her want to run, but she stood stoically in place. Seconds later, her father’s hand dropped onto her shoulder, and she shed the tears she promised herself she wouldn’t.

“Do you know how badly I needed you?” The ragged breath she took underscored the broken words.

“Tell me.”

The whispered plea gave her permission to let go of all that she’d held in for so many years. There was no turning back now. Jessie shook her head trying to make sense of her thoughts.

“There wasn’t one day that went by that I didn’t wish I could see my daddy. I would pray at night and wish on stars, but you never came. I settled for loving you from afar.”

She reached out and cupped his cheek. "I couldn't hold you close to me, but I held on to what I could. Every news article, every interview, every game, I was there, adoring you, cheering you on and loving you the only way I knew how."

Jessie took a deep breath. "I could only wonder why you didn't love me." Jessie lowered her hand from his face and turned away.

"I did, Jessie. You have to believe that."

She spun back around to face him. "Why? How? You want me to believe you loved me, but you never showed me that love. Not a phone call, not a present at Christmas, not even a lousy card on my birthday. I don't even remember a time when you came to visit me. When I was here, you acted like I was a bother. But you loved me? That the biggest load of crap I've ever heard."

An unwanted sob tore from her. Unable to meet his eyes any longer, she turned back to the vegetables she had been chopping. She grabbed a handful of mushrooms that sat nearby and placed them on the cutting board.

"Maybe I didn't always love you the best that I could. But I always loved you. I'm just a man, Jessie. I've made mistakes, and I regret them. I always thought it was too late, but we both got a lot of life left to live. I wasn't there in the past, but I'm here now and I want to give you all those things that you dreamed about when you were a kid."

"I'm not a kid anymore. You can't take back those years," Jessie whispered.

"But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere."

The determination in his voice broke through the coldness surrounding her. She turned once again and met his eyes. In his tear-clouded eyes, she saw hope. It was tentative and fragile, but it was there. His intent gaze bore into hers, searching. In the next moment, she was engulfed in his warm embrace. His lips pressed against her temple. "I love you, Jessie."

She nodded against his chest and relished being wrapped in her daddy's arms. He was asking for a chance, and she'd be a fool to deny him that.

* * * *

Jessie walked beside Trevor and her father. Christmas Eve had always been her favorite day of the year. The music and the laughing children

brought her peace. Although her own life was full of turmoil, the innocent smiles and wide-eyed excitement of the little ones restored a little faith in her heart. Bad things happened. But the world wasn't all bad. She had to remember that or the grief would swallow her whole. Trevor's hand grazed hers and she allowed him to engulf her hand in his. It was natural and safe.

"Miss Jessie." She turned toward the familiar voice of Malachi and saw him with two other boys she didn't recognize. Sadness clouded his eyes, and she knew that what had happened the night had been hard on him. Just like it had been on her.

"Malachi. How are you?"

"All good."

The look on his face told her different but she didn't press. Forcing a smile, she reached out a hand to him. "Would you like to walk with us?"

Malachi looked at the boys with him, and they nodded. "Yeah, okay, Miss Jessie." He and his friends fell into step behind her and Trevor. Jessie looked around for her father and when she caught his eye, she smiled. It wasn't much but it was a start.

Their small group turned down Canyon Road, and Jessie gasped at the site of the farolitos, New Mexican Christmas Lights. She'd seen nothing like it ever before. Paper bags weighted with sand glowed from the candle within. It was breathtaking.

"Did you know that this is done as a reenactment of lighting the way for Christ's birth?" Trevor whispered in her ear.

Jessie gave a slight shake of her head but said nothing. The growing crowd surrounding her made her anxious. They walked down the street, the number of people enjoying this New Mexican tradition grew. She couldn't focus. Her head started to pound, and she searched for one thing to focus on, but there was too much activity. In all her life, she'd never felt this way before. A tear slipped out of her eye, her breath began to quicken. Trevor must have sensed her stiffening, and he drew her into a corner away from the crowd. Malachi followed and was beside her in an instant.

"Miss Jessie. Are you okay?" Hearing the near panic in his voice gave her something to focus on besides herself. She knew that she needed to calm down for the sake of the child before her.

Taking several deep breaths to calm herself she said, "I'm okay." Forcing a shaky smile, she reached out and grasped his hand. When he

pulled her hand to his heart, the tears that she had been holding back fell down her face in torrents.

Trevor's arms wrapped around her from behind, and she sank back against him. For several minutes, the three of them stood there frozen in time, not paying attention to their surroundings and the people that glanced their way when they walked by. Beneath her fingertips, Malachi's heart beat, and it seemed to breathe new life into her. She had a purpose, and although it was much the same as it had always been, in that moment, it became much stronger. *I will survive this. I won't be a victim anymore*, she told herself over and over again.

"We're going to get through this." Her voice was a whisper.

The man holding her and the boy across from her both had set looks of determination on their faces, and she knew she wasn't alone. "I think I'm ready."

"Are you sure?" Trevor asked.

With a nod, she looked at both Trevor and Malachi and tried to reassure them with her eyes that she spoke the truth. When they stepped out of the corner and into the stream of people enjoying the lights, she tucked away the realization that her father had waited. Malachi's friends had gone on ahead, but her father had waited, and that meant a lot to her.

They passed a small group of carolers and she stopped to listen to the voices of revelers when they began to sing "O' Holy Night" a favorite of hers. A hand crept into hers and held tight. When she looked down she expected to see Trevor's hand grasping her own but it was not. She fixed on the hand holding hers. She stared at their joining, and she realized that she got what she had come to New Mexico for. She raised her eyes to meet those of her father. Love burst in her heart, and she began to sing "Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angels voices. O' night divine, O' night when Christ was born, O' night..." Her voice trailed off. A lump formed in her throat at the emotion in her father's eyes. The song ended and the carolers paused. In that pause, her father took advantage of the relative quiet to say, "I'll adopt you, then it will be legal."

Before she could answer, a female voice called out, "Trevor! Trevor Malone! Is it really you?"

The high-pitched screech grated her nerves, but more than that, the new hope in her heart died when the owner of that voice threw herself against

Trevor and kissed him like she had a right. It wasn't so much that she kissed him that hurt. But he kissed her back, and ice curled around Jessie's heart.

Chapter 27

Trevor knew he was in trouble. When he had managed to extricate himself from his former fling Bonnie, Jessie was gone. If looks could kill, he'd be dead from the glares that Malachi and Coach had been shooting at him since they had left Canyon Road. Malachi had argued when he said he'd take him home, but Trevor had insisted. It was what Jessie would want, and that was the bait he had used to goad him into the car. Coach, on the other hand, said nothing to him.

They had a right to be angry, and he knew it. Although he had never expected Bonnie to throw herself at him, he bore the brunt of the blame because, for a moment, his brain had stopped working and he had kissed her back. He didn't even know that Bonnie was back in New Mexico. Last he had heard, she was in Texas working toward her master's degree in education.

Their relationship had never been serious. Both were seeing other people. Nothing surprising for him. Until Jessie, he had never wanted a committed relationship. They were too much work. Maybe that was why he'd lost his head and kissed her.

Trevor turned down Malachi's street and pulled up in front of his apartment. "Malachi—"

"I'm not the one you need to talk to. That was tore up, dawg. You hurt Miss Jessie. She's good people, she don't deserve that. If you'd have seen the look in her—"

"I get the point Malachi. I'm gonna go talk to her."

"I hope she blasts yo ass." Malachi turned his back.

"You have a good night too, 'Chi," Trevor said, using the nickname he'd heard Jessie use. A smile turned up his lips.

"Catch ya on the flip side," Malachi said, holding up two fingers in a peace sign as he walked away.

Trevor looked at Coach Kirk out of the corner of his eye and almost laughed out loud at the horrified look on his face. “Interesting way of making a point,” Dan said when Trevor put the car in gear and pulled away from Malachi’s house.

When he pulled into Coach’s driveway, a surge of irrational jealousy hit him when he saw Dylan’s car. “Well, now we know how she got home,” he said, his tone flat.

“You expected her to walk?” Dan said sarcastically. Trevor rolled his eyes when Dan walked away. He knew he deserved it, but it didn’t make it any easier to take. When he reached the front door, he was glad that it was still open. At least it hadn’t been slammed in his face. He stepped through the entryway and met Jessie’s eyes.

“Hey, slick.”

He could hear the smirk in Dylan’s voice but he didn’t look away from Jessie. “Jessie, I’m sorry.” Trevor heard the pleading in his own voice.

“Don’t.”

Trevor didn’t move closer to her, but he didn’t drop his gaze either. In her eyes, a storm was brewing, fury mixed with pain, and he wondered how long this calm would last.

“We need to talk.” Trevor said.

“No, we don’t. There is nothing to say. I knew in my heart that this...whatever this is wouldn’t last forever. It’s okay, you don’t have to explain.” The calm tone of her voice didn’t match the look in her eyes, and Trevor knew that at least for tonight, his plight was hopeless.

“Just so you know, that woman means nothing to me. It’s you that I love, that I want by my side, and that I’d die without. You mean so much more to me than you are willing to let yourself believe. I won’t let you throw it away.”

“I didn’t throw it away, you did.” Each word was spat out in a controlled staccato. “Go back to your other woman, Trevor. She obviously wants you, I don’t.”

Trevor steeled himself against the pain those words brought. Wanting to run to her, sweep her up in his arms, and not let go until she listened and understood, he took a step forward. The huge step she took backward was a wake-up call—he had screwed up big time.

“Stay away from me. This was all a mistake, I should have known better than to let you get close to me. Just stay away!” The tears fell from her eyes. She swiped at them before she turned on her heel and ran out of the room.

Trevor moved to the sofa and sat heavily on it. He let out a sigh of defeat. No matter how much he deserved her anger, it didn’t make it an easy pill to swallow. Part of him understood her anger and hurt, another part of him was just angry. He always listened to her. Why wouldn’t she listen to him? He pushed his hand through his hair frustrated. Damn woman was going to be the death of him.

“You okay?” Dylan sank down next to him.

“Now I remember why I never tried very hard to commit myself to anyone. It’s too damn much work.”

“You can’t seriously think she’s wrong. Jessie has every reason to be upset.”

Trevor leaned back and covered his eyes. The bright light was making the slow pounding in his head worse. “No, I don’t think she is wrong. I know she has reason to be pissed. But I’ve done everything I can to show her how I feel. I mean, you know me. Dylan, you know it’s never been like this with another girl.”

Dylan chuckled. “Yeah, I never thought you’d find just one girl to settle down with.”

“Exactly!” Trevor said, exasperated.

“I may know that, but does she?”

“I’ve told her.” Trevor dropped his hands into his lap and looked at Dylan. “She doesn’t believe me.”

“So it’s your job to make her believe you. When she’s feeling insecure, you need to make her feel secure.”

“I don’t know what more I can do. She has been waiting for something like this to happen. Now she can say I told you so and shut me out of her life.”

“So fight for her. If you don’t want this to end, fight for her. Look, she’s upset right now. You kissed another woman. Bonnie may have come at you, but you had the choice to push her away or not. You made a bad choice, bud.”

“Thanks for the overview.” Trevor’s tone oozed sarcasm.

“Give her until morning. Do yourself a favor though. Remember, it’s Jessie that has the right to be angry. If you want to talk about the fact that you think she has just been waiting for you to screw up, make a note of it and talk about it another time.”

Trevor snorted. “Thanks for that.”

Dylan rose. “Just trying to spare you a little pain, ’cause I know you are already in for enough. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Trevor watched Dylan make his way out of the house, and then he sank back against the sofa. Picking up a pillow, he punched it. “Damn it,” he muttered.

* * * *

Trevor cracked open an eye open and saw that light filtered through the drapes at his bedroom window. After the wonderful time he had spent with Jessie yesterday, he had hoped Christmas morning would dawn with her at his side. He didn’t expect to have had sex with her, but he couldn’t have thought of a better way to wake up than with her next to him. It would have been the greatest Christmas gift ever.

Damn it! Why am I so stupid? Trevor berated himself when he climbed out of bed. Grabbing a towel out of the hall closet, he made his way into the bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as he knew he could stand. Slipping his boxer shorts over his hips, he climbed into the tub and let the punishing heat of the water that was just tolerable wash over him.

Thirty minutes later, he stood in his bedroom, a pair of loose-fitting jeans hanging low on his hips, his attention on the many awards that Jessie had once admired. Did she know that each one of them had meant a great deal to him, but none came even close to how much he cherished her? Could she not see that? His life had been the game before his injury. Jessie’s gentle love had changed that. There was no doubt in his mind that she loved him, but she was going to fight it tooth and nail. Trevor knew he had to be patient. Jessie was fragile and in the midst of some major life changing events—new love the least of those events.

Unlike any other woman he’d ever known, he had to work for even a glimpse into the sweet emotion he knew she felt. Maybe that’s why he kissed Bonnie. It was so much easier to deal with a woman who revered

him. Why had his heart settled on someone after all this time, only to have it be the one woman who could take him or leave him.

The phone rang and he shook the troublesome thoughts away. He moved to his nightstand and grabbed the phone. Caller ID told him it was Coach calling. "Hello?"

"You bastard." Coach's voice was full of venom.

"We covered this last night. I know it was a real asshole move. The woman means nothing to me. I haven't heard from her in forever and probably won't again."

"Yeah, well, you should have thought of that before you decided to play tonsil hockey with her. Your sport is baseball, son. You'd do better to stick with it. But in all reality, that's not why I'm calling." Coach took a breath. Trevor said nothing while he waited for Coach to get to the point. "Well, it is, but not specifically."

"What the hell are you talking about? Since when have you been so wishy-washy?"

"Jessie's gone." A deafening silence settled over the phone line. Trevor's stomach clenched like he had been punched in the gut.

"Where?"

"Now if I knew that, son, I wouldn't be on the phone. All the note said was that she couldn't take it anymore and she was going to start over someplace where no one knew her. Said if she could make one fresh start, she knew she could make another."

"Coach, I don't think Jessie would just up and walk away. She felt too much responsibility to those kids."

"And she also felt pretty screwed over and abused by people in her personal life. There are troubled kids everywhere, she knows that."

"I can't believe this."

"Well believe it. If your sorry ass hadn't had to make out with that woman—"

"I did not make out with her. It was a kiss that meant nothing. Coach, you know as well as I do that last year at this time, I had any woman I wanted. No one to bitch about who I was kissing. I'm only human, and yeah, I messed up, but at least I didn't lie to her all her life." Trevor regretted the words immediately but he was angry. His actions might have

been the straw that broke the camel's back, but he was not the only one responsible for running Jessie out of New Mexico.

"Son, if I were you, I'd watch myself. Or I might just come over there and give you the beating my daughter should have given you last night."

"I'm sorry," Trevor said, angry that this whole mess was being pinned on him. Despite the fact that he had acted like a pig, he didn't deserve to be strung up and publicly stoned for it. Jessie was a grown woman, who could have chosen to talk about this like an adult. He had said he was sorry. Instead, she chose to run away like a child. And that was fine with him. He didn't need this shit. "I hope that she finds happiness. I'll see in you in February, *Coach*." Trevor flipped the phone closed and threw himself down on his bed. "Goddamn it!" he screamed at the empty room. The fact that there was no one there to answer him, or ease the ache of anger away, only infuriated him more.

* * * *

The end of January brought a blizzard to New York. Jessie looked out the window of her apartment and groaned. Driving in the city was too much trouble, so she walked everywhere. The very thought of traipsing through mounds of freezing cold, wet slush wasn't at all appealing.

In fact, the thought of going to work at all had her groaning once again. She missed the Youth Center, especially Malachi. Although she had lucked into a job as teen counselor, the setting was more formal—sterile and clinical. The rapport she'd had with the kids in Santa Fe had been easy, and she'd enjoyed it. Here, the kids were forced into counseling by order of the court, and they did not open up to or respect her.

Malachi had called her two days ago and to her relief told her that the police had closed the case. He would not be charged, and the death of the man who raped her labeled self-defense. Briana had let her know that Malachi had been wanting to talk to her, and she gave permission to give him her cell phone number. Although she had been anticipating the impending phone call, she had been unprepared for the depth of emotion that would hit her when she talked to him.

This child had taken a man's life to defend her. She promised him that they would get through it together and then ran out on him without even

saying good-bye. Guilt assaulted her. *Damn you, Trevor*, she thought. Dylan and her father had told her that Trevor asked about her, but she'd sworn that if either one of them told him where she was, she would never speak to them again. The almost daily phone calls he'd made to her cell had dwindled to a couple times a week, and she wondered if he was giving up. The last she'd heard he continued to ask about her, but that didn't mean he'd left behind his precious playboy life.

The absurdity of it all was that she still loved him. She had convinced herself that she did what was best, but deep down inside, she hated this new life. Jessie missed Santa Fe, she missed Dan—her father, who continued to talk about a paternity test. She'd planted the seed, but he continued to water it and now she was anxious to know if this man she'd come to love was or was not her dad. Dylan, Adam, and Briana all called her often. It was nice to keep in contact with them. To have someone to talk to because God knew she hadn't bothered to even try to make friends here. And most terrifying and annoying was that she missed Trevor with every bone in her body.

The doorbell rang, and Jessie wiped away the tear that had fallen down her cheek. Running her fingers through her hair, she made her way to the door. Jessie pressed her eye to the peephole but saw nothing. The doorbell sounded again, and she reached out and unlocked the door. Opening it just a crack, she peered out into the hallway. When she saw the muscular body that she had seen so many times in her memory, her heart stopped. Schooling her features so her face wouldn't give away her emotion, she raised her gaze to his. "Hello, Trevor," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

Jessie stared at him stupidly. Her thoughts had been tangled up in this man since she had left Santa Fe. Memories of his touch had haunted her at night. Now, here he stood, in the flesh, and her pride wouldn't allow her to make it easy for him. "I'm sorry. I have to go to work, and I really don't have anything to say to you." She watched the way the impact of her words made him flinch, and she wanted to take them back.

"I'm not leaving until we talk, Jessie. You owe me that much." The determination in his eyes was evident. If Jessie didn't know him so well, she might be frightened of him.

"How did you find me?" Jessie asked.

"Dylan doesn't hide things well." A sly smile turned up the corners of his lips. "He wrote your address in his little black book. A few days ago, he ran into the bank, the book was in the car."

"So you snooped into someone else's personal stuff? How low is that? If I had wanted you to know where I was, I'd have told you."

"No you wouldn't have." Trevor was angry now. She could see it in the thin line of his lips.

"Pardon?" Jessie asked indignant.

"You want to be safe. I scare the hell out of you. You can't stand the fact that someone knows you. That someone wants you. You! Not whatever version of yourself you are claiming to be at any given moment." Trevor stepped over the threshold, and she took a step back.

"You don't know me. You know what you wanted to see! Do you think I didn't know it was a game? I knew that all along! Part of me wanted to believe in you, but I know who you are. You are a womanizing, self-centered jock who cares about two things, the game and getting laid. Seeing you kiss that woman only proved that to me." Jessie turned and walked away. Over her shoulder, she said, "Close the door on your way out."

Stomping through the living room, she didn't bother to look over her shoulder when she heard the click of the door closing. Taking a deep breath, she proceeded into her room, where she pulled out a pair of jeans and a sweater. Her hands went to the hem of the T-shirt she slept in.

"So it's as easy as that? You dismiss me and assume I'm going to fall into step to follow your orders?"

"Just go, Trevor."

"Why? To make it easier for you? You didn't make it easy on anyone when you left. Do you think you were doing Malachi a favor by running out on him? What about your friends? The people who cared about you and made you feel like you were a part of something. What about Dan? You gave him back his daughter only to snatch it away from him. And for what? Because you were pissed at me? Grow up, Jessie!" Trevor took a breath.

"I was raped! The man I thought was my father isn't, and not that it's any of your business but my friends, Dan, and Malachi keep in touch with me," Jessie ground out through clenched teeth.

"All the important people, right?" Trevor said sarcastically. He moved closer to her, matching her step for step until he had her backed into a

corner. "You think you can erase everything that happened between us. I got news for you, darlin'. You can't. I won't let you."

"There was nothing between us." Jessie's breathing was labored. She saw the glitter of anger in his eyes. She'd never seen him quite this dangerous before.

"Bullshit."

"Trevor--" His lips crushed hers in a bruising kiss meant to punish her. With fear swallowing her, Jessie pushed against his chest.

No sooner had he touched her than he moved away. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry." Trevor pleaded with his eyes. She could see that the enormity of what he'd done, considering what had happened to her, had been great.

"Just go." Jessie's voice trembled, and she wished she could erase the humiliation and fear she heard in it.

"Fine." Trevor spun around and walked away from her. He stopped and turned back. "If you care, the doctor cleared me to go into spring training. I guess next week we'll find out if I can play again or not."

They studied each other for several long moments. Finally, he said, "And for the record, I love you. Maybe that's just me being selfish as you so eloquently put it, but I can't help what I feel. I guess somehow I'll learn to live without you, but will you learn to live with what you gave up?"

Before she could respond, he stormed through her apartment and out the door, slamming it behind him. Jessie shook with the aftershocks of both the slam and his visit.

* * * *

Jessie shivered while she made her way into the counseling center where she worked. She tried to put that morning's unexpected visit out of her mind, but she just couldn't do it. When she'd left New Mexico, she'd been convinced that Trevor would just go on with his life, to the next woman. Even when Dylan and her father had told her that Trevor asked about her, she hadn't believed it.

His appearance that morning, and the pure fury she'd seen in his eyes, had her doubting her actions. Running away had been childish, and she knew it. What she didn't know is why she did it. When Trevor had come to her that night, there had been such sincerity in his eyes. The hurt in his voice

when she refused to talk to him had almost been her undoing. Fear had held her in its grip, and she made a choice that she didn't think would have an impact on much of anyone. After all, she'd shown up and planted herself in their lives whether they liked it or not. That night, she had believed that she was merely rectifying that and making life easier for them.

Only after she was settled and talked to the people she'd left behind, did she realize that her presence wasn't unwelcome like she believed it to be. By then, it was too late. Going back hadn't been an option. She just couldn't face Trevor. The man she had come to know was everything she'd ever wanted and never believed she could have. But he was in the grip of trauma and vulnerable. That wasn't the real man, the one he was when all was well in his life. It was just a picture of who she wanted him to be—at least that's what she convinced herself of.

She took her time walking down the hall to her lonely office in the back corner of the building. Within the safety of the four walls, she did what she hadn't allowed herself to do before, and broke down in tears. Great sobs shook her as she cried for all that had been lost and all that she'd done wrong.

"Jessie, are you okay?"

She looked up at her boss. "I'm fine, Mitch." The sorrow laced her voice, making it heavy.

"You don't look fine." Mitch said. He leaned back, making himself comfortable while he studied her. "You know, a good boss not only makes sure his employees are trained well and prepared for their job, but he also cares about their well being."

Jessie wanted to throw him out. Talking about it wouldn't help, it would just frustrate her more. "Really, I'm fine. I just needed a moment."

"Is it something to do with work?" he persisted, kindness in his eyes.

"No. It's personal," Jessie said, her voice flat.

"Well, Jessie, if you want to talk, I'm here. I know it's hard to adjust to a new town, can't hurt to have a friend."

"Thanks." Jessie pasted a smile on her face and tried to quell the sadness that remained. Trevor was gone. This time, he wasn't coming back, of that she was sure. Her life in Santa Fe had been brief and full of turmoil. It was best she moved on, and Mitch was right. It sure didn't hurt to have a friend.

Chapter 28

Trevor was queasy. Nerves that hadn't plagued him since his rookie year had him tied up in knots when he stepped up to the mound on the first day of Spring Training. Excitement buzzed around the field, anticipation high. Everyone held their breath and waited to see whether the star pitcher was back.

Jim Ray was behind the plate, and Trevor eyed him for the hand signal. When the sign "curveball" came, Trevor's gaze wandered to Coach. Their relationship was very strained at this point. Coach blamed him for driving Jessie away, and Trevor blamed coach for not owning up to his own hand in driving Jessie away, and, more important, not telling Trevor where she was.

The tension in the stadium was palpable. Trevor took a deep breath, wound up for the pitch, and released the ball. Although he couldn't see it, he knew that all eyes were on that ball while it traveled down the space between home plate and the mound. Trevor was pleased when the pain he'd expected never came and was elated when the ball crossed the plate exactly where he'd aimed it. A sigh of relief escaped. Around him, he sensed his teammates begin to move, all ready to focus on their own game now that Trevor had proved he wasn't taken down so easily.

* * * *

Trevor ambled to the dugout. He'd pitched a total of fifty pitches, some better than others. It was a good number for pitchers, but Trevor had done better. He headed for the water cooler, he reminded himself that it would take time.

"That was some great pitching, Slider. Much better than I had anticipated." Trevor turned and met Coach's gaze. Apology loomed in the tired eyes that stared back at him.

“Thanks, Coach.” Pride wouldn’t allow either one of them to say the words, but the simple acknowledgement of his accomplishment was a step in the right direction. Watching his teammates play took his mind off things. His time with Jessie had expanded his interests, but without Jessie there, none of it seemed exciting. She had been his inspiration to reach beyond what was comfortable for him. Anger welled up within him again at the thought of his visit to her. She had shut him out. There wasn’t anything he could do to change her mind about him. Although he had wanted to see love in her eyes, all he had seen was distrust and disinterest—she had written him off.

The time they spent together meant nothing to her. But it had meant a whole lot to him.

“I’m so happy for you, Slider. That was some great pitching.” Dylan slapped him on the back.

“Thanks,” Trevor said absently.

“You gotta snap out of it, man. Jessie said it’s over, and I’ve never known her to lie.” Trevor blinked against the sun. Sometimes he wished Dylan weren’t so perceptive. “It’s not like you to moon over a woman either. There’s women up in those stands who drove a lot of miles to watch us train. Like always, you can have your pick of them.”

“Could. But wouldn’t that just be proving Jessie right? She thinks I didn’t mean it when I said I loved her. According to her when I got back to playing, I was going to drop her like a hot potato for one of those sluts that wouldn’t want me if I wasn’t playing, and have no interest in knowing me.” Trevor spoke like he was pleading his case to the woman herself. Trevor closed his eyes and allowed visions of auburn hair and glittering silver eyes to wash over him. “No, I can’t do that,” he whispered with a shake of his head.

* * * *

Trevor flipped the phone closed on another unanswered call to Jessie. He had called every day for a month to no avail. The pain burned his gut worse than the vodka he had just downed.

“Hey there, stud.” Trevor turned toward the high-pitched female voice. Black spandex clung to her curvy frame. Her cleavage was daringly

exposed, and she held herself in a way that said she knew what she wanted and how to get it. “Glad to see you back for the new season. The Devils are my favorite team.”

Trevor smiled a fake smile, and he drawled, “Is that so?”

“Oh yeah.” She leaned in closer, making sure her breast rubbed against his arm. “I’ll take a redheaded slut,” she told the bartender.

Trevor almost spit out the mouthful of vodka he’d just slung back and his eyes traveled over her once again. The flaming red hair and come-get-me green eyes told him her drink of preference was perfect. The woman slid onto a barstool next to him and leaned in close. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “So want to teach me how to hit a homerun?”

Trevor narrowed his eyes. “If you follow baseball at all, you should know pitchers can’t hit worth a damn.”

“Well, that’s okay. You hit well enough to get on base, and I’ll make sure you get to home plate.”

Distaste coiled in his stomach. Women like this were a dime a dozen. Looking to score off his notoriety, and of course live a nice cushy life off his paycheck. A year ago, that wouldn’t have mattered to him. He hadn’t planned on getting attached anyway, so he’d give them a night or two of immense pleasure and be done with it. That wasn’t enough anymore. He wanted so much more. He wanted Jessie.

The woman’s hand came to rest on his thigh. He’d be a fool to pass up what was being offered. After all, Jessie didn’t want him. Trevor pushed down the surge of self-pity. *I’m Trevor Malone. I can have any woman I want. If Jessie can’t see what she gave up, then who needs her?* Trevor ignored the voice inside his head that answered, *You need her, you dope. Go fight for her! Don’t prove her right. Show her how wrong she is.*

The woman’s hand inched higher, and his shaft twitched. Ignoring the little pang of guilt that told him he was betraying his true love, he leaned in and said, “I think we should take this game somewhere a little more private.”

* * * *

“Wake up!”

Trevor heard the deep voice of his best friend calling him, but he couldn't respond. His mouth was so dry it was like he hadn't had a drink in months. It seemed like his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth.

"Get up, you ass!" the voice called again. Trevor cracked one eye open but couldn't see beyond the grit that was caked on his lids. Turning over, he cursed whoever was in his room.

"You missed practice today, you moron! Coach is on a rampage. I expect he'll be here any minute. Do you really want him to see you like this? Now get up!"

Trevor blinked, trying to bring the clock on the nightstand into focus. The fog began to clear. *Damn, it's after three in the afternoon!* The realization had him sitting up far too fast. A wave of nausea passed over him, and he sank back down against the pillows.

"Dylan?" Trevor asked without turning toward the man.

"I'm here."

"What in the hell am I doing?" Trevor croaked out.

"Good question."

Dylan sounded annoyed. Trevor couldn't blame him. Spring training was half over, and Trevor had become quite the party animal. Late-night drinking binges had affected his game play to the point that he didn't know if it was his arm or the hangovers that prevented him from throwing even one good pitch. He was skating on thin ice with his coaches and his teammates.

"This isn't like you, Trev. I've known you a lot of years, and never have you let yourself go like this."

"Yeah, well I've changed," Trevor snapped.

"And not for the better." Dylan pulled the blinds up high, causing Trevor to squint against the bright afternoon sun. "Too much liquor and too many women, you're overcompensating and you know it."

"For what?"

"Jessie thought you were a cad. You've set out to prove her right. It's just too damn bad she isn't here to see it. Because isn't that what this is about? Or is it the crappy way you've been playing lately? Maybe if you took as much time working out as you did partying, your game would improve."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Trevor said between clenched teeth.

"Don't I? I know that you're spending your nights at the bottom of a bottle and with too many women who want only one thing."

"In case you've forgotten, that's the only kind of woman I've ever dated. Relationships are too much work." Trevor didn't want to talk about his failing ability as a pitcher. It was too painful. Once, he had thought he could still be successful even if he couldn't pitch again, but it seemed that now the day of reckoning was here, all he could do was fipity himself. Jessie had made him feel like he could do anything. Without her, all those dreams were hopeless. Life before Jessie had been the game. Life without them both just didn't seem worth living.

"You're right, Trev. Before Jessie, you never dated any one woman seriously, but you also never let it affect your game like this! Do you really think you're solving anything like this? If you want to be with Jessie--"

"You don't know shit about Jessie or my feelings for her. And you've never suffered an injury like I did. You try having your arm crushed and then see how quickly you can go back to flawless performance."

"Bullshit, Trev. Many nights I was with you in your yard throwing those balls. You worked your ass off, and you were ready. As for Jessie, maybe I don't know all about your feelings for her, but I know that ever since she left, you've not been yourself. One more thing I know is that she still talks to me--"

"Good for you. I wish you the best of luck with that one." Trevor said in disgust.

"You are being an ass."

"Get used to it. I'm a new man."

"All because Jessie left? Because you think she doesn't love you? Because you aren't where you used to be on the mound? It takes time, Trevor."

"Time." Trevor shook his head. Why didn't anyone understand? "I don't have time. If I don't improve by the end of training, you know as well as I do that I'll spend the season riding the bench. Jessie leaving doesn't have anything to do with that. But, I know she doesn't love me. She had expectations of me that I didn't live up to. Just like everyone else, when she saw that I wasn't superhuman she didn't want me anymore."

“Maybe her leaving wasn’t about you. I mean, yeah, you kissed another girl and it set her off, but deep down, she had a lot of reasons to run. None of those reasons was due to you failing to be her superhero. She cared about the man—it was the superstar she found distasteful.”

Trevor sat up straighter and met Dylan’s intense gaze. “I went to see her, Dylan. I saw the look in her eyes. She doesn’t care. No matter what I said and did, it wasn’t enough. I could never convince her that I wasn’t going to run out on her.”

“Maybe she just needed you to prove it to her. Words are cheap, man.”

“Jessie left. I didn’t have the chance to prove it.” Trevor sighed.

“You’re right. But if you think making headlines every night with your audacious behavior is doing anything to bring her back, you’re dead wrong. You know right after you went to see her, she asked me if I thought she was being too harsh.”

Trevor laughed bitterly, “It didn’t matter, obviously.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because she stayed away. She hasn’t even called me to see how things have been going.” Trevor groaned.

“You told her it was over. Shortly after, you made headlines for getting tossed out of that bar over that red head. It’s been one thing after another ever since.”

“Like she cares.”

“She needed space, Trev.”

“Yeah, well, she’s got it. Now if the lectures over, isn’t there a party to get ready for tonight?”

Trevor watched Dylan’s face go from angry to disappointed and back to angry.

“Well, if you’re talking about my birthday party, yes, it’s tonight. But, I don’t think you need to get ready! You are officially uninvited.” With that, Dylan stormed out of the room, slamming the door good and hard when he went.

* * * *

The ass chewing he’d gotten from Coach had put him in a dangerous mood. Although it was well earned, Trevor was pissed. Who did these

people think they were, all high and mighty.—like they were the picture of sainthood—hah that was a laugh! Trevor slid on a pair of tight jeans. He was going to that party tonight. There was no way he was going to be the only guy on the team not there.

It was just after six, and Trevor was determined that tonight he'd not think a thing about Jessie. He'd been just fine before her, and he'd be fine again. It was just a matter of getting his priorities straight. At least that's what he told himself. He grabbed his keys and walked out the door. His cell phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it. He didn't need another person riding his ass. Turning the stereo to full blast, he peeled out of his parking space and headed toward the bar.

The bar was dark and smoky. Loud music blared from speakers near the stage. A local band sang a bad rendition of the old Beastie Boys favorite "Fight For Your Right To Party" A more fitting song couldn't have been chosen if he'd handpicked it himself. All of his life, he'd been responsible, well, for the most part. So what if he wanted to live it up a little now. He was entitled. After all, he'd suffered through a lot in this past year.

It was quiet, a few guys hung out around a pool table and a couple of women had folded themselves into a booth near the band. Otherwise, the place was dead. Trevor sidled up to the stools in front of the long counter and slid into one, making himself comfortable.

"Can I get you something?" the bartender asked in a conversational tone.

"A shot of tequila." Trevor slapped some money down on the flat surface in front of him.

"Team looking good this season?" the man asked when he set Trevor's drink in front of him.

"Yeah, real good," Trevor said, disinterested.

An hour later, some of the guys started trickling in.

"Hey, Slider," Cage Lawson called. Lawson had replaced him last season, and now he had a permanent spot as a relief for the Devils. If Trevor couldn't improve his showing on the field, it was likely that Lawson would take the lead spot and Trevor would be demoted to relief.

Trevor raised his hand in a salute and turned back to the drink he was nursing.

“You planning on putting on a show for us tonight, Malone?” The guys laughed and slapped him on the back when they passed him, in search of their own seats around the bar.

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see,” Trevor said, his buzz increasing with each sip.

The hours passed before he knew it, and Trevor ignored the fact that the other players seemed to exclude him from the festivities. Whether it was intentional or not didn’t matter, Trevor felt like a piranha. Dylan refused to talk to him, and the other guys were all involved in their own games or activities. Trevor hadn’t gone out of his way to be “friends” with the guys, so he couldn’t blame them, but the childish part of him did.

“You’re looking awfully lonely over here. Don’t you know how to play nice with the other boys?” a woman with a sultry voice asked when she slid onto a barstool next to him.

“What makes you think it’s me? Maybe they don’t know how to play nice with me.”

A deep, throaty laugh came from the woman beside him. “Oh, I don’t know. You look like the bad-boy type.”

A long red fingernail trailed down the length of his arm. Trevor surveyed her out of the corner of his eye. She was tall with long, platinum blonde hair. The tight black leather skirt almost didn’t cover her butt, and a bold, orange halter top covered just enough to be decent. He could see the daring in her eyes, and he had never been one to turn down a dare.

They talked about her. Those kind of conversations suited him just fine. There were no questions, no pity, and no need to think about what he should say. He listened and feigned interest to the best of his ability. By ten, the party was hopping. Dylan had even stopped shooting daggers at him from across the room. Trevor was beginning to loosen up and enjoy himself.

The dance floor was crowded when they made their way to the center. The loud music blared louder, and Trevor let loose with some furious hip swinging that would have made Ricky Martin jealous. The woman, Heather, stuck to him like glue all night, and in Trevor’s opinion, that was all that saved this party. Although he had no plans to satisfy her curiosity about whether the star pitcher was also the star stud, she was cute and kept his mind off things he’d rather not think of.

Several dances later, Trevor and Heather, feeling their liquor and laughing all the way, made their way back to the bar. Trevor turned to the bartender and ordered two more shots of Tequila.

“So, you ready to see what your prize of the night is?” Heather said a little too loud.

Trevor could sense the guys around him perking up at the challenge in her voice. “What are you talking about?” Trevor asked, slurring his speech a little.

“Well, it’s a game, you see.” She paused to lick her lips.

Trevor eyed her, curious. Of course, it was a game. He knew that from the moment she had sat down next to him. “If you can do six shots in a row, you win the honor of taking me home for the night. If you don’t, well, I’m afraid you go home with a stiffy and only lefty to keep you company.”

A round of cheers went up and Trevor got a few slaps on the back and encouraging chants of his name.

Trevor smiled. “I’ll do the shots, but either way, we both know that what you want is for me to take you home with me.” Trevor twisted a lock of her hair around his finger. “Let’s play this my way. I’ll do the six shots, and by the time I’m done, you’ll be begging me to take you with me. If you don’t move so much as an inch, or make a single sound while I do it, I might oblige you. If you do, well, you’ll be going home wet and frustrated with nothing but my memory to keep you company.”

The round of “ohhhh’s” that accompanied his words had him smiling. A gleam of sheer desire came into her eyes, and he knew he had her.

“Fine, I’ll watch you do six shots.”

Trevor laughed. “Not what I had in mind.” Trevor moved closer and leaned in to whisper in her ear, “I need that sexy tummy of yours to do them.”

If Trevor had expected her to be shocked, he was out of luck. A wicked twinkle entered her eye. She made a point of rubbing up against him when she moved to the bar. After climbing up onto the flat surface, she laid back. “Bartender, six belly shots,” she called.

“Now remember, darlin’, you can’t move or make a sound while I do this, or you lose.”

When the shot was ready, Trevor leaned over, encouraged by the catcalls of his teammates. Even Dylan had dropped his sour attitude and was

getting into the spirit of the moment. Of course, Dylan knew the game. This wasn't anything they hadn't done together in their early days. Before he dipped his head to her belly, he chanced a look over his shoulder and caught his friend's eye. The slight nod Dylan gave, encouraged Trevor even more. Dylan and he would be okay. This wasn't their first fight, and it wouldn't be their last, because no matter what, they were still brothers.

Trevor allowed his head to fall to Heather's belly and he was quick to down the first shot. He allowed his tongue to dip into her belly button in an attempt to make her wiggle, but she held her ground without a peep or movement.

By the third shot, Trevor's head was spinning. The woman had panache, that was for sure. Times that he'd done this before, the woman had lost of the first round and the game ended in his favor. Not so with this woman. The chants and catcalls continued when he leaned in for his fourth shot. This time, he made sure to take his time and allow his tongue to linger. He didn't question the total silence that surrounded them. When he lazily lifted his head, he met Heather's eyes and said, "Uncle?"

Heather shook her head with a big, teasing grin, and Trevor prepared for his next serving. The quiet registered, and Trevor looked over his shoulder to see what had happened to his cheering section. He came face-to-face with one very pissed-off coach, and just behind Dan Kirk was Jessie. Her eyes showed her hurt, and he'd be damned if that didn't hit him just like a sucker punch in the gut.

Chapter 29

Jessie tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Trevor was nearby, and her heart cried out for him. He wasn't well. She knew that from her conversations with her father and Dylan, but to see it had put a dent in her resolve to stay away from him during her visit. Dylan had asked her to come for his birthday, and after much convincing, she had agreed. Mitch had given her a few days off, telling her that things would be fine for a few days without her. She was grateful for Mitch's gentle understanding. He was becoming a good friend, and it was nice. Working at his company had taken away the loneliness of the first weeks alone in New York, and the adjustment had been easier because of him.

She'd never been with her father in Florida during Spring Training and the time had gone by fast. Her father and Dylan had played tour guide when they were able, and left her to her own devices when they had to. Trevor hadn't come by or called. It was that thought that made her sick. She tossed and turned for hours before she wearily sat up, giving up on any idea of sleep. Rising from the bed, she pulled on a pair of shorts, slipped her feet into a pair of slippers, and tiptoed out of the house her father had rented for the six weeks of training. The house was nice, the furnishings much nicer than those at her father's house in New Mexico. Whoever owned the home had immaculate taste. It was right on the water, and the second she pulled open the door, the cool ocean breeze made her shiver. Jessie breathed deep and caught the scent of the salt in the air. Someday, Jessie planned to own a place like this. With the ocean as her backyard, it would be easy to get lost in its majestic beauty. She moved to the edge of the deck and allowed her gaze to settle on the water in the distance. It was so dark that it was hard to tell where the night sky ended and the water began.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Jessie jumped. She searched the ground below her for Dylan, whose voice she recognized. A second later, she saw him mount the steps of the deck. She said nothing while he made his way to her side.

“Thanks for coming, Jessie.”

“You’re welcome.” The sadness in her quiet voice said everything that she couldn’t put into words. Dylan settled an arm around her shoulder and she sank against him, relieved for the strength that flowed through her at the contact. “What’s happened to him?” She sobbed.

“He’s in self-destruct mode. In all the years I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him this low. There’s nothing I can do, he won’t listen to me.”

“But you’re his best friend.”

“I also am playing better this season than I ever have. Not only that, you and I talk every day and he knows that. He feels like I can’t relate to him, and I can’t really say I blame him.”

“You mean you don’t understand why he’s doing this?”

“No. I understand it. It’s just that if the roles were reversed. I don’t know what I would do. How can you unless you’ve been there? So I understand why he thinks I can’t relate.”

“Is he doing this because of me?” Jessie looked up at Dylan, searching his eyes for the truth.

“Oh, honey, don’t you go blaming yourself. It’s easy for him to blame you, that means he doesn’t have to focus on what’s bothering him. None of this is your fault.”

“I shouldn’t have left the way I did.” Jessie moved away from Dylan and sank down into a wicker lounge chair covered by a soft, floral print cushion.

Dylan sat down at her feet and looked at her. “You did what you thought was best.”

“I was smothered and confused. Trevor had all these expectations of me—of us, and I didn’t believe the way he did. When I was...raped ...” Jessie took a deep breath and swiped at the tears that had begun to fall. “I put my trust in Trevor, I relied on him to make me okay. When he kissed that woman, the shaky ground I had rebuilt for myself began to crumble. I was angry, but more than that, I was swallowed up by hurt. I’ve never relied on anyone like that before.” Her voice shook when she spoke. Swallowing hard, she went on, “I went up to bed that night, and I couldn’t sleep, all I

could do was think, and I realized that before I could give to anyone else, Trevor, Dan, you, Briana—anyone, I had to be okay with me. The only way to do that was to be on my own. So I got out of bed, called the airport, and booked the next flight to New York. I wrote a note to my father, telling him I had left and where he could find my Jeep, and I left.”

“Did you think Trevor wouldn’t understand? Is that why you wouldn’t talk to him?”

Jessie shifted in her chair. How could she make him understand what she didn’t understand herself. “Trevor wanted to save me. I didn’t want to be saved. I didn’t want to be anybody’s cause. I guess I thought I was just the good deed he was doing while he couldn’t play ball.”

“I know that’s not true.” Dylan said. “I’ve never known Trevor to stay with anybody for any length of time. I’ve never heard him talk about anyone the way he talks about you. You can see it in his eyes that he really loves you.”

“I don’t know, Dylan. I want to believe that. Then I see the headlines throughout the years, the women he’s been with, especially recently, and I can’t compare. Maybe if I didn’t follow news of the team so much, I’d never know these things, but for much of my life that was the only way I knew my dad. I didn’t just read about him, I read about the whole team. How can I erase the knowledge that Trevor was, is, and probably always will be a playboy?”

“I don’t think Trevor is comparing you to anyone.” Dylan reached out and cupped her cheek, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Have you looked in the mirror lately? You are beautiful. You are also one of the best women I know. When I first met you, in the hospital, remember?” He paused and waited for her acknowledgement. When Jessie nodded, he continued. “I had every intention of going after you. After his surgery, Trevor told me in no uncertain terms you were hands off. I knew then that Slider had it bad, and I watched him fall deeply in love with you from that point.”

“It was all about the thrill of the chase. Trevor can’t stand to lose.”

“Do you love him, Jessie?”

Jessie sniffled and swiped at more tears that fell.

“Yes.” It was one tortured word, but it spoke volumes. “But he scares me. Whenever he’s around, despite the love I feel, the fear takes over and often comes out in anger.”

“Jessie, I know you need your time and your space. I believe that somehow, some way you and Trevor will find your way back to each other--”

“Dylan, I--”

“I’m not saying right now. Trevor has his own issues to work out. For weeks now, he’s found his joy at the bottom of a bottle. He’s had a lot of trouble with his arm, and has gotten very discouraged.” Dylan stood and paced in front of her. Jessie watched his nervous movement, her heart breaking for all he was telling her. Suddenly, he stopped and dropped down to his knees, meeting her gaze, he said, “Coach has cut his time significantly due to numerous losses, and then because of his behavior. Coach wanted him to work out, go to therapy and strength training, but I guess he felt it was hopeless. The less he played, the more he acted out.”

“So you’re saying that if he followed my dad’s recommendations, he’d get more time to play?”

“Yeah.” Dylan blew out a breath and pushed his hands through his hair, the frustration evident in his eyes.

“He went to therapy for months, worked out like a madman. Why is he so opposed now?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s because before he actually stepped back out on the field, he had hope that he would be able to pitch, just like before. When the pain was overwhelming and he couldn’t throw a strike to save his life, I think he just convinced himself it was over, so why put himself through all the pain.”

“Dylan, I don’t know what to do.”

He smiled a devilishly charming smile and then leaned over to kiss her lips. “Yes you do. Follow your heart, Jessie. It won’t lead you astray.”

Dylan turned and walked away. Jessie stared after him until long after he was gone.

* * * *

Jessie pulled up to the field where she knew the Devils were practicing before their game that afternoon. She pulled down the rearview mirror and fumbled through her purse for her compact. The dark circles under her eyes couldn’t be concealed. After Dylan left, Jessie had stayed out on the deck

crying. When she was bled dry of tears, she just sat and stared at the place where sky meets ocean. When the sun rose, Jessie met the dawn with more confusion than she'd ever known in her life.

Jessie pulled out her compact and pressed powder to the dark smudges. Satisfied that she'd done all she could, even if she did look like death warmed over, she opened her car door and made her way to the field. When her father saw her, he waved and Jessie pasted on a bright smile for him. She didn't want him to worry about her when she went back to New York this afternoon, so she was determined not to let her emotional turmoil ruin the afternoon.

She made her way to his side and rose up on her toes to press a kiss to his jaw. "Hi, Dad."

"Hi, baby girl. I thought you weren't going to be here until later."

"I had some stuff I needed to do, so I thought I'd stop by and see you."

"Well, that's a nice surprise. I could get used to it. Are you sure you have to leave tonight?"

"Yeah, I have to get back to work. I'm lucky I got this job after walking out on the community center the way I did."

Dan looked at her, his expression unreadable. "I bet they'd take you back if you explained."

"I've already talked to Marnie. She understands why I did what I did, but it was still unprofessional of me."

"You've been through a lot."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make what I did right." Jessie shrugged.

He put his arm around her shoulder. "You're going to be okay, I promise you that."

"Yeah, I will. It all just takes time." Jessie searched the field for Trevor and a pang of hurt rushed through her when she saw that he wasn't on the field. "Is Trevor here?" Jessie swung her gaze to her father. Anger replaced his relaxed look of moments before.

"On the bench."

"Don't be like that. He's going through a rough time."

He narrowed his eyes on her. "Maybe, but I still have a team to think about."

"Daddy, if he comes back with a vastly improved attitude and is willing to put one hundred ten percent into his game, will you let him play?"

“Honey, it’s not about me letting him play. He’ll play when he can prove he can get the job done.”

“If you are gonna be stubborn, and keep him on the bench, how can he prove that?”

“When Trevor shows up here with a smile on his face and is ready to be a part of the team, he’ll play. Until then, he rides the bench. That’s my final word.”

“So since you’re so determined that he’s gonna sit on the bench, you won’t mind if I steal him for an hour?”

“Jess, he still needs to be here. I’m trying to prove he needs to act like he’s part of this team. How can I turn around and give him special privileges?”

“Please.” Jessie didn’t ask her him for much, and the one word was said with quiet sincerity. She watched his eyes change from hardened coach to loving father.

“One hour.”

Jessie kissed his cheek and muttered, “Thank you,” then turned and headed toward the dugout, where Trevor sat with a half-bored, half-irritated look on his face. Jessie’s heart raced as she made her way over to the bench and sat down next to him. Words stuck in her throat, glued by heavy emotion she couldn’t quite explain. Instead, she reached out and took his hand. It was a simple gesture, but when he stiffened, she turned to look at him, and knew it had more impact than any words she could have spoken.

For several minutes, they stared at each other. Tears clouded her eyes. This man was so incredible. Somehow, she had to find a way to tell him that, but also let him know that she wasn’t ready to be half of a couple yet. She was still learning to be whole as an individual, until she was steady on her own feet once again, she couldn’t make a commitment.

There was also still the trust issue. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t believe that he was sincere in his proclamations of wanting *her*. His carousing with all those women in recent months hadn’t done anything to improve her trust. She wanted it to be different, but Trevor was still a playboy, and she was not a groupie.

“What are you doing here?” Trevor broke through the mass of confusing thoughts she had.

"I wanted to talk to you." Honesty was the best policy. Jessie couldn't lie to him anymore. Most of all, she couldn't lie to herself.

"Oh."

The surprised pleasure in his voice sent tingles down her spine. "My dad said I could have you for one hour, and time is ticking. Come on." Jessie rose, pulling his hand in an attempt to get him to follow her.

"Where are we going?"

"Just come." She tugged again, this time getting compliance.

Hand in hand, they walked to the silver Taurus she had rented for her time here. Once settled behind the wheel, she tried to ignore his closeness, but couldn't. At the same time, they turned to each other.

"Jessie--"

"Trevor--"

If the moment had been so tense, she might have laughed, instead she sat mesmerized by his beautiful blue eyes. Impulsively, she leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to his jaw.

"What was that for?" He sounded stunned. His eyes registered his shock. Jessie didn't think she'd ever seen him so unsure of himself. It broke her heart. His cocky nature, and playboy attitude had caused her to push him away, but she admired those same qualities. He complimented her own more reserved, less-than-confident style. It seemed that the very thing that made him so easy to be around also made it impossible for them to be together.

He reached up and cupped her cheek. Jessie closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his open palm. The gentle massaging motion of his thumb was so welcome, so missed. How she wanted to give in to her desire for this man. *Be strong*, she told herself.

Straightening, she turned away and put the key in the ignition. "We should go."

Fifteen minutes later, Jessie pulled up in front of her father's rented house. Without a word, she shut off the car and opened her door. "Come on." She prodded him when he didn't follow her lead.

"What are we doing here?"

"I have something to say, and I intend to do it in private," Jessie said with more aplomb than she had. She slammed her car door and strode toward the front door.

“Jessie, this isn’t necessary. I don’t need pity.” Trevor called after her, disgust lacing his voice.

Jessie turned on her heel and marched back to him. She met his gaze head on. With all the derision in her tone she could muster, she said, “I seem to recall telling you the same thing at one time.”

“It’s different.”

“No. It’s not,” Jessie said, her tone emphatic.

“Jessie, you don’t have to do this. I don’t expect anything from you. You’ve made it very clear how you feel about me. Just because I’m in a slump doesn’t mean I expect you to come running to my rescue to repay some imagined kindness. It’s that damn sense of nobility you have. Let it go. You don’t owe me anything.”

Dumbfounded, Jessie stared at him. Is that what he thought? That she believed he was some debt to repay and when she was done, she’d move on without a second thought.

“Trevor, I’m not here because I think I owe you something.” Her voice had taken on a loving tenderness that wasn’t there before.

“Then why are you here?” he asked, his husky tone displaying the depth of his emotions.

“Because I care.”

A simple truth that created a glimmer of something in his eyes. Jessie wanted to hold him close to her and promise things would be fine. More than anything, she wanted that glimmer to ignite into a full-blown fire. In that single instant, she knew that there was no turning back—this man was everything to her. She took his hand, and together, they walked to the front door.

Trevor sat on the couch and tried to pull her down next to him. “I’ll be right back,” she said, pulling away. In the kitchen, she grabbed the portfolio she had left on the table and then moved back to where Trevor sat, dropping down next to him.

“What’s this?” he asked when she put the folder in his hands.

“Open it and see.”

Trevor removed the rubber band and opened the cover. The first article was from the Santa Fe Times about the Sports Complex he had funded. Ground had been broken just after the new year, and the article contained an

interview with Trevor about what he wanted to accomplish with the city's youth in need.

"Do you know what I thought when I read that?"

Trevor looked her, then shook his head. "How could I?"

Jessie swallowed her tears. "I was so proud of you. I knew that you had done this for me, and for the kids like Malachi, and it meant so much to me."

"Without you there to share it with me, it just didn't seem exciting." His voice broke and he turned the page. The next entry was a *Sports Illustrated* issue that he had done an interview for just prior to spring training. It talked about his comeback, and in it, he had seemed so confident and positive.

"Read the last question." Jessie pulled out the magazine and flipped to the marked pages and set the book in his lap.

"What's next for Trevor Malone if your injury doesn't allow you to return," the interviewer had asked.

Trevor had responded, "Whether I play in the Majors or not, baseball will always be in my life. I've got the Youth Complex in Santa Fe for the off season, and I've thought about coaching," Trevor read aloud.

"When I came to Santa Fe, there was no life without the game for you," Jessie said. "See how that's changed? When you gave this interview, you saw a future."

"Maybe, but I never said it would be easy. The game has been my life for so long, and you want me just to shrug it off and move on."

"That's not what I want, Trevor. From what I understand, you had a couple of bad days and assumed the worst. Since then, you've partied like there was no tomorrow and haven't gone out of your way to try."

"The pain--"

"It's bad, I know. But I watched you push through terrible pain when you threw the ball at the mat in your yard," Jessie interrupted him.

"I'm afraid," Trevor whispered.

The admission wasn't shocking. She had figured that much out. To hear the words tumble from his lips while barely contained tears loomed in his eyes almost broke her heart.

"Of what?" She asked

"Of disappointing people, of failing. Maybe on some level, even of success."

“The only way you could disappoint people is if you give up. Then you make yourself a failure.” Jessie moved closer to him and met his gaze. His eyes were unreadable--so many emotions flickered through them. “Why are you afraid of success?”

Trevor stared hard at her. The tension between them rose to a near explosive level. Several minutes passed, and then he spoke, “Aside from my parents, I’ve never needed anyone’s approval. I’ve always played the game for myself—because I love it. Then I fell in love with you, and more than anything, I want you to be happy, to be proud of me. My success is your instability. Or at least you see it that way.”

Jessie couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. What she had done to him became very clear. Trevor wasn’t to blame for the way things had ended between them, she was. It was a hard pill to swallow.

“Trevor, I’m not an easy woman to love.” Jessie got down on her knees in front of him. “But you did. You loved me better than anyone ever has before. That scares me. I believed I was just a distraction to you while you were recovering, that I didn’t see the sincerity in the things you said and did.” Jessie looked up at him, pleading with her eyes for understanding. “By the time I did, things had happened to me--”

“You mean the guy who raped you.”

Jessie nodded. “Yes. I was raped, and I couldn’t accept your love then either. You stood by me, though, and you helped me in those first horrible weeks. You gave me the will to live.” Jessie swiped at her tears. This was a lot harder than she had ever dreamed it would be. “In all my life, I’ve never relied on anyone. There’s never been anyone for me to rely on. When I realized that I was in love with you--”

“You love me?” Trevor sounded amazed.

Jessie looked up and held his gaze. “Yes,” she whispered relieved to say it after all this time. “But I was scared. I wanted to run—I needed to run.”

“And I gave you the perfect excuse when I kissed Bonnie.”

The heat of embarrassment crept into her cheeks. She had blamed him because it was easier than admitting the truth. “Yes. I was in denial. All the calls I ignored, when you visited me, my heart was screaming out that I loved you and my mind was searching for any place to run and hide.”

Trevor pulled her up off her knees and settled her close to him. A protective arm closed around her. For a few minutes, they were content to sit there and revel in emotions too long denied.

“How do we get back to where we were?” he asked against the top of her head.

Jessie was grateful that he could see, they couldn’t just pick right up where they left off. “I don’t know.” She allowed her hand to caress his stomach. Hearing his heartbeat beneath her ear was like a potion of life. It breathed strength and hope into her. “I don’t want to be where we were. I want to be better than that.”

“How do we get there?” Trevor asked.

“Slowly. Trevor, when we met, you were in crisis. Then I was traumatized. Now, we both need to heal. We have to come into this being whole, emotionally healthy people, not two people searching for someone to complete them.”

“You do complete me.” Trevor said

“But I’m not your whole life. You are still Trevor Malone, with or without me. Before we can be Trevor *and* Jessie, we have to be *just* Trevor and *just* Jessie. Until we can be secure in that, we have to be just friends.”

“Are you going back to New York?”

“I have to.”

“Then how can we do that?”

“If it’s meant to be, it will be. There’s phones. I promise not to ignore your calls. You can visit me when you’re able, and I’ll visit you.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“No, it won’t. It will be better. I’ll be able to trust you, and more importantly, I’ll have faith in myself. You will work through your issues and come out of it stronger, wiser, and ready to take on the world again, no matter what you do.”

“You still don’t trust me.”

“I trust you. I don’t trust that I’m good enough to compete with all those beautiful women.”

Trevor caressed her shoulder in a soothing motion. “They have nothing on you. How can I make you see that?”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing. It will come in time.”

“When will we know that we’re ready to move on?”

“When we’re ready, we’ll know.” Jessie looked up at him and got lost in the depth of emotion in his eyes. His head made a slow descent to hers and she allowed his lips to settle against her own. It wasn’t a kiss of passion, but one of promise. His tongue caressed the crease of her lips, and Jessie saw a very bright future ahead for the two of them. She opened her mouth, and she welcomed the invasion of his searching tongue. She moaned, but seconds later, he pulled away. Jessie missed the warmth of his body, which he settled against the arm of the sofa, far enough away that they wouldn’t be touching. However, she knew he was respecting her wishes and her heart soared with love.

“It’s been more than an hour. We should go before I feel my father’s wrath.” Jessie snickered.

“I think I’m the one who’ll feel that wrath. He’s not happy with me,” Trevor replied with a grimace.

Jessie smiled and followed Trevor when he rose from the sofa. Before he could get away, she wrapped her arms around him from behind and rested her cheek against his shoulder. “You’d never break a promise to me would you?”

“Of course not.”

“I need you to promise me something then.”

“If I can.” Trevor turned and her arms curled around his neck.

“I want you to pitch a perfect game to win the World Series.” His eyes rounded and she saw a protest begin to form. “Okay, forget the perfect game. I want you to win the World Series for me.”

“Jessie, I can’t promise you that. Winning a baseball game relies on a whole lot of people other than myself.”

Jessie smiled at his reply that lacked the arrogance she so liked to tease him about. “I’ll accept that, but you have to at least promise me that when the Devils make it to the World Series, I’ll be able to read ‘Malone pitches better than he ever has’ or something similar.” Jessie giggled.

“What if we don’t make it to the Series?”

“Have a little faith,” Jessie said. She rose on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips.

Trevor shook his head, but she saw the spark of a good challenge light his eyes and she knew she’d done her job. Now, he knew that she loved him and was motivated to get back on the field and try.

They left the house and drove back to the field. Hand in hand, they walked down to where the team still practiced. Trevor grabbed his glove and jogged out to her father, while she remained by the dugout. She watched with tears in her eyes when Trevor leaned in to say something to Coach An. An exchange occurred between the two that ended with Trevor taking his place in the bullpen, warming up to replace Cage Lawson on the mound. Dan Kirk turned to her, and she waved, and then turned away. As she headed to her car, she realized her emotions had settled and the confusion had cleared. Things were going to be okay.

Chapter 30

Trevor sat on the trainer's table waiting his turn for the man's attention. Dylan sat next to him, the trainer taping his right hand. Two broken fingers in the last game had made playing painful, but thanks to the tape, not impossible. Trevor would get a liniment rubdown on his shoulder and would go through a series of exercises to loosen him up. All that before regular warm-ups began, but it was worth it, knowing that he would be the starting pitcher at the Devils's home opener, something that had seemed impossible four weeks ago. A month of too much food, too much booze, and not enough working out had left him in bad shape. With the encouragement of his coach, his teammates and Jessie, he had worked three times harder than he ever had at a Spring Training to be ready for this night.

Like family, Coach and the team had welcomed him back, yet expected him to prove himself, and so he had. There wasn't a better team in MLB in his humble opinion.

"Jessie coming tonight?" Dylan asked.

"Should be here by now." Trevor answered.

"Too bad she couldn't have come in over the weekend."

"Yeah, I know, but she had some big event at work. If she hadn't been the one to coordinate it, she'd have probably been able to get out of it, but since it was her baby, she had to be there."

"She seems to be doing really well up there. Sounds happy anyway."

"I know." Trevor tried not to let the worry show, but at Dylan's curious expression, he had no doubt he'd been unsuccessful.

"What's wrong, Trev?"

"I just miss her, that's all."

"At least you two are talking now. It's been a month, and you both talk like you're getting closer."

"We are. I just can't help but wish she'd come back here. Get her job back at the youth center. Her family and friends are here, I'm here."

"And none of you are going anywhere."

"No. But what if she makes such a great life for herself there, she doesn't ever want to come back?"

"Then when you two are ready, you can move there."

"What about the team?" Trevor asked, a bit deflated.

"You know as well as I do, that it is not uncommon for a player to live wherever they want to live, and only reside in their team's home state during the season."

"True. But I love Santa Fe."

"Have faith, Trev, It will all work out." Dylan punched him playfully in the arm and hopped off the table when the trainer moved out of the way and on to Trevor's shoulder. The man began to massage the liniment in, and Trevor winced. The stuff burned like nobody's business. "Besides, when I asked Jess if she planned on staying in New York, she changed the subject."

"Maybe that's because she knew you'd come back and tell me."

"Maybe, but I thought it odd that the subject she changed it to was how much she was looking forward to her visit to Santa Fe." Dylan smiled

Trevor watched Dylan make his way out of the trainer's office, and he couldn't help but be glad Jessie had taken such a liking to Dylan. If it weren't for Dylan, Trevor wouldn't have half the insight into the woman that he did. As usual, after talking it over, Trevor saw things clearer and was able to focus on getting ready for the game.

* * * *

In the fifth inning, Trevor was still going strong. He hadn't pitched a perfect game in a long time, and this wasn't one of his best games, but the team had rallied and they were still ahead by two runs. The score was four to two, and while he'd prefer a no-hitter, at least they weren't being creamed.

Time out was called by Assistant Coach Max Devlin, who made his way out to the mound. Milo Cortez, the Devils' new catcher, headed in for a mid-inning powwow.

"Intentionally walk this next batter," Max said.

“We don’t need to do that. I can take this one,” Trevor replied. Aaron Robinson was a power hitter, but Trevor had struck him out more times than he could count. Robinson liked to go for balls that were high and inside. If he threw it just right, he’d just make the strike zone. If Robinson swung, he either wouldn’t get a big enough piece of it to knock it out of the park or would miss altogether.

“Trevor, listen to me. You got one out, Aberdeen is up next, and you know he doesn’t hit consistently. There is a better likelihood of getting Robinson out on base at this point.”

Trevor opened his mouth to protest, but Coach Max’s hand on his shoulder stopped him. “Each pitch you have thrown has gotten slower, and more off its mark. You know what pitch to throw to strike him out, but you don’t know if you’ll have the power to do it. Now do like I said and walk him.”

Trevor met Max’s eyes and knew there was no arguing. Although he didn’t agree, he wasn’t going to make waves. He wanted to pitch, so he’d play by the rules. “Fine,” Trevor said.

Max made his way off the field and the game resumed. Trevor watched Cortez squat back down behind the plate and assume the ready position. Trevor wound up and threw the ball, high and outside, straight into Cortez’s glove. Boos sounded all around when his intentions became clear. Robinson made his way down to first and Leroy Aberdeen took his spot in the batter’s box. Trevor looked to Coach, then to Cortez, waited for the signal, and wound up for the pitch. The crack of the bat hitting the ball seemed deafening. Trevor watched the ball sail over his head, into the outfield and over the wall.

“Damn!” Trevor cursed. The runners made their way around the bases, Coach Kirk moved into the dugout and picked up the phone to call to the bullpen. Trevor knew this would be his final inning.

Two quick outs later, the inning was over. Trevor headed in to the dugout with his teammates.

“Malone, you’re out. Lawson is in.” Coach Kirk announced heading to the water cooler. Trevor nodded an acknowledgement and joined his teammates on the bench. When the Devils took the field again, the game was still tied four to four. Trevor rose and moved to stand by Coach so he could see the game.

“That was some damn fine pitching,” Coach Kirk said.

“Not good enough. I used to be able to pitch longer and better than that.”

“Give it time,” Coach responded, his attention on the field.

That was everybody’s answer to everything, but how much time was he supposed to give it before he gave in and accepted that he’d never be the pitcher he once was.

* * * *

When the game was over, Trevor headed down to the locker room with his team. There was excitement in the air, the game having been a nail biter down to the ninth, ended with the Devils taking the lead by two runs. The team was happy, the fans thrilled and now, Trevor could relax and enjoy the weekend with Jessie. Coach insisted he take more rest time than the average pitcher in starting rotation, which meant Cage Lawson would pitch in his place in half the games he would have played this season had he not been injured.

He wanted to fight that decision, but Trevor knew Dan was right. To overdo his arm could be career suicide on the comeback trail. That was the last thing he wanted. Sucking up his pride, he gave himself a mental pep talk while he headed into the shower. *Five innings is better than nothing. You just have to keep trying. You’ll get there. Remember, you’re the star pitcher! You can do it.*

* * * *

Trevor and Jessie settled back on the sofa to watch *The Notebook*. It wasn’t his first choice in a movie, but Jessie wanted to see it, and he wanted to make her happy. Trevor wrapped an arm around her and sighed contentedly when she settled against him, her head on his chest.

The movie wasn’t terrible like he thought it would be. With Jessie nestled against him the way she was, he’d probably even enjoy *Kung Pow*, and he hated that movie. When the movie came to an end, he heard Jessie sniffing. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You okay?” he asked

When Jessie raised her eyes to meet his, he was mesmerized by the depth of emotion that he saw in the shimmering silver depths. Without thinking, he he rubbed his thumb over the tender flesh of her mouth. He dipped his head, and what was meant to be a chaste kiss of friendship exploded into a fiery kiss of passion the second their lips touched.

Her mouth opened, and he nibbled her lower lip before slanting his mouth over hers and plunging his tongue deep. Trevor pulled her closer against him, wanting her entire body pressed against his own. He caressed the curve of her hip, settling on her rear, his fingers massaging the flesh beneath the thin cotton shorts she wore. When Jessie moaned, it broke the spell and he broke away, breathing hard. Her eyes were glazed with passion when she met his.

“Don’t stop.” Her voice was husky.

Trevor groaned. “Oh, baby.” Trevor set her away from him and took several deep breaths for control. “I’m trying to respect your wishes. You were right when you said we both needed to be healed before we could be together.”

“Before we made a commitment,” Jessie spoke up.

“And you don’t think doing this ...” Trevor gazed at her. He saw the hurt in her eyes and knew that she thought he was rejecting her again. “I love you, Jessie.”

“And I love you.” He watched her blink back tears.

“Do we really need any other kind of commitment? Can’t we just take it day by day instead of trying to formalize everything. When things are right, we’ll know it and we’ll go with it.” Trevor reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “If this is right to you, then believe me, I’m ready.” Trevor sank down on his knees in front of her, looking up at her while she considered what he had said. He saw the uncertainty, fear, desire, and the finally--blissfully an all-consuming love and acceptance flicker in her eyes. Whatever else had happened between them didn’t matter, somehow, through all the turmoil, they had fallen head over heels in love with each other.

Trevor rose, pulling her up with him and into his arms. The friction of her body sliding against his had a low hiss escaping from between his teeth. He knew she hadn’t been with a man since her attack--he had to take this slow. When he claimed her, he didn’t want to see fear in her eyes, just the overwhelming love that she couldn’t hide.

Trevor lowered his head, and pressed his cheek against hers. Inhaling deep, he took in all that was unique to Jessie. The touch of her petite body shrouded within the safety of his arms made him realize how vulnerable she was. Trevor had an intense need to protect her, to erase the bad memories and replace them with ones that wouldn't scare her.

"Let's go upstairs," he whispered.

Jessie nodded. Not another word was spoken when they headed up stairs to his bedroom. Jessie stiffened and Trevor knew that nerves were getting the better of her.

"Why don't you go take a hot shower and relax. We have all night, baby."

"Let me call my dad and tell him that I won't be home. He'll worry."

"Why don't you go get in the shower and let me take care of that." Trevor kissed her cheek, and gave her a gentle nudge toward the bathroom.

Trevor watched her make her way to the bathroom, and when he heard the water turn on, he turned to the phone to make the promised call. Several minutes later, Jessie called out to him, "Trevor?"

Not wanting to violate her privacy, he stayed where he was and called, "I'm here."

"Come here." He heard the strain in her voice and wondered if she was having second thoughts. He walked to the bathroom, and stepped just over the threshold. .

"Did you need something?" he asked.

Jessie stuck her head out. "Just you." Tension crackled in the air between them. Trevor could have sworn that he heard his heart pounding in his chest. He swallowed hard, forcing back the intense desire that surged forth. *Slow and steady*, he told himself. He pulled his shirt over his head and stepped out of his pants and boxers.

When he stepped into the steamy shower with her, he stood still while Jessie surveyed him. His own eyes raked boldly over her, touching every part that would belong to no one but him from this point forward.

When he allowed his eyes to travel back to her face, he was startled by the dark look of passion. Jessie licked her lips and took the one step that was necessary to close the distance between them. Crushing her to him, he pressed his mouth to hers in a deep, scorching kiss.

He splayed his hands over the small of her back and pulled her closer to his hard shaft and their tongues danced. Her nails dug into his back while she shifted her mouth to his neck. Sweetly, she bathed him in her love, sending tiny shivers down the length of his spine. He caressed her all over her body while her tongue stroked him.

Before he could stop her, Jessie sank to her knees before him, her eyes widening when his member seemed to grow even harder. She was tentative when she reached out and grasped him. Trevor muttered a curse at the intense waves of pleasure that washed over him. Throwing his head back, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the motion of her mouth squeezing him. When the silky touch of her hand was replaced by the warm heat of her mouth, he gasped in surprise. Water from the shower rained down over her, but she didn't seem to notice as she sucked on his manhood. With one hand tangled in her hair, he encouraged her but did not force her. He reached out with the other hand to brace himself against the wall. His knees became weak. His breathing labored, he couldn't control his low moans when the heat of her mouth scorched him.

The pleasure was pure and explosive. His climax neared, and he pushed her away. "Not yet, angel," he whispered gruffly. He held his hand out to her, and when she placed her palm in his, he helped her to stand. The water had run cold, and when she shivered, Trevor reached around her to turn the knobs to the off position.

Stepping out of the shower, Trevor reached for the fluffy blue towel that hung nearby. He wrapped Jessie in its warmth before moving to the closet and grabbing a towel of his own.

Jessie used her fingers to comb through her hair. Trevor watched, entranced by each sexy movement. He hadn't known it was possible to want someone the way he wanted her. But while he stood there watching her, it seemed like he would die if he couldn't be inside of her.

Moving behind her, he clutched her close to his chest and buried his face against her neck. He nibbled his way down to her shoulder and delighted in her light purring. Jessie's hands came back to settle on his hips and pulled him closer to nestle him against her. He continued to work his mouth over her smooth skin, her hands began to wander, searching until they came in contact with his rigid shaft. Jessie groaned, and he swung her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

The towel loosened when he laid her down, and he opened it, letting the fabric fall to her sides. She was beautiful. He'd seen her like this before, but this was different. She looked so vulnerable in the center of his big bed. Her gaze met his, trusting him, and she drew him down to her.

He settled himself on his side and caressed the length of her body. When his hands met her nipples, they stiffened, seeming to reach up for his touch. He lowered his head, taking one into his mouth. Jessie cried out in pleasure and it urged him on. He splayed his hand over her stomach and soon, he moved it between her thighs. Jessie opened her legs and allowed him access to her heat.

His finger parted her, searching for the tiny nub he knew would bring her pleasure. Finding it, he massaged in a circular motion. He enjoyed her low moans and the way she bucked her hips against him. He looked up, watching her expressive face, seeing in every line, every twitch, the fire that engulfed her.

Burning with the need for more, Trevor rose up above her. He settled between her legs and leaned down for a taste of the heaven she offered. He ran his tongue up and down the length of her womanhood. She tasted so sweet. Pleasure intensified within his body at her cries of pure delight.

When he couldn't take anymore, he moved up her body, allowing his skin to drag against her. Jessie shuddered at the friction, and he smiled. Their eyes locked on each other, knowing what came next. Jessie closed her eyes, and she tensed, but she didn't pull away. When Trevor entered her, he watched for any sign of fear. He saw none. Relief flooded him and he buried himself.

With more care than he'd use with a piece of fragile crystal, he began to move, pulling out, only to bury himself once again. *Slow and steady*, he reminded himself while he watched her face contort in ecstasy. When she began to spasm as she shattered around him, he leaned in and captured her mouth in a heat searing kiss, and he let go of his control and rode the waves of passion with her.

Trevor moved to his side, and pulled her into his arms. Jessie curled into his body, grasping at the strong arms he wrapped around her. Trevor sighed, happy they had found a place of peace together. He would hold it tight, for it was a once in a lifetime kind of love that glowed inside him.

Chapter 31

Jessie smiled while Trevor tied a blindfold over her eyes. “Where are you taking me?” she asked, her voice exposing her girlish pleasure at the game.

“It’s a surprise,” he whispered close to her ear. “But I promise you’ll like it.” He seized the lobe of her ear between his teeth. Jessie laughed, then moaned low when his gentle gnawing became more intense.

“If you don’t stop that, we’ll never leave your house.”

Trevor moved his hands to her hips and pulled her closer to him. “Would that be such a bad thing?” he asked.

Jessie laughed. “My father is expecting us, so we have to leave sometime.”

“That’s not for hours...” he said in between kisses pressed to her neck. “But you are right. Although I’d love to stay here and seduce you, we are expected somewhere, soon.” Trevor pressed a final kiss to the side of her neck, and then he moved away.

Trevor led her out to the car and helped her in. He leaned over her and then she heard the click of her seatbelt. A second later, the door slammed, and she knew she was alone while he made his way to the driver’s side.

The ride didn’t take long. Trevor was like a little boy, chattering and holding her hand, guiding her to wherever he was taking her. The path was rocky, but she knew she was safe with Trevor telling her where to step and what to watch out for. When they stopped, Trevor moved behind her. “Ready?” he asked.

“I am.”

He untied the blindfold, and when it fell away, Jessie gasped. They were at the construction site of the youth complex he was having built. A blanket was spread out in the dirt. A picnic basket sat in the center with candlesticks

on either side. A dozen roses were resting near the basket along with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. It was beautiful.

“Trevor...this is lovely,” she said overcome by emotion.

“I may have funded this...” He swept his hand wide over the building which was more complete than the last picture she’d seen of it. It wouldn’t be long now. “But you inspired it.”

Trevor smiled at her. The pride in his eyes touched her. Jessie knew that this meant as much to him as playing the game did.

“This is for all the kids like Malachi who deserve a chance to have the best, but can’t afford it.” A tear slid down her cheek and she turned to him, smiling a bright smile of appreciation.

“You’re amazing!” Jessie said before she launched herself into his arms, finding his lips for a hot kiss.

Trevor pulled her toward the blanket, and together, they sank down, locked in an embrace. Their lips met, but in Jessie’s opinion, they weren’t close enough. She moved her hands to his chest and knotted the fabric beneath her fingertips into her fists. Jessie was on fire for him. She wanted his flesh against hers, to have him inside of her. Her movements became frenzied and she started to tear at his clothes. Trevor responded in kind. He settled his hand at the hem of her tank top and pushed it up to expose her tanned stomach.

When the clearing of several throats nearby registered, Jessie turned several shades of red. Of course, they weren’t alone! This was a construction site. How could she have lost herself so completely in such an inappropriate place?

Trevor just laughed and rose. “I forgot I had asked you guys to meet us here today.”

“I see.” A man in a pair of tight jeans, a T-shirt and a hard hat stepped forward. The humor in his voice was obvious, so was the twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “We’re ready when you are. We’ll just give you a minute,” he said with a slap to Trevor’s back.

“Why are they here?” Jessie whispered the moment they walked away.

“I told you we were expected.”

Jessie met his eyes and when he wiggled his eyebrows, she forgot her humiliation and burst into laughter. “I guess we gave them something to talk about,” she said in between giggles.

"You bet we did." Trevor laughed with her. When they regained their composure, Trevor took her hand, and they walked toward the half-built building. The construction crew was gathered around what appeared to be blueprints to the building.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"Making wishes for the future." Trevor leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"What do you mean?" Jessie asked confused.

"Today, they are going to be pouring the concrete for the basketball court." Trevor turned her and pointed in the distance. Shaded by a grove of trees were two basketball nets spaced about the length of a full court apart. "Because you inspired me to build this place, well, you and Malachi, and I know you both love basketball, so I thought it perfect to have your wishes for the future of the Malone Sports Complex immortalized in concrete."

Jessie studied Trevor. It was sweet, what he wanted her to do. She knew it was his way of letting her have a part of the building of the complex and she was honored.

"It doesn't seem right to do it without Malachi." Jessie said, shaking her head.

"I thought you might say that." Trevor said with a tender look at her. "That's why I asked Briana to pick him up and bring him here at one-thirty."

Jessie glanced at her watch and realized that he had timed things perfectly. It was twenty after one.

Two hours later, Malachi and Jessie rose at the same time, smiles lighting their faces while they surveyed their handiwork. Jessie had written, "Never give up your dreams to settle for reality," followed by the chorus of *Imagine* by John Lennon, a favorite song of hers.

Tears formed in her eyes when she read Malachi's statement, "Don't apologize for who you are. Live life to the fullest, you never know when it will be taken away." It was something she had said to him often. It was that moment that she knew the full extent of her influence on Malachi. Emotion overwhelmed her. She wrapped the boy in her arms and hugged tight.

"My turn," Trevor said, taking the stick from Jessie and moving the corner of the fresh laid concrete. He squatted down and wrote, "Dream because you love it, not because you have to. It's when you let go of your dreams that life becomes hopeless." He rose and walked back to Jessie.

“Thanks, for helping me realize that it was okay to have more than one dream.” He leaned in and kissed her. The small crowd of construction workers along with Briana and Malachi applauded and Trevor pulled Jessie into the crook of his arm. Together they studied the property. The look of pride on Trevor’s face made her smile. A few months ago, he thought he’d just fade out of existence without the game. Today, he had a new dream taking shape and the game. It was good.

* * * *

Jessie made her way over to the table where her father sat. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “How are you, old man?” Trevor said from behind her.

“Not as old as you think,” her father said with a look of mock severity. Jessie giggled and took a seat to her father’s right. Trevor sat next to her and put a protective arm around her shoulder.

“Jessie, have you thought any more about getting that DNA test?” Dan Kirk asked. Jessie cast her eyes downward. She was happy with the way things were. She and Trevor were getting closer, and her relationship with Dan was better than it had ever been. She had debated over and over again whether she should do the DNA test. In some ways, she wanted to know. But if it turned out that he wasn’t her father? He was the only father she ever knew. Did it matter if they had each other’s blood?

“I don’t want to do it,” Jessie said in a quiet, manner of fact way.

“Why?” Trevor asked before Dan could say a word.

“I just don’t. It doesn’t matter whether or not his blood runs in my veins. He’s the only daddy I’ve ever known.”

“If you have a real father out there, wouldn’t you want to find him? Get to know him?”

Jessie bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling. The idea of finding another father, one who didn’t know about her, and of trying once again to earn that love scared her. Dan was her father, she’d worked hard to come to terms with this, with him, and she didn’t want to rock the boat. What if he found out that she wasn’t his daughter and cut her out again? She didn’t know if she could handle that.

“No. Our relationship hasn’t always been great, but I’ve worked hard for what we have. I won’t give that up.”

“That’s the understatement of the year,” her father muttered. He picked up the glass of water in front of him and took a long gulp before he continued. “You do know that I’m not going anywhere. I’ll always be here for you, gal. You should know that. But maybe there is a man out there who deserves the right to know his daughter.”

“Can I get you two something to drink?” the waiter who had made his way to their table asked.

“Diet coke.” Jessie said

“Iced tea.” Trevor said.

“And are we ready to order?” the waiter asked.

“Give us a couple of minutes, please,” her father said to the man. The waiter nodded and walked over to another table. When he was gone, her father said, “Just think about it...please.” Jessie was reluctant, but she nodded and then picked up her menu to avoid any further discussion of the topic.

The rest of dinner was comfortable, they laughed and teased each other throughout. The light, easy banter between the three of them increased her security. It was nice to belong, to have a family. The meal was great. Of course, she hadn’t expected any less. From The Shed. Her cold red raspberry soup and lemon garlic shrimp were superb. There were great places to eat in New York, but one thing she missed about Santa Fe was the wonderful, authentic Mexican dishes. Although she had opted for shrimp for her own meal, she couldn’t resist nibbling at Trevor’s heuvos rancheros, a point that had both Trevor and her father teasing her all evening.

“Well, kiddo, I have got to get home. These old bones need more sleep than they used to. Especially on the rare times I have off during the season.”

Jessie giggled. “I thought you weren’t that old.”

Her father aimed a dirty look at her, “You are not too old to turn over my knee...”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Jessie laughed, snuggling closer to Trevor’s side for protection.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t.” Dan laughed. He pulled out his wallet and counted several bills. He placed them in the leather case containing the bill and set it on the table.

“So you are going to meet us for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. I can’t let my girl go out of town without seeing her again.” Jessie smiled and allowed her father to pull her out of her seat and into an embrace.

When she had said good night to her father and headed home with Trevor, she was happier than she had been in a long time. Finally, she had what she had been searching for all her life—happiness.

* * * *

Jessie sat on the bench watching Trevor play a game of one-on-one with Malchi. Her plane left in just a few short hours, but she couldn’t leave without seeing Malachi. The weekend had been busy, and far too enjoyable. How was she ever going to go back to New York—alone? Trevor had been so gentle and loving with her that she couldn’t imagine having asked for a better love. His patient kindness was unending, and each day, she fell more and more in love with him.

When Malachi had called her cell phone that morning, Trevor had given her the space she needed to talk to him and hadn’t nosed into what they had talked about. Maybe that would have been expected *if* she and Malachi hadn’t gone through all they had together. Despite those particular circumstances, Trevor didn’t push and didn’t begrudge her the time she wanted to spend with the teen before she left.

“Hey, Miss Jessie, I know you can ball, why don’t you get off your duff and come shoot some hoops with us.” Malachi smiled at her. Behind the smile, Jessie could see something that hadn’t been there before. A haunted look that didn’t belong in the eyes of a child. Jessie’s heart broke at the realization that what had happened to her, and what he had been forced to do to protect her had also stole his childhood.

Malachi must have noticed her concern because he turned away and ran to half court and shot a three pointer. Trevor shot her a questioning glance. Jessie rose and moved closer to Trevor. “Can I have a few minutes alone with him?”

“Of course.” Trevor leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I’m going to go run some laps down by the lake. I’ll be back in about a half hour, and we can go get some lunch before we take Malachi home.”

“Sounds good.” Jessie smiled at him. He winked at her and turned toward the lake.

Jessie turned and made her way over to Malchi. “Anything you want to talk about?” She asked.

“Naw.” Malachi threw the ball against the backboard and then caught it when it came bouncing back to him. Before he could toss the ball again, Jessie put her hand over his, stopping him in midair.

“Talk to me, Malachi.” Jessie pleaded.

“Malachi met her gaze. “I still have nightmares about what I done.”

Jessie bit her lower lip. She studied the child in front of her who had grown so much since she had met him. “So do I.”

Tears glittered in his eyes. “How do you make it go away?”

Jessie’s heart went out to him. All the tough “hood” talk was gone. The attitude, the anger, and, sadly, the pride had disappeared. In its place was a young man who was vulnerable and scared. Jessie sensed that what she said next could change his life forever.

When she had first met him, he was a boy seeking manhood in all the wrong places. Now, he was just a boy searching for the innocence he had lost by one simple act. Not only did she want to alleviate his responsibility, she wanted to see his life become better than he’d ever dreamed possible. What she had to do wasn’t easy, especially when she had been victimized and terrorized by the man he had killed, but she couldn’t let this child live forever with grief.

Jessie sighed. “You can’t, ’Chi. It happened, and for the rest of your life, it’s going to be with you. Just like what happened to me will stay with me forever. But, how it affects you is what you have to choose. Are you going to let it make you hateful and bitter, or are you going to grow from it?”

“How do you figure I’m gonna grow from killing a man?” Malachi raised an eyebrow.

“Because you didn’t just kill a man. You didn’t go out looking to take a life. It’s a shame that it happened. But what you did, you did in defense of someone. Of me. Your intentions were good, Malachi.”

Malachi walked away from her. Jessie didn’t follow—a tear slid down her cheek. She watched him throw the ball, hard. She didn’t move toward him, wanting to give him some space., He spun back toward her, his

movement, sudden, angry. “Good intentions don’t bring back the life I took, Miss Jessie.”

“Did you ever think about the fact that you may very well have saved mine? I don’t know what that man was going to do to me after he raped me. It’s likely he’d have killed me. Malachi, you didn’t go out gang banging and smoking people for fun. You stepped up in the heat of the moment and defended someone you cared about. Don’t ever be ashamed of that.” Jessie’s voice broke on the emotion. The indebtedness she had to this child would never go away. More than that, they were bonded through horrible circumstances no one but they could understand. Her love and respect for Malachi would never die. “I remember in the first days after it happened. I didn’t think my life would ever be the same. And you know what?” Jessie waited for him to acknowledge her. He brought his gaze up to meet hers and she knew he was listening. “It will never be the same. I’ll always see things differently, and I’m stronger and better today than I was then. You can be to. We can’t go back. All we can do is go forward. Malachi, be proud of who you are. Don’t punish yourself for his crimes.”

Jessie reached out her hand and before she could say anything more, Malachi sank into her arms, tears falling from his eyes. Together, they stood there on the basketball court, mourning what was lost on that horrible night. Allowing their tears to wash away the pain and make way for a brighter tomorrow. When Malachi pulled back, Jessie saw a faint glimmer of hope in the child’s eyes, and she knew he’d be okay.

* * * *

Lunch had been full of laughter and joking, but when it came time to say goodbye, the mood changed. Tension had taken the place of happiness, and the light feeling of the afternoon turned to one of heaviness. Malachi had seemed a little less troubled when they had dropped him off, and Jessie was relieved. He was a good kid, and she hoped that he’d overcome the weight of the heavy burden.

The ride to the airport was silent. The distant look in Trevor’s eyes troubled her, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask him what was wrong. If he was having regrets, she wasn’t sure she could bear it. When they’d parked the car, he turned to her and pulled her close for a passionate kiss. No words

were spoken, but they said it all with that one loving gesture. Too soon, it was over, and he pushed his door open and climbed out of the car. Jessie steeled herself against the pain the thought of leaving brought her, and she followed him out into the warm sunshine of the day.

She watched him pull her bags out of the trunk. When he grabbed the last, he handed it to her and asked, "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Jessie said, her chest tight, sadness overwhelming her. It was hard to leave, she worried that being apart would drive a wedge in the newfound closeness they shared.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jessie smiled, shaking off her worry.

Trevor reached out and curled a hand around her neck, pulling her in close for another sweet kiss. When they broke apart, he whispered, "I love you," against her lips.

Tears welled in her eyes. The emotion boiled over inside. She had to go, or she never would. "As much as I don't want to go, I have to."

Trevor nodded and slipped an arm around her. They made their way into the airport. Once her bags were checked in, Trevor led her to a small coffee shop just outside the security checkpoint.

"Two mocha lattes, please," Trevor ordered.

Trevor paid for their drinks and then guided her to a small table in the corner.

"I'm scheduled to land at ten. I probably won't get back to my apartment until eleven or eleven-thirty," Jessie said when he sat across from her.

"Whatever time you get there, call me." Trevor held her gaze and Jessie could see the sadness behind the chipper attitude he presented.

"I will," Jessie said.

A tense silence settled over them and Jessie knew that their looming goodbye was taking a toll on them both. She sensed that there was something more Trevor wanted to say, but she didn't push him.

"I'll be in New York in two weeks for a game."

"I know. I'll be there."

"We won't be there long. We have to head out right after for a game the next night in Texas."

Trevor grabbed a napkin and began to squish it in his hand. For several minutes, Jessie watched him nervously fiddle with it. He tossed it down on the table and rose. He moved closer to her and dropped down on one knee. Jessie's heart felt like it had stopped. The air became trapped in her lungs, and she thought she was going to pass out.

"Jessie, this weekend has been one of the best of my life. I knew a long time ago that I wanted you by my side for a lifetime. But this weekend, I realized I didn't want to wait for that. I love you and I want you to be my wife. There is nothing that would make me happier."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. When he flipped the lid open, Jessie gasped. It had to be at least two carats. The light caught it, and it glinted a small rainbow across the white table. Jessie stared at it, overjoyed and horrified at the same time. This was what she had waited for all of her life. She loved Trevor, and becoming his wife would be like a dream come true. But she wasn't ready to make that commitment. They hadn't been together long enough and the time that they had spent together had been wrought with trauma.

"Trevor, you know I love you. The time I've spent with you has made me happier than you can possibly know. But, I can't marry you right now."

There in his eyes was all the hurt and anger she had just inflicted. Jessie flinched at the coldness that settled over him.

"Why, Jess?"

"Trevor, please understand. It's not that I don't want to be with you. I do. Very much! I just can't marry you right now. Remember we were going to take this day by day?" Jessie pleaded, feeling helpless.

"Why do we analyze everything? Can't you ever just go with the flow? You love me, and I love you. I want to spend my life with you!"

"Trevor, please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry. I'm hurt."

"You are the one who said we didn't have to formalize everything. Day by day remember," Jessie whispered, her voice shaking.

"I also said when it was right, we'd know it. I know this is right. I don't know why you want to fight it."

"Trevor, I just need time." Jessie reached for his hand, but he moved it away before she could touch him.

“Fine. Go hide in New York and take time to figure things out. While you are deciding whether or not you love me, or whether I’m good enough for you, keep this in mind. I love you. That will *never* change! You make me crazy. You make me want to beat my head against a wall. You hurt me, and above and beyond all that, you make me happy.”

“Trevor, you make me happy too--”

“Then marry me! It’s not like we have to get married tomorrow. We’ll have a long engagement. Just so I know that you are going to become my wife.”

“Why do we need a ring to prove a point? Can’t we just do what we said and go day by day?”

Trevor shook his head. “Why do you always doubt? Since the day I figured out I was in love with you, I never doubted it. I *know* you are the one for me.”

“Trevor, we need to spend time getting to know each other. Like normal people. Not in times of severe distress and drama. Just normal.” Jessie shrugged, helpless.

“We already know each other. Do you think secrets I confided in you, the emotions I’ve invested are going to change?”

Jessie knew he saw the truth in her eyes at the look of sheer pain that crossed his face. “You still believe you are just a diversion for me.”

She couldn’t deny it. Instead, she said, “I just think we need more time.”

“And how are we supposed to spend more time together when you live thousands of miles away?”

“What does it matter where I live? You travel so much anyway that you’d never be here. Even if I moved back to Santa Fe tomorrow, you still would not be with me.”

“So you won’t marry me because you don’t want to be alone? Because I travel so much? I thought you supported me playing?”

“I do! That’s not it. The point was, you can see me in New York as often as you can see me in Santa Fe.”

“Not true. On off times, we have practice and community events. I can’t just take off because we don’t have a game for a few days. Sure, in the off-season, we could be in New York. Lots of players live in a state other than where they play. But during the season, I am obligated to be in Santa Fe.”

“Trevor, I just need time,” Jessie said, allowing the tears to fall.

“Fine.” Trevor snapped the lid closed on the box and shoved it back into his pocket.

“Trevor—”

“You’re going to miss your plane,” he interrupted her, voice cold as ice.

“Don’t let this change things, please,” Jessie cried.

“Just go, Jess. I’ll call you later.”

He pressed a hard kiss to her cheek, and then he was gone. Jessie swallowed back her sob. What had she done?

Chapter 32

Trevor sat at the bar, nursing a beer and broken heart. How could she have said no? Could she not see his sincerity? Jessie was it for him. No other woman ever had, or ever would, come close to making him feel the way she did. Somehow, he had to find a way to make her see that.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket. Pulling it out, he glanced at the caller ID. It was her. She must have landed. Slipping the phone back into his pocket, he picked up the bottle in front of him and downed it.

Trevor set the bottle down and slid a couple dollar bills down on the counter. He headed out of the bar, but wandered, directionless. While he walked, he studied the adobe walls of the businesses. New Mexico was unique in its style. It was a place of authenticity that other places lacked, a place where he knew he was safe. How many MLB players had the luxury of playing for the team in the state where they grew up? Not many. The idea of leaving hit him hard, but if that's what it took to make Jessie see that he loved her, that's what he would do.

"Trevor!"

When he heard his name called, he turned toward the sound. "Bonnie! It's good to see you again." Trevor smiled and indulged the woman in a light hug.

"What brings you out tonight?" she asked batting her eyelashes at him.

Since the disaster at Christmas, he had seen her around a few times but had tried to avoid spending time with her. Once again, this time she had him cornered. "Just taking a walk."

"Great season so far." She smiled at him.

"Yeah. We've done well."

"And how is your shoulder doing?"

"I have my moments. Sometimes it hurts more than others."

"Well, you're doing some great pitching."

“Thanks, Bonnie.” Trevor reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll see you around.”

“Hey, Trevor?”

He turned back to her with a raised eyebrow.

“Wanna come over to my place for a while?” she asked.

Trevor knew what the woman wanted, knew that she wasn’t looking for just idle chitchat. “No. Bonnie, I can’t do that.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You have a good night.” He didn’t miss the seductive scent of her or the way her lips rounded at his rejection. She was one of those women who fell all over herself when she was with him. They had made a pretty couple, but the substance wasn’t there. At the time, it had been okay, but now—he just wanted more.

“Whoever she is, she is a lucky girl. I hope she knows that.”

“What?” Trevor looked at her, noticing the sad smile.

“Christmas Eve, when I kissed you, you took off like a shot, presumably after a woman.” She raised her eyebrows, and then laughed when he didn’t respond. “You’ve been avoiding me ever since.” Trevor shifted, uncomfortable. He didn’t know that she’d seen him. “Now, you just out and out reject what you would have jumped on in times past.”

“Things change.” Trevor said.

Bonnie tapped a finger against her lips. “Yeah, I guess they do. Never thought I’d see you settle down.” Bonnie smiled a bright, brilliant smile. “She’s a lucky girl, indeed.” She rose on her toes, pressed a light kiss to his lips, and then turned the opposite way he had been heading and was gone.

Trevor ended up at a nearby park, where he just sat and watched the people coming in and out of nearby restaurants. Couples walked out holding hands and laughing and with each one, he hated himself a little more for ambushing Jessie. This was all his fault. He knew she was skittish, yet he had jumped the gun and scared her.

He pulled out his phone, dialed the number that was engraved in his mind and heart, and listened to it ring. Her voice mail answered after four rings and Trevor muttered a curse. It was late. He should have just waited until morning. After the tone, he left a message for her, hoping that in the morning, when she heard it, her temper and hurt would ease and they could talk like they had before he made the mistake of asking her to marry him.

It wasn't that asking her to marry him was a mistake--it was the timing. One day she would be his wife, he was sure of it.

* * * *

Trevor looked up into section of the stands reserved for family and friends of the players when he took the field. His heart sank when he saw Jessie wasn't there. Since she had gone back to New York, their phone calls had been friendly, but nothing like the warmth they had shared on her last visit to Santa Fe. The tension between them was explosive, and afraid of hitting the trip wire, Trevor walked on eggshells.

While she said she had forgiven him for getting angry at her refusal to marry him, and that they could just take it day by day like they had planned, her voice betrayed her, exposing her hurt and distrust. Trevor didn't know what to say to put her at ease. Part of her anger came from the way he had left her at the airport. The rest was for the pressure he had put on her. Despite his best attempts to avoid the subject of his botched proposal, it always came up. His heart and ego were still bruised, and he didn't suppose he was doing a great job of hiding that.

After two innings of rotten pitching and distraction, Coach Kirk threatened to bench him if he didn't shape up, and Trevor knew he had to get his head in the game. At the start of the third inning, he ran out on the field intent on pitching his best. Without thought, his gaze traveled to the fans, and there sitting in the front row of the family and friend box was Jessie. His beautiful Jessie, laughing like he'd never seen her laugh and some strange man's arm around her. Black rage surrounded him. Another man! How could she? His icy glaze sliced back to Milo Cortez behind the plate, he gave a signal. Trevor nodded and focused all of his rage into that one pitch. He wound up, and violently let go of the ball.

On release, a searing pain ripped through his shoulder, and he went to his knees. Coach came running out to the mound, time out was called, and the team surrounded him. A sense of déjà vu overcame him when the team trainer was called out to assist Trevor off the field. He didn't know what was worse, the horrible pain that held him within its grip or the overwhelming hurt at the knowledge that Jessie had betrayed him.

* * * *

Trevor lay on the table, ice on his shoulder. There was some comfort in the fact that he could move it, painfully, but his range of motion was good. The trainer had iced him down good and had left him there to sulk in the bitterness that he swam in. When the locker room door opened, he didn't turn, assuming it was the trainer coming back to check on him.

"Trevor, are you okay?" Her voice was like honey, and he remembered back to her last whispered, "I love you."

"What are you doing here?" he bit out between clenched teeth.

"Where else would I be? I saw you get hurt. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but with you," Jessie said.

Her lies came so easy, he thought. If he hadn't seen her with another man, he'd have believed the concern he heard.

"I don't want you here," he bit out.

"What? Why?" The confusion and hurt in her voice almost broke him, but he pictured her in that man's arms laughing the way she was and the black rage surged forth again. He wanted to hurt her the way he had been hurt. It didn't occur to him to think about the consequences of what he said, he just spewed out his fury. "You were right, Jessie. A girl like you doesn't belong with a guy like me." He ignored the tears that formed in her eyes, and he pushed on. "It was a fun little game while it lasted but it's over now." Pain was etched in every one of her features but he didn't stop. "You..." He let his eyes wander down her body, and then work their way back up. *God, she's pretty.* He forced himself to focus on his anger then continued, "Can't compare to the women I've been with," he finished lamely.

"Are you done?" Jessie asked, pain straining her voice.

"Yes I am. Finished being made a fool of. Done falling over backward to please you. Women are taking numbers to have a turn with me. I don't have to work for it. I don't need your immature back-and-forth, 'Maybe I love him, maybe I don't.' I've got plenty of women to choose from. And guess what?" Trevor stared at her.. "I don't choose you."

They studied each other. Fury mixed with the pain of fresh wounds. Jessie nodded and then turned to walk out of the room. When she stopped and turned to him with a defeated look, Trevor wanted to snatch it all back.

The damage was already done. He could see that in the icy daggers she shot at him.

“When I was seventeen years old, I thought you were the most arrogant son of a bitch I’d ever met. Remember how condescending you were with me?” Jessie stepped closer, and he wished she’d stayed where she was. The closer she moved, the more the intense emotion rolling off her slapped him, punching him straight in the gut. “Oh, you thought you were being nice to the coach’s miscreant daughter, but I knew your game.”

“What’s your point?” Trevor asked.

“Well, maybe I was a trouble making brat back then, but at least I’ve grown up! You remain the same self absorbed, arrogant son of bitch.” With that said, she spun on her heel and stormed out of the locker room. The door slammed, leaving him in stone cold silence. It was fitting, for that’s how he felt—stone cold.

* * * *

Trevor loathed himself every time he looked in the mirror. The idea of hurting Jessie the way he had ate away at him. When the anger had given way to a simple deep, gnawing pain, he realized that no matter what she did, he would always love her. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have cared what she did. Since his injury that day, he’d been listed on the DL for the next three weeks. Only one of them had passed, and he was going crazy. He’d lost his girl, his game, and his zest for life all in one fell swoop.

Part of him was grateful that, apparently, she hadn’t discussed his horrible treatment of her with her father or Dylan, because neither of them were angry at him. At the same time, he wished they were giving him hell. At least that would mean she still cared enough to talk about him. As it stood, Dylan had told him that she had stated it wasn’t working and changed the subject. That hurt more than any words she could have thrown at him.

Despite the fact that it was pointless, he picked up his cell phone and dialed her number. Voice mail picked up like he had expected, and he flipped it closed and tossed it down on the table. Trevor muttered a string of curses and sank down onto the sofa and pulled on his running shoes. A nice five-mile run would clear his head—he hoped.

* * * *

It was the bottom of the ninth, and Trevor was pitching well in his first game after coming off the DL. He hadn't been brought in until the sixth inning, but so far, he'd not allowed a hit. He needed three quick outs to win the game. Trevor glanced toward the dugout and noticed that Coach was on a cell phone. Something that was unheard of for a coach during a game. Trevor shook off the foreboding and focused on Milo, who gave him the call.

Trevor struck out the next three batters quickly, and a roar of celebration could be heard from the stands. Trevor moved away from his celebrating team and found Dan, who had sunk down on the bench, all color drained from his face.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Jessie. She's been hurt."

It seemed like the world had begun to spin and he thought he was going to faint. "How bad?"

"The nurse who called me said it's bad. She's getting ready to go into surgery," Coach said, his voice strained.

Dylan walked up behind him, "Party's over here," he said, laughter in his voice. "Hey, what's wrong?" His light tone of a moment before was gone.

"Jessie's hurt."

Within an hour, they had three seats booked on the next flight to New York. Coach Max had been given instructions for what to do if they weren't back for the next game in two nights. The team had been given a brief pep talk, and they were on their way.

The flight was long and full of tension. All three men worried about the woman they loved each in their own unique way. Jessie was an amazing woman, who brought out strong emotions in all of them--the worry etched across each of their faces spoke of that.

"She's going to be okay," Dylan spoke.

"She has to be," Dan replied. "I don't know what I'd do without her."

"Did the nurse tell you the extent of her injuries?" Dylan asked.

"Only that she had fallen off a cliff and was going into surgery."

“Did she jump?” Trevor asked. Dylan and Coach turned horrified eyes to him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that.” Trevor hadn’t meant to say it aloud but he couldn’t help himself. He worried about the stress of all that had happened to her.

“Of course she didn’t jump. You’re not worth all that. Even if you are stupid,” Dan Kirk said. Trevor stared at the man. It sunk in that Jessie had said something to her father about what had happened between them.

“So she did tell you something?” Trevor asked.

“Enough. I don’t know all of it. I know that you hurt her.”

“I know...”

“Wait! She hasn’t said anything to me. What happened?” Dylan said.

In an odd way, he was glad she hadn’t told Dylan. It wasn’t that he was worried about what Dylan would think. He knew Dylan would be mad as hell at him, but it showed him that there was a line with Dylan, and it was nice to know there were some things he was not a part of when it came to his own relationship with Jessie. The fact that she had confided in her dad, but not Dylan—in a strange way, it gave him hope.

“I said some things I probably shouldn’t have.”

“If you only think you probably shouldn’t have said them, then you don’t deserve her. I thought you were better than that. You’ve been moping around here for weeks when it was you who drove her away. You are the one who told her she meant nothing to you. So you were going to go out and take what you wanted from the line of women taking numbers to be with you.” Trevor cringed when his own words were tossed back in his face. “But I haven’t seen you with any women, and I haven’t seen anyone taking a number to be with you either.”

“You actually said that to her?” Dylan said, shock showing on his face and in his voice.

“Yeah,” Trevor mumbled.

“You ass,” Dylan growled.

“He’s paying for it. Why do you think I haven’t given him hell? I’ve known since the day it happened. I was mad, furious even, but he’s paying for it.” Trevor glanced at Dan. A very controlled anger was in his eyes. He realized that the reason he hadn’t been taken to task in all likelihood had a lot to do with the very same woman he had so thoroughly blasted without a thought. Guilt ate away at him.

Trevor trailed behind Coach Kirk and Dylan while they made their way into the New York hospital where they had been told Jessie was in. They approached a desk that said "Information."

"We're here to see Jessie Kirk."

The portly woman behind the desk adjusted her glasses and said "One moment please." Her fingers flew across the keyboard, and a second later she said, "Fifth floor ICU, room five-one-one-four."

"Thank you," all three men said at once.

They stepped off the elevator and followed the signs to Jessie's room. When they entered, Trevor saw Jessie lying in the bed, her eyes closed, bandages around her head and her arms. A thick cast protected her right leg. The man whom she had been with the last time he'd seen her sat at her bedside.

"What happened?" Trevor was the one to speak. Coach had moved to Jessie's bedside, and Dylan stood just behind him. Before the man could speak, a nurse came in.

"I'm sorry but only two people at a time can visit on this floor."

Trevor put a hand on Dan's shoulder. "I'll go." His eyes met the man who he'd seen cuddling Jessie at the game. "Let's go. You can tell me what happened."

The man nodded and walked past Trevor and out of the room. When Trevor stepped out into the hallway, he rounded on the man. "What did you do to my girlfriend?"

The man's mouth dropped open and then snapped shut. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Mitch. You must be Trevor."

Trevor ignored the extended hand. "What did you do to her?"

"I would never hurt a woman. I did nothing to her. We were hiking and she fell off a small cliff."

"How does one fall off a cliff?"

"She was taking a picture. The edge was hidden by brush. When she backed up, she lost her footing and fell."

"How badly is she injured?"

"The worst injury is her leg which was broken in several places. They operated to fix it."

"Are you a skilled hiker?"

"No." Mitch answered.

“Then what were you doing taking her hiking?”

Mitch laughed. An infuriating, deep chuckle. “If you want to blame somebody for hurting her, go look in the mirror, buddy. I don’t have to stand here and take this.”

Trevor started to say something more, but he realized the man was right. Dylan came out of the room and headed toward Trevor’s side. “She’s awake if you want to see her.” The words were cold. Trevor knew Dylan was mad at him. Jessie evoked a strong urge to protect her, and he knew Dylan was mad on her behalf. A part of him wondered if Dylan wasn’t in love with Jessie himself. That thought worried Trevor. The way he’d hurt her, he wouldn’t put it past Dylan to move in and try to make a move. They were best friends, but this wasn’t the first time a situation with Jessie had put those bonds to the test.

“Want to go get a cup of coffee?” Dylan asked Mitch.

The man nodded and the two headed off toward the elevator. Trevor turned back toward the room and entered.

Jessie looked at him. He wanted to crawl in a hole when the same hurt he’d seen last time they were together was there. “Jessie, how do you feel?”

Jessie stared at him but said nothing. He moved to her side and reached out to take her hand. She winced at the contact, and he didn’t know if she was cringing out of pain or from his touch, and that stung.

“I was so worried about you,” he said before he leaned over and kissed her hand.

“Get out.” Jessie whispered.

Trevor met her eyes. “Jessie, I--”

“Get out. I don’t want you here,” she said, her voice a little stronger.

Tears filled his eyes. Up until that moment, he had held a tiny glimmer of hope. Seeing the cold hatred in her eyes shattered that. Trevor straightened and moved away from the bed. When he reached the door, he turned back and said “I’m so sorry, Jessie. Maybe someday you can forgive me.” With that, he walked out of the room.

* * * *

The night was long. Trevor had turned off his cell phone hours ago, when Dylan had taken a notion to call him fifteen times in an hour. Trevor

wanted to be left alone. He was an asshole. Lower than the lowest form of life, and he deserved everything he was getting. Despite Dylan's anger, he knew his friend would try to comfort him, and he didn't want it. He wanted to know the burn of all that had been lost.

In the quiet of the dark room, Trevor allowed the tears to fall. The pain was overwhelming. When the tears had bled him dry, and he could think beyond his own misery, he pulled out a small pack of stationery he had bought earlier and wrote a letter to Jessie.

Several hours later, he was happy with what he had written. He sealed it in an envelope and scrawled her name across the front.

Trevor sank into the bed and let the welcomed blackness take him.

* * * *

Morning dawned, bright and sunny, but his mood remained dark and dismal. He checked out of the hotel, and walked to a small gift shop he'd seen the night before. He looked around the shop for over an hour, before deciding on the perfect gift. The delicate angel made of the finest crystal, its wings, encrusted with sapphires was beautiful. Its delicate radiance reminded him of Jessie. Its fragility reminded him of how little it took to destroy something so precious.

Trevor next went to a drug store nearby, and bought a gift bag, and a bow. With the package wrapped and the letter attached, Trevor caught a cab to the hospital.

"Wait for me. I'll be right back."

Trevor hopped out of the cab and hurried to the information desk. "Can I leave this here for a patient?"

"Yes, which patient?"

"Jessie Kirk."

The woman typed something, then wrote down Jessie's room number on a sticky note. She stuck the tiny piece of paper to the side of the bag. "I'll see she gets it," the woman said pleasantly.

"Thanks." Trevor turned and made his way back to the cab.

"Four hours later, Trevor boarded the flight to New Mexico. When the plane lifted off, Trevor shook his head. He thought it was ironic that a year ago, the game was all that mattered. Now it was all he had left. There was

always the sports complex but even that, without Jessie, meant nothing to him. Trevor closed his eyes and tried, to block out the pain. No matter how hard he tried to think of something else, the only thing he could see was the hatred in Jessie's eyes. It haunted him.

Chapter 33

Jessie stared at the package the orderly had dropped off a little over an hour ago. On the front of the envelope, her name had been scrawled in Trevor's unmistakable penmanship. Seeing him yesterday had brought up a lot of conflicting emotions. He had looked so handsome when he came in, hair rumpled and his eyes bright with worry. Her heart had cried out to him, but her mind wouldn't allow her to give voice to the words.

A need to defend herself had asserted itself, and the mask of anger and hurt slid back in place and she told him to go. And so he had, and that hurt more than the nasty words he'd spewed at her that day.

"I can make a call and tell him I'll bench his ass for the season if he doesn't come back." Jessie turned to her father whom she hadn't heard come in. She tried to force a smile but it wouldn't come. Tears welled up in her eyes and before she could stop it, they dropped down her cheeks.

"I wanted him to fight for me." The whispered words hung in the air. Her father studied her.

"Honey, what happened between you two?"

Jessie brought her tear filled gaze to meet her father's. She hadn't been able to hide the hurt or the fact that they were no longer seeing each other, but the details she'd kept to herself, stating simply that he'd called it off between them.

"It doesn't matter," Jessie cried.

"Do you love him?" Dan Kirk moved closer and sank down into a chair next to the bed. He reached out and took Jessie's hand in his. "I don't know everything that happened between you, but I've seen and heard the hurt in you. I know you are angry at him, but, honey, there is freedom in forgiveness. If you carry it around, it becomes a bitter knot that just gnaws at you. Bitterness and anger are heavy burdens to carry."

Jessie squeezed his hand. "You're talking about Momma?"

A flash of anger moved through his eyes but it was gone just as quick, and he nodded. "I've spent a lifetime living with that anger. I let it take a lot from me."

"Trevor doesn't love me. I just need to accept that and move on."

"Who says he doesn't love you?"

"He did."

"I oughta give that boy a good beating," Her father mumbled. Jessie almost laughed at her father's outrage. It was sweet to see him act so protective of her, something she had wanted all her life. "Trevor is a liar. He's miserable without you, and if he tells you different, he's deluding himself. Have you tried to talk to him?"

"No. He called once. I didn't answer the phone."

"Jess, one way or another, you have to start somewhere."

"Hey, Jess. How are you today?" Dylan came into the room and moved to her side. He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "You better today?"

"Getting there." Jessie smiled. Dylan was sweet. He'd become the closest thing to a brother she had, and she loved him better than any family she had ever met.

"Good, good. Guess you won't be falling off any more cliffs." Dylan joked.

"No, not in this lifetime." She chuckled, and then winced with the pain. She searched for the button that would give her a dose of pain medication, and when she found it, she pressed it.

"Did you get your plane ticket?" Dan Kirk asked Dylan.

"Yeah. I'm leaving at one. I'll touch down an hour before the game and go straight to the field. When will you be back?"

"I'll let you know. Max knows what to do until I get back."

Jessie watched her father nod and pull out the copy of a lineup he always kept on him. He nodded and turned his attention back to Jessie. "You okay now, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine." Jessie studied her father, could see the concern in his eyes. It still amazed her that they had gotten so close. When she found out that he might not be her father, her heart had been broken. She didn't think she could ever forgive him for keeping that from her. Somehow, she had managed, and it seemed every day their relationship grew. Was it possible

that the same thing could happen with Trevor if she gave him a chance? Her gaze traveled to the still unopened package.

“Call him, Jessie. Give him a chance. If it doesn’t work out, fine, but at least you’ll know and you’ll be able to begin to heal.” Her father squeezed her hand again.

“I want you to go on back to New Mexico with Dylan.” She saw him about to protest and she rushed on, “You’ve got a team that needs you.”

“I’ve got a daughter that needs me, too.”

“I’m fine. I’m sure we can find a nurse to help me out until I get better.”

An hour later, Dylan and her father left the hospital and were on their way to the airport. It had taken a huge amount of encouragement, but her father had agreed. Jessie was grateful to be alone. She sank back down in the bed and closed her eyes. It didn’t take long for her to fall into a deep sleep filled with dreams of laughing blue eyes and a cocky half smile.

* * * *

Jessie hobbled her way to the wheelchair that the nurse brought in. After a week in the hospital she was ready to go. Millie, a private home health nurse would be moving into her apartment to help her out. Despite her assurances that twenty-four hour care wouldn’t be needed, he had insisted.

The cab she had called was there, and Jessie was ready to go. Taking one last look around the room to make sure she’d gotten everything, she caught a glimpse of the wrapped package Trevor had sent. She still hadn’t found the courage to open it. Maybe in the privacy of her own home, surrounded by her own things, she would find the strength to read what he had written her. Judging by the thickness of the envelope attached to the bag, it was more than a simple “Get Well Soon” card.

“I forgot a package,” she said to the nurse before the woman could wheel her out of the room. “It’s over there on the table behind the bed.”

“Sure, I’ll get it for you,” the nurse said moving around her to grab the package. When she handed it to her, Jessie started to stuff it into the plastic bag labeled “Patient Belongings,” but on second thought, she set it in her lap, cradling it like she would an infant.

Traffic was horrible, and it took just under two hours for her to get home. The cabbie parked and got out of the car to help her. Balanced on her

crutches, she watched the man open his trunk and remove the small bag of belongings and the gift bag. Before they had gotten here, she had asked him to help her to the apartment, and he had agreed. Slowly, she made her way to her door, and she fumbled for her keys. It was a trick to stay balanced and unlock the door, which had a tendency to be sticky, but she managed. “Just put that stuff there,” she said, inclining her head toward the love seat. The driver complied, and she reached into her purse and pulled out two twenty dollar bills.

“Thanks,” she said holding out the money. The driver smiled at her and made his way out the door. Jessie shut the door behind him but didn’t lock it so that when Millie arrived, she wouldn’t have to struggle to rise.

In the silent warmth of the apartment, Jessie hobbled over to the loveseat and picked up the package she had been avoiding. Taking a deep breath, she clutched it close to her and made her way to the sofa.

First, she opened the package. The tiny crystal angel with jewel-encrusted wings took her breath away. Its delicate beauty was stunning. It shone in the glow of the lamplight, and Jessie was in awe of this gift that was so obviously chosen with such love.

She reached for the envelope attached to the package and opened it. The pretty stationary surprised her. Trevor had picked it just for her, and it made her soften just a little toward him.

Unfolding the letter, she read,

Dear Jessie,

I took a good look in the mirror tonight and I didn't like what I saw. In the time we spent together, I learned to like the man I kept hidden inside instead of the superstar. The person you came to know has always been there. But when you live your life in the spotlight, you learn to keep your vulnerabilities hidden. You made it okay for me to nurture the boy inside who wanted more out of life.

I know that our relationship has been dramatic and full of turmoil from the beginning, but I don't regret those things. These circumstances allowed us to see each other without the luxury of the masks that we normally wear. I saw you for the woman that you are and the hurt little girl that you were. There isn't one thing about you I would change. Maybe you aren't perfect, Jess, but you are perfect for me.

As hard as you fought it, I knew you felt the same connection to me. It was there, the elephant in the room that we couldn't hide from. When we finally gave in, it was the most beautiful, sweetest love I've ever felt. How could you think I would want more than that?

When you said you wouldn't marry me, I was hurt. I'm sorry that I didn't give you the space you needed. What you said makes sense. We were together and in love, you were right, a ring wouldn't have made that any more real. I've never felt this way about a woman before. No woman has ever wanted all of me! I guess in some ways I was just as afraid of that as you were.

Without your love, my life is dark, a place that's cold and demeaning. The welcome I have come to expect is gone. I don't know how to get it back? I don't say these things to make you feel guilty, only to let you know that without you my life is somehow less.

A year ago, I was happy with just being me, Trevor Malone, star pitcher of the Santa Fe Devils, but you gave me so much more. Without it, the happiness I found in who I used to be doesn't compare.

Baby, I know I don't deserve a chance to make things right. I know you don't owe me anything at all, but if you could find it in your heart to try—meet me halfway, I promise I'll spend a lifetime making up for the pain I caused you.

My nights are spent in dreamless sleep, because my dreams were tangled up in you. I need you to come and wrap me up in the warm blanket of your love. I promise, this time, I won't let go.

Your love and your happiness mean everything to me. Maybe you won't even read this and we really are over—I hope not, but I know the possibility exists. If you are reading this, know that my heart is sincere. I love you, Jessie Kirk.

*Love,
Trevor*

Tears filled Jessie's eyes, and she let them fall unchecked down her cheeks. All the pain and loneliness of the past weeks washed away in a torrent of sobs. When she was done, she was left with a terrible emptiness that she knew only one man could fill. Despite everything that had happened, she loved Trevor. She was so tired of pretending that she didn't.

Reaching toward the coffee table, she grabbed her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She scrolled through the names in her address book until she got to *T*. Jessie held her breath and hit Send. What would she say? Before she had a chance to think about it, his sweet, honey voice answered.

“Hello?”

“I have just one question?”

“Anything.” His voice sounded tortured.

“Why?”

“I don’t have a good reason.”

She heard sincerity in his voice. “But you had a reason,” she said.

“I saw you with that guy, Mitch. At the game in New York.”

“I didn’t know I couldn’t bring a friend with me.”

“Jessie, things were stressed between us, remember? When I looked up, I saw him with his arm around you, and you laughing, I just lost control. I know I was cruel. I should have talked to you.”

“Damn right, you should have. There is nothing going on between me and Mitch.”

“Why did he have his arm around you?”

“We were running late to the game. We didn’t have time to eat, I went to sit down so I wouldn’t miss the first pitch, he went to get me some food. He handed me a pretzel and hugged him. My earring got stuck in the zipper of his jacket. It was as simple as that.”

“Jessie why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never gave me the chance. When you got hurt, I ran down there to be with you, and all you wanted to do was hurt me.”

“I thought you were moving on with Mitch. I thought you had brought him there just to hurt me.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Trevor.”

“You sure spend a lot of time with him. You were with him when you fell off a cliff.”

“He’s my friend!” Jessie took a deep breath for control. Finally, she had a reason. He had been jealous. She hated what he had done, but she understood. In her opinion, jealousy was an evil emotion that caused people to do stupid things.

“Jessie, I am so sorry.” Silence drew out over the line. His deep heavy breathing broke the uncomfortable quiet. “How can I prove that to you?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Jessie sighed. “All I know is that I love you. I’m tired of pretending I don’t. I’m tired of being angry, and I’m tired of being alone.”

“Oh, baby. I love you, too.”

“Wait a minute. You don’t get off that easily. You really hurt me.”

“I know I did.”

The sorrow in his voice was clear, and Jessie sensed that everything would be okay. They just had to go slow, just like they planned.

“Trevor I want this to work.”

“So do I, Jess.”

“But I need you to work on my timeline. I need you to be patient with me. I need to be able to trust you. We said that we were going to take things slow. Day by day. We were supposed to find who we were as individuals.”

“Can’t we find ourselves as individuals, but still be together? I can’t stand not being with you, Jessie. I feel like you’re running. Staying there in New York keeps you away from me. It’s easy to take a few days and come and have a good time, but what about facing the day to day. Everything that happens, rather than just a few good days here and a few good days there.”

He was right. If she was going to commit to making it work with him, she needed to leave New York, and go home.

“Trevor I--”

“No listen to me, Jess. If you love me, you have to love everything about me. The good *and* the bad. We have to be there for each other, and we have to face each challenge together. That’s how we will grow.”

“People have long distance relationships all the time,” Jessie replied.

“Maybe they do, but not me. I can’t. I’ve never felt this way about another woman. I never dreamed I’d fall in love, or that I’d need someone so desperately. But I do. I can’t handle you living so far away.”

“What about when you are traveling? We won’t be together then.”

“But I’ll be able to come home to you. In the off season, we’ll be together all the time. During the season—yeah I travel, but with you there, I can’t even come and see you when we have down time because I need to be here practicing.”

“Trevor, I understand all that.” Jessie couldn’t take it anymore. She missed her family and friends, her job, Malachi, and, most of all, Trevor. “Give me eight weeks to heal. In that time, we’ll talk. We’ll work on our relationship from a distance.”

“Jessie, I--”

“It’s only eight weeks. My doctor is here, I need to sublet the apartment there are things I have to do.”

“Eight weeks seems like forever.”

Jessie heard the pout in his voice and it brought a smile to her lips. “Eight weeks is nothing compared to a lifetime. Trevor, I need this time. I read your letter, and it made me see that you do love me.”

“Of course I do. I’m sorry I said that I didn’t. I’m sorry I treated you no better than a one-night stand. I was so wrong. I will never hurt you again, Jessie.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I won’t.”

“You will. It’s inevitable. People sometimes hurt other people, even when they don’t mean to. I understand you were jealous. It doesn’t make me happy, and it doesn’t excuse it, but I understand. Now I need to work on forgiving you. I can’t make any promises until I know I can forgive you.”

“That’s fair.” He said in a low, serious tone.

The knock on the door cut off what she was about to say, and she said, “I have to go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I love you, Jessie. I’ll prove it.”

“Goodnight, Trevor.”

When Trevor hung up, she turned to the door where a knock sounded again. “Come in”

The door opened and an older woman with graying hair and a thin wiry frame walked through the entrance.

“You must be Millie.” Jessie smiled at the woman.

“I am.”

Jessie directed her to the spare bedroom and hobbled around while she gave a brief tour. The woman was sweet and laughed a lot. Very pleasant to be around, Jessie thought. When all the formalities were out of the way, Jessie settled back down on the couch while Millie made dinner. She picked

up the tiny crystal angel and cradled it in her hand. Love emanated from the gift itself, and the man who had given it to her.

* * * *

Eight weeks flew by. Jessie had sublet the apartment to a nice young couple, who were to be married soon. Their obvious joy and love for one another had increased her longing for Trevor.

Since the night she had given in and made that phone call to him, they had spoken every day, sometimes several times a day. It had been a nice time of renewal of the bond they shared. They laughed together, cried together, and shared dreams together. When it came time for Jessie to pack, she was hopeful, and confident.

Yesterday she'd gotten her cast off her leg. When the doctor had removed the plaster and told her to stand, she had tentatively walked around the room. Her limb had been weak and bruised, but she found that walking again came easy. As she became more sure of herself, she increased the pressure on that leg and the pace with which she walked.

A smile lit her face when she walked out of the room. An epiphany had dawned on her. Her relationship with Trevor wasn't so different from her leg. Her heart had been battered and bruised, and she had erected a barrier to protect it. In the past weeks, Trevor had worked at tearing down those walls, brick by brick, stone by stone. Now she was ready to give him more. Although she had the remaining soreness of the injury, like the doctor had said about her leg, it would get stronger and better with time.

With that thought in mind, she hugged Millie and thanked her for her help, grabbed her two suitcases and headed for the door. The rest of her belongings had already been shipped to her father's house—where she would live in Santa Fe.

With a final glance around the pretty apartment, she shut off the light and shut the door on this chapter of her life.

Chapter 34

Trevor stepped up to the pitcher's mound. It was the final game he would play this season. The last game of the World Series. The Rangers were a tough team to beat and had kept them on their toes throughout the seven games. It was the ninth inning, final pitch of the game. Bases were loaded, and there was a full count on the batter. Devils were winning by two. This next pitch could make or break him. He stared down the path at the Cortez, who was crouched behind the plate.

Cortez gave him the signal, and he wound up for the pitch. Trevor nodded. He looked up in the stands, his eyes searching for Jessie. They locked on her for a second. She sat there on the edge of her seat, cheering him on. Malachi sat next to her, an arm around her. Trevor flashed them a smile, wound up for the pitch and released. Trevor watched while the ball sped down toward home plate and formed into a perfect slider. His eyes flew to the umpire, who made the call, it seemed to go in slow motion. "Strike."

A round of loud cheering went up from the stands, and Trevor was engulfed in a massive bear hug from members of his team. Although he had played just a few innings of the game due to continued problems with his shoulder, it had been up to him to maintain the lead and bring it home. And so he had.

Jessie and Malachi came running on to the field as a reporter cornered him for an interview. His gaze stayed with Jessie when she launched herself at her father and the two of them laughed and cried together in celebration.

An hour later, with Jessie at his side, he received the great honor, the World Series MVP trophy. Jessie beamed up at him with pride while he answered questions from reporters.

"After battling your shoulder injury all season, this must be a great honor. How did you stay focused?" a female reporter asked him.

Trevor smiled at Malachi and then Jessie before he answered. "I took it day by day, and I didn't give up."

"How is your shoulder feeling tonight?"

"It's feeling great!" Trevor laughed.

"Can we expect you to have more pitching time next season?"

"That is entirely up to my coach." Trevor smiled, and the reporters turned their attention to Dan.

The celebration lasted long into the night. The entire team along with their families enjoyed the thrill of their victory.

* * * *

Trevor stared out at the crowd that had gathered for the ribbon cutting ceremony at the sports complex. Jessie straightened his tie while he went over what he planned to say once again.

"You'll do fine. Just relax," Jessie told him with a chuckle.

"I know. It's just that this is so important."

"I know it is," she said, meeting his eyes. Jessie rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his jaw. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"No." Trevor's watched her eyes light with amusement. "I was beginning to wonder," he said teasing her.

"Don't ever doubt," she said grasping his hand and raising it to her lips. "That I love you with all my heart." Jessie brought his hand to rest over her heart.

"I can't believe how lucky I am," Trevor whispered.

They leaned in and met each other's lips. His arms circled her and he brought her close to him. With Jessie there, in his arms, he felt invincible. Trevor knew that with Jessie by his side he could do anything.

"How did I ever live my life without you?" Jessie whispered against his lips.

"I don't know." He focused a look of mock horror at her. "But I do know you will never have to live without me again."

Trevor rubbed his lips over hers. Trevor's heart thumped loud in his chest like it always did when he thought about how lucky he was. Since Jessie had returned to Santa Fe, they had spent more and more time together, forgiving each other, basking in each other, and falling more in love every

day. The doubt he had seen her eyes in those first weeks after her return had been replaced by a glow of sheer happiness.

“Come on, you two.” Malachi said when he came into the room. “Everyone is waiting,” he said, his impatience showing.

Trevor and Jessie laughed, and then they broke apart and followed the teen out the door. They stopped just before the ribbon, and Trevor turned to the crowd. When he began to speak, Jessie slipped her hand into his, and the words came that much easier.

“The Malone Sports Complex for Underprivileged Children, is a place where all are welcome. A place where we can nurture the talents and dreams of the young people in this community. It’s only through the eyes of our youth that we can see our future. Someone very important taught me that.”

He beamed at Jessie. Tears welled up in her eyes, and before he could go on, he stopped to wipe away the single drop that had slid down her cheek. He cleared the emotion from his throat. “With that said, I welcome one and all to come in and celebrate the opening of this great community center.”

Trevor took the scissors held out to him and snipped through the ribbon. A loud cheer went up from the crowd. Trevor turned and led the way.

* * * *

Dinner smelled delicious. Jessie had made a chicken and rice casserole, with wild mushrooms and tons of cheese and garlic. White asparagus and a tossed salad with raspberry vinaigrette accompanied the scrumptious meal.

Trevor sat next to Jessie holding her hand, while her father sat off to Jessie’s other side and Malachi and his mother sat on Trevor’s other side. Trevor welled up with emotion at the thought of everything they had all been through to get to this point.

“I know that tonight we are celebrating that opening of the Youth Center, but there is more to celebrate,” Jessie said. Trevor looked up at her and saw the wink she exchanged with Malachi.

“What are you talking about, baby?” he asked.

Jessie looked at him. Everything about her shined with love and happiness, a far cry from the woman who had walked into the locker room a little over a year ago.

“First, I have something to give my dad.” Jessie looked at Dan, love shining in her eyes. She leaned down and grabbed something out of her purse. “When you came to see me at the hospital, I found one of your hairs on my blanket. I saved it. I thought about what having the DNA test could mean to us both.” Jessie looked around the table. She fiddled nervously with the envelope. “I decided that the most important gift could come from it, and I couldn’t deny you the opportunity to know for sure.”

Jessie smiled and held out the envelope to him. Coach Kirk’s hands shook when he took the envelope and opened it. He pulled out a single sheet of paper and read. When the paper fell from his fingers, Trevor saw that the man had turned a pasty shade of white. Tears had filled his eyes. The man stood up and opened his arms. Jessie flew into them. “My daughter,” he whispered into Jessie’s hair. “I let her take you away, all that time, and you were *my* daughter.” He sobbed.

“We may have lost the past, but we have an entire future to look forward to—Dad.” Jessie croaked out the last word.

Trevor swallowed the lump of emotion and picked up the bottle of champagne Jessie had set out. He began filling glasses. “I think that calls for a toast,” he said.

“I’m not done yet,” Jessie said, turning amused eyes to his.

“There’s more?”

“You betcha.”

Trevor watched the sparkle in her eye dance when she winked at Malachi again. The boy laughed.

“Get on with it, Miss Jessie. You wrong for keeping us in suspense.”

“Okay then,” Jessie said, her clear voice tinged with humor. She moved back to her seat and sat down. Trevor sat next to her, and taking his hands in hers she turned to him.

“I love you, Trevor Malone.”

“I love you, too, Jessie Kirk.”

Jessie smiled at him. “You have given me so much, more love than I’ve ever expected, happiness and a life that I only dreamed about to look forward to. Two days ago, I found out that you gave me the greatest gift of all.”

Jessie stopped, and Trevor looked at her. He replayed her words in his mind, trying to make sense of what she was saying. It was important to her, and he wanted to respond the right way.

“Jessie...I--” Trevor stopped short. It dawned on him what she had been trying to tell him. His gaze flew to her stomach and stayed there as if attached by sticky glue.

Jessie laughed. “Congratulations, Daddy,” she said.

“Jessie, are you sure?” he asked stunned.

“I am positive.”

Trevor let out a war whoop. He rose from the table, dragging her up with him. He wrapped her in a tight embrace, saying into her hair, over and over again, “I’m going to be a daddy.” Her tears dripped onto his neck and he forced himself to look at her. He cupped her face in his palms and looked into her eyes. The pure joy he saw there told him she was just beaming with happiness like he was. He kissed her hard. “You know this means you have to marry me.”

Jessie pulled away from him. “Have to?” she asked.

“Don’t be difficult, woman.”

Dan piped up. “Look who you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, Miss Jessie doesn’t know how not to be difficult,” Malachi added.

Trevor burst out laughing. He dropped down to one knee. “Jessie, my love. Will you marry me?”

“Where’s my ring?” Jessie asked, her voice laced with humor.

“At my house, where I plan to take you later to give you the ring and—”

“Trevor!” Jessie squealed.

“What? You’re pregnant. It’s not like they don’t know we have sex.” Snickers were heard from the three at the table. “Say you’ll marry me—please.”

“I’ll marry you,” she whispered.

Trevor rose and pulled Jessie into a soul-searching kiss. When they pulled apart, he whispered, “My wife.” Placing a hand against her belly, he said, “My child. Does life get any better than this?” Emotion overwhelmed him and he realized that it didn’t.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jordana Ryan is a 32 year old single mom in Missouri. Although she's spent most of her adult life working with the mentally ill, and juvenile and adult offenders, she has always had a passion for writing. Starting with poetry, she spent most of her teen years and early adulthood writing poems that no one ever read. Almost three years ago, feeling brave, she began to share her writing with others, and the positive response led to her setting out to achieve her ultimate dream of writing a novel. Jordana is now a multi-published author.

When not writing, she can often be found with her young daughter at the pool, or at her daughters school volunteering for one of many activities that go on throughout the year. Jordana enjoys spending time with her friends and family and takes an hour everyday to exercise and stay fit.

Jordana also enjoys cooking, making scrapbooks and cooking, and those loves come through in her writing. Jordana loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at enchantedpixie@charter.net. Please visit her website at <http://jordanaryan.tripod.com>.

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