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(c) 2007

ISBN 978-1-59578-397-4

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Published 2007

ISBN 978-1-59578-397-4

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

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Chapter One

“Shut your mouth, you’ll catch flies.”

Sasha’s jaw snapped shut, but he *was* the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. Although she figured beautiful wasn’t a term used for a man—still, he *was*. All blond curls and blue eyes. In all her life, she’d never seen anyone like him.

“I’m sure he’s just passin’ through, sweetheart. They always are.”

Verbena’s words penetrated her haze, and she tried to check her dreamy romantic side, but something about *this* man made her think he just might take her with him.

“You gonna go wait on him?”

Verbena’s voice came to her like a dream she heard through a tunnel.

“He winked at me.” Her dream-like state ending, her violet eyes brightened as she gazed down at the older waitress. “Did you see it?”

“No, honey, ‘fraid I missed it. Now go take the man’s order before Luther comes out front and reads you the riot act for lazin’ ‘bout.”

“Right.”

Sasha picked up a menu, straightened the skirt of the peach-colored uniform, tried to quell the butterflies that were attacking her quite viciously and headed for the booth at the far end of the diner where the stranger sat waiting.

“Hey.” Hearing the breathless quality of her own voice caused her to inwardly cringe. “You needin’ a menu?”

She held it out to him, but didn’t loosen her grip when he tried to take it. She was caught in the grasp of the powder-blue eyes that held her future. She was certain of it now.

“Oh, sorry.” She smiled, realizing her mistake, and released the menu. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

She grinned like a schoolgirl and ran to get his coffee. Her stomach was doing flip flops and her hands were literally shaking. He had the most beautiful smile she’d ever seen. It lit up his entire face until his eyes actually sparkled. For the first time, she actually understood what that expression meant. Prior to this moment, she had thought it just a quaint figure of speech. She had to push away a squall of girlish giggles when she saw his dimples for the first time.

Carefully carrying the pot and cup back to him, she wasn’t sure which would be the safer way to go with her unsteady hands. Should she place the cup down on the table, then fill, or have to carry the full cup across the diner? She hoped she hadn’t made the wrong choice, but the slight chance she’d pour hot coffee all over him wasn’t something she was willing to risk.

“Shasta?” He motioned towards her nametag with his head while she filled his cup. “Is that your name, sweetheart?”

She shrugged in reply. “That’s what everybody calls me.”

His oh-so-sexy lopsided grin should have been declared a lethal weapon, because Sasha felt herself grow weak at the sight of it. She also started feeling reckless, which was not at all like her ... well, not since Julian anyway.

“Okay, but is that your name?”

“It don’t matter. Are you ready to order, sir?”

She hated that she had to turn on the ice she was so famous for. She reckoned it was his own fault, though. Part habit and part defense, it came naturally these days, but his digging around her name made her go on the defensive.

“Okay, message received.” He looked down at the menu. “What do you suggest?”

“A finer dining establishment.”

He laughed, but she’d spoken with complete sincerity. She could tell he wasn’t the truck stop type. His laughter, however, put her back at ease and brought on that heavy dose of lust again that she’d been feeling from the moment he first walked through the door.

“Anything wrong with the cheeseburger?”

“Nope. Not a thing. You want fries or rings with it?” She placed her hand on her hip and considered him with her head cocked to one side. “Or are you one of them salad types?”

He leaned forward on his elbows, bringing himself closer to her. His spicy scent made it necessary for her to close her eyes in order to regain her equilibrium.

“Now sweetheart, if I were a salad type, why on earth would I have ordered a burger?” Mischief twinkled in his eyes, his expression rendering the question flirtatious rather than sarcastic. She almost wished it hadn’t. She knew how to deal with sarcasm—charm was another story completely.

“Uh.” It was all that would come out. Horrified, she grabbed his menu and raced toward the kitchen, hearing him call out to her as she retreated that fries would be fine. In the relative privacy of the kitchen, she pounded her forehead carefully with closed fists.

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!”

“Honey, have you got that couple on five? They want their check.”

She looked up and caught the last glimpse of Verbena’s graying ponytail fly through the kitchen door back into the dining room.

Okay, Sasha, now what are you going to do?

She couldn’t think of anything right off the bat, so she brought the check out to table five, took a new order and cleaned out the pie case while waiting on his burger to be done. Occasionally she snatched glimpses of him as he read a magazine article, paying her absolutely no attention whatsoever. Finally his food was up and she steadied her hands the best she could before taking his order to him.

“Your burger.” She laid the plate on the table and motioned to his half-empty cup.

“Can I get you a refill?”

“Mmm-hmm, thanks.” He lifted the top of the bun off the burger. “This doesn’t look so bad.”

“I had Earl use the fresh beef,” she whispered conspiratorially with a smile.

“I’ll be eternally grateful, I’m sure.” They shared a private laugh for just a moment, and then she went for the coffeepot.

“Can I get you anything else right now?”

She watched the most curious things flit across his face and resonate in his eyes. She figured he was deciding, so she waited—not that prolonging her time in his presence was a hardship by any means.

“Company?”

Her heart stopped. He looked over his shoulder at Verbena, who'd been eyeing him since he walked in as if she'd seen his face that morning on a wanted poster, then looked back up at her.

"Can you sit, or will that get you in trouble?"

She'd get in trouble—all kinds of trouble—and she knew it. Especially if anyone saw her, but she didn't care about any of that right now. She bit the corner of her lower lip.

"I'll sit." She instantly had second thoughts and added, "But just for a sec."

He pushed his plate towards her, smiling that killer smile again.

"I'll take what I can get. You want some of my fries?"

She raised both her eyebrows at him.

"Are you kidding? I couldn't get Earl to change the oil."

Though she tried to squelch her nerves, they were doing a serious number on her stomach. She felt all breathy and off balance. It was a foreign thing for her. Maybe it was just because she hadn't known him since childhood, but whatever it was, it was deliciously new and different—and quite addictive.

"I don't want to get you in any trouble."

"It'll be okay." After a pause, she looked straight into his eyes. "For a second."

Something flared in his eyes and he quickly looked away from her, but not before that look sent heat through her entire body. She knew her existence, what was possible for her in life and what wasn't, but he made her want to dream wild and crazy things. He also inspired desires that she never allowed herself to feel. That made him both incredibly potent and incredibly dangerous. Somehow it also made him all the more desirable.

"You know, I should go anyway."

Sasha's heart fell. They hadn't even had a chance to talk. He hadn't eaten. She had to catch her breath before being able to ask him.

"What happened?"

He stood up and started pulling bills from his wallet. She stood in front of him furiously trying to figure out a way to keep him there, even for just a little bit longer. He handed her the bills.

"You keep the rest."

His voice was strangely thick and his hand slowed as it touched hers in passing her the cash. She felt an incredible spark when it grazed her own. She had the nearly uncontrollable urge to press it to her lips. He must have been thinking along the same lines, because he brought his hand up to her cheek and rubbed the backs of his fingers against it. Sasha thought she might fall. She casually leaned against the table. His next words shocked her.

"You're so very young."

She blinked her best weapons at him, only this time it wasn't on purpose as she'd been known to do so many other times to get what she wanted. This time it was in sheer bewilderment.

"I don't have to be."

She knew it sounded stupid. It sounded desperate, but she *was* desperate. Desperate for him not to leave. But as she stood there partially stunned, he did just that. Her heart took the hit hard.

Verbena came up beside her, arms full of dishes. "They never stick around, honey."

It's better that he left before he could take your heart with him."

Sasha sank back into the booth and absently put a fry in her mouth.

Too late. He just did.

* * * *

Six months later

"Holy Shit!" Matthew leapt for cover behind the bed of his new black pickup. "What the hell are you thinking of, West?"

"I *think* that I'm making up to Frannie for spoiling Thanksgiving for her last year."

West took another shot at the target, and then turned around just as Matthew was poking his head back up.

"Making it up to her or not, just put that thing down."

He motioned at the bow and arrow West had vaguely pointed in his direction. After witnessing West's skill with the thing, that was as close as he wanted to get. West took one last shot at the target, missing so horribly that Matthew had cause to wonder if his friend didn't need his eyes checked.

"Damn." West put the bow in the truck bed. "Come up from there, you idiot."

"Self-preservation is not idiocy." Matthew straightened his shirt and dusted the dirt off his jeans from where he'd hit the ground. "What the heck are you doing with that thing, anyway?"

West picked up the bow again, looked askance at it, and tossed it back in the truck bed.

"It's a Songer family tradition to hunt the Thanksgiving dinner. All the men hunt for wild game and the women grow the vegetables all year." His expression turned wistful. "Frannie grew pumpkins. You should have seen her, nine months pregnant, standing over that pumpkin patch as if it was the most important thing in the whole world."

Matthew hopped up on the tailgate, running his hand along his beard, which was really no more than a few days' growth. "That woman of yours is something else..."

West's beaming face shouted to the world that he loved Frannie more than anything in existence, but Matthew knew it firsthand from watching the two of them together.

"...but hunting?" Matthew raised one judgmental eyebrow at his friend as the smile fell from West's face.

"I know, but at least they're not going out with high powered rifles, telescopic scopes and a big tub full of ice and gin."

Matthew snorted. "Woulda made it interesting, though, ya gotta admit."

Leveling a sardonic glare at his friend, West started with a defense of his new family. "It's nice. They try to have a traditional Thanksgiving and for the second year running, I actually have something to be thankful for. This year, I intend to celebrate it the way Frannie wants to."

West looked at Matthew with a sparkle that always seemed to be there nowadays.

"You going to your mom's?" West moved up on the tailgate and said with a knowing grin, "Bet you're missing him a whole bunch."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

The gathering at Matthew's parents' house would certainly be small in comparison to the Songer celebration. Just his parents, his aunt, maybe a cousin or two in attendance,

and his reason for smiling—the *only* reason he was looking forward to the holiday—William, Matthew’s only son.

Matthew had raised him alone for fifteen of the boy’s seventeen years, but when he was fifteen, the child had had the audacity to want to go away to a prestigious boarding school for his last two years of high school. Now that William had gone back for his senior year, Matthew was left feeling adrift again. Empty Nest Syndrome had hit him harder than he would care to admit.

“So what are you doing out here, anyway?” West turned an expectant expression on his friend.

That was a good question. Matthew had gotten in his truck and just started driving. Before he knew it, he was crossing into West Virginia and knew exactly where he was headed. The big yellow house that West had bought for Frannie as a wedding present, where his two close friends lived.

Family.

He shrugged, not about to let West know that his sentimental side had kicked into high gear.

“Nick was out of town.”

West made an obvious attempt to look dejected, then smiled with knowing eyes.

“A woman?”

Matthew felt the weight of six months resting heavily on his back. Six months he’d been worrying and wondering what to do, without saying a word to a soul about his dilemma. He’d always been the parent, it seemed. Not only to William, but to West and Nick, as well. It was only Frannie who didn’t look to him to be her hero, probably because she had her own in West. It made his relationship with her refreshingly different and immensely comfortable. He loved her very much for it and often felt like she played mother to his father over West and Nick—and even William, at times. Regardless of how happy he was for West, he found himself terribly jealous at the same time.

“I suppose,” Matthew muttered, not certain of how honest he wanted to be.

“You suppose? I know that look. It’s the one that kept staring back at me after I met Frannie. So who is she?”

Matthew let out a long breath and scratched the side of his head while avoiding eye contact at all cost and finally admitted, “I haven’t the faintest clue.”

Long brown hair, violet eyes, sweet smile.

“You don’t know?”

West raised a brow to him. Matthew could see in his eyes that his friend thought he was finally cracking up. Mathew bet he’d been wondering for years when it was going to happen. They’d been friends since college and been through all the highs and lows life throws at you. West had been there when he met, fell for and knocked up Kate. West had also been by his side when he made the toughest decision of his life and married her.

West had also been there when she snuck off in the night, leaving two year old William behind.

Matthew scraped his palms on his jeans like he wanted to lacerate the skin. The only thing that gave an outward appearance of the agitation he was feeling was the faint tic of a muscle beneath where one of his dimples usually resided. He needed to tell this story to someone and if he was truthful, this was exactly why he’d come here.

“Six months ago, I was feeling a little bit listless.” He stopped and blew out a breath.

“Aw, hell, I’ve been listless ever since William set his mind on that damn boarding school of his.” He looked at West with wide-eyed horror. “I have no life outside that boy.”

West laughed, and then sobered. Matthew thought he’d remembered his own baby girl and realized that maybe it wasn’t quite so funny, after all.

“Okay, but tell me about this woman. Is she somebody from D.C.?”

Matthew picked some straw off one of West’s fallen arrows. “No. Georgia, I think.”

West shook his head. “Okay, I think maybe you’d better start at the beginning.”

Matthew slid back into the truck bed until his back rested against the cab. West followed. “I suppose you’re right.” He stopped and pointed an accusing finger at him. “But don’t you dare laugh at me. I stood beside you through the whole Frannie thing.”

“I won’t laugh.”

Placated temporarily, Matthew went back to staring at his legs, slowly beginning to tell a story he wasn’t proud of. “I was feeling listless, like I said, so I took a road trip. Wasn’t sure where I was headed, but I didn’t want any company other than my own self-pity, I knew that much. That’s why I didn’t come here. I kept on going south until I hit this little bitty town, I think somewhere in Georgia.”

He let out another breath, settling in to his story.

“I met this girl, first at a truck stop.” He looked at West. “She was working there, cute little brunette, but *young*. Way too young for my tastes.” His eyes went back to his pant legs and that bit of straw he was twisting.

“She was sweet, and I could tell she liked me, but I wasn’t looking for company, not even for the night. So I paid my bill and let it go. Later that night I was at what I think the locals called a honky-tonk...”

West burst out laughing. The evil look Matthew shot him should have been enough to silence him but apparently wasn’t. He held up a hand for mercy and slowly started catching his breath. Matthew was not amused.

“Oh man, I’m sorry.” A few more chuckles came out before he sobered. “But come on, seriously? Mr. Suit-and-Tie in a honky-tonk?”

“Yeah, yeah, real funny. But it was the only place around to get a drink, and I needed one pretty bad by then. That girl at the truck stop had me spellbound. I just couldn’t stop thinking about her. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like to hold her, to touch her, undress her and do things to her that are probably illegal in at least twelve states. It was either the honky-tonk, or the truck stop and then my motel room. I thought the honky-tonk the wiser choice at the time.”

West, who had completely sobered now, turned a bit towards Matthew and rested his elbow on his knee.

“Okay, so you were tying one on at the...” a mere twitch of his lips was all that gave away his amusement at the situation this time. “...honky-tonk. Go on.” He gestured with his hand for Matthew to continue. After a prolonged stare obviously intended to warn West’s humor away—which only seemed to have the opposite effect—he continued.

“After I’d had a few I, uh...” He bit the inside of his jaw, his eyes persistently on the floor of the truck bed. “...looked up to see her standing there.”

“Miss Truck Stop?” It sounded like a question, but West’s tone said it was a rhetorical one, so Matthew merely nodded.

“I was too far gone for good decision making, so I remember very little after that. I

remember dancing...”

He supposed you could call what they had done dancing, in loose terms. They were vertical, anyway.

The sound of smothered laughter rent the fall air. West got another evil grin shot his way, but by this time Matthew knew it was no use. Besides, if the shoe had been on the other foot, he’d be rolling on the ground by now.

“I woke up the next morning in my motel room, naked, with her in my arms.”

“What did you do?”

Matthew dropped his forehead into his palm. His voice laden with self-contempt, he replied, “I got dressed, snuck out and never looked back.”

They sat quietly for a while as the late fall afternoon turned to dusk. West packed up the rest of his arrows, looking back at the target that held none. In an apparent attempt to lighten the mood, he asked, “Do you think I should round up all the ones I shot?”

Matthew gave him a sad half-smile. “We’d be out here half the night.”

West climbed back up into the truck bed, rocking back on his haunches. “So what are you going to do now?”

Matthew shook his head. “I told her at one point I thought she was beautiful. Do you know what she said to me?”

West only shook his head.

“She said that she had unusual eyes, and that a lot of men had confused that for beauty.” He picked at the straw some more. “She was right about one thing, though. Those eyes...” He looked up at West. “Her eyes are the most peculiar shade of violet and she’s got the thickest black lashes surrounding them. All natural, no cosmetics, either. I see those eyes in my sleep, every single night.”

West settled back in beside him. “The way I see it, the decision’s already made. So I’ll give you the push you need. In the mood for a road trip?”

Matthew look up, his heart laced with guarded hope. “It’s nearly Thanksgiving. You miss another one, and Frannie’ll take that baby and leave you.”

“Frannie and Sarah aren’t going anywhere. Besides, we’ll be back long before dinner hits the table.”

One of Matthew’s famous crooked grins slid over his face. “But maybe not before you miss the hunting?”

West slid out the truck bed. “My Frannie’s a romantic.” Matthew slammed the tailgate into place and the men climbed in the truck. “And for some reason she’s got a soft spot for you.” The truck began bouncing along the rutted dirt road. “I’m sure she won’t mind one bit.”

* * * *

“Westly Dean Hollins, if you miss another Thanksgiving, I will never forgive you as long as I live!”

West took Frannie into his arms and kissed the side of her neck in the spot he knew disengaged her higher brain functions, but she wasn’t going to give in that easy.

“This is for Matthew. He may have found the woman he’s been looking for all his life. You wouldn’t want to deny him that, would you?” He pulled back, looking intently into her eyes.

“Knock off the puppy eyes, West. He’s waited six months to look for this girl.

What's another week going to matter?" She pulled away from him, making an attempt to fold the laundry she'd dumped on the bed earlier.

"Come on, sweetness. We'll be back on Wednesday night, Thursday morning at the latest. It's not that far of a drive."

Frannie swallowed her tears. She'd hoped the weepiness would abate after the baby was born, but Sarah was nearly five months old and it hadn't happened yet. She walked back toward West. "This holiday is important to me. It's the first one with Sarah, and the first one you'll spend with us as a family." She let him snuggle her back into his arms. "I love Matthew, I do. And I want him to be happy." She looked up into his eyes, her own shining with tears. "Is it terrible that I just don't want it at my own expense?"

He gently kissed her forehead. "Sweetheart, it won't be. That I promise you. I'll be back. Thanksgiving is almost a full week away, so we've got plenty of time."

"It's five days," Frannie argued. West knew she hated how pouty she sounded at times like this.

He brushed the hair from her eyes. "I love you, Frances Louise."

She sucked in air in a gasp. "You promised!"

"As did you, my love." He ran his index finger down her nose and she realized she had indeed used his full name only moments ago. The entire scene causing her to relax, she even laughed.

"I truly do want Matthew to be happy. I'm sorry I'm being so selfish."

"Sweetheart, with what we went through last year, you have a right to be a little prickly about this particular holiday. And you're right, it will be Sarah's first, but I promise I'll be back, even if I have to dump Matthew's butt and come back myself. Please say you're okay with it."

She rubbed the shooting pain away from her forehead, only to have West run his finger over it next, soothing it further. He placed a soft, slow kiss on her lips, which really wasn't fair, because he knew she couldn't think straight when he kissed her.

"All right. Go. Find Matthew's mystery woman." She held her finger at his nose. "But if you're not back here no later than eleven-thirty Thursday morning, I'll never forgive you, Westly Dean."

He laughed, pulling her tighter into a more passionate embrace. Soon he had maneuvered her to the bed and the last thing she heard him say before making love to the woman of his dreams was, "I love you ... Frances Louise."

* * * *

"Hand me those chips, would ya?"

Matthew looked behind him at the display. "The jalapeno ones?"

"Mmm-hmm."

He piled the bag of chips on top of the array of other snack foods that they'd purchased, along with their two sixty-four ounce sodas, while the clerk gave them the total.

Safely back in the truck, food safely tucked in the behind the seats, and the drinks—not fitting the cup holders—safely stowed between their legs, they hit the road again.

"Back on I81 South? Then straight on into Knoxville and on down to Georgia?"

Staring out the window, Matthew answered without thinking.

"I think."

What if he couldn't find her again? Worse, what was he going to do if he *did* find her again? *Fuck her senseless* was the first renegade thought that sprung to mind, but he ruthlessly shoved it aside, sadly not before his body took note and adequately started adjusting to the thought. He in turn adjusted in his seat.

"Rip open that bag of cookies, would you?"

Without questioning, he grabbed for the cream-stuffed cookies and handed the open package to West. They'd been friends for nearly twenty years and knew each other like brothers.

"We shoulda picked up Nick on the way," West yelled over the radio blaring Green Day. With him it was either Pavarotti or Metallica. Matthew's tastes ran more towards jazz, but he could tolerate just about anything. Shouting back over the stereo, he said, "He couldn't make it. He's in California doing that political thing for his family."

West visibly cringed. Matthew popped one of the cookies in his mouth.

"Don't tell me you don't have a new view of family since Frannie's gotten her hands on you."

"I suppose I do, but those stiff political luncheons his mom always gave still make me break out in hives just thinking about them."

Matthew laughed good and hard.

"Maybe that's because you were always causing trouble at them."

They drove on in shared silence for a while, enjoying the weather as it got warmer the further south they went.

"So when I turn off the highway, where then?"

Matthew was lost in thought and it took him a minute to re-formulate the question in his mind.

"Uh, I don't know exactly. It was a little middle-of-nowhere place, either just over the border into Georgia, or right before. But I'll know it when I see it."

West drove on in blind faith, but when the radio clicked off a little while later, Matthew knew his reprieve had ended. He blew out a breath and looked at West.

"You want to know, don't you?"

"Well, considering I suffered the wrath of my wife over this, I think I'm due."

Matthew lifted one side of his mouth into a lopsided grin. "Was she really that mad?"

West shot him a sideways glance with one brow raised. "She called me *Westly Dean*."

Matthew recoiled in mock horror. "Ouch. Bet that left a mark."

"Mm-hm, so you owe me." He laughed without much humor.

"There's not much to tell, not much I remember." Which wasn't at all true. He couldn't clearly remember everything about that night, but he remembered a lot of it, and he did remember everything that happened before he got drunk.

"Then tell what you do know, like her name."

Even the thought made him smile. "I gather it's not Shasta, but that's all I really know."

West was looking at him as if he were crazy, then turned his eyes back to the long road stretching out in front of them. Matthew got lost in his memories and before long was talking without even realizing it. "She had the cutest southern accent, you know?"

"Since we're heading south, I could have guessed that much."

West's dry tone barely registered on Matthew, who was too busy anticipating a possible reunion with the girl he hadn't been able to stop thinking about for months. A woman whose image filled his thoughts day and night and fueled erotic dreams every night since he'd met her. More, a woman he worried about. Wanted to protect and keep safe. The yearning was almost unbearable at times and he had no idea why it should be that way.

"I've been dating, you know."

West said nothing, so he continued.

"Computer dating."

Matthew watched West bite the side of his jaw so hard that it must have drawn blood. He gave his friend a pat on the shoulder.

"Thanks for not laughing."

"Mm-hmm."

Pain echoed in that sound. Matthew found himself wanting to laugh now. Instead, he went back to the subject at hand.

"It's hard, you know? I'm thirty-eight years old and I have a nearly grown son. I work all the time, mostly with other men, and I have absolutely no social life now that I don't have William around."

He sighed heavily.

"After I got back from Georgia, I was desperate to find... something, I don't know."

West was quiet for a while before asking, "So how's it working? The dating?"

Matthew's initial reaction was a heavy groan, but then he more realistically stated, "It's a good way to meet women as lonely as I am who want to have sex, but..." He couldn't bring himself to finish the statement. He wasn't exactly sure how he was going to finish it anyway—they aren't *her*?—possibly.

"But you're looking for more than a roll in the hay?"

Flashes of her raced across his mind.

I'm looking for her.

"I suppose so. It was fine when William was little, or even still at home, because I had all my attention focused on him anyway, but it's just so damn lonely now."

West glanced at Matthew, then back out at the road.

"Matthew, it seems to me that you've always been lonely."

"Oh, thanks. Thanks a lot, West."

Matthew turned back to the window.

"No, I mean even in college, you were always looking for *The One*. I remember one time you told me you wanted your heart to connect with someone's in a permanent lock, one you couldn't get away from no matter how hard you tried. Do you have any idea how jealous I was that you even believed it was possible? As long as I've known you, that's what you've been looking for."

The words rolled over Matthew like shrapnel, digging out hunks of his flesh along their way. West was right. He'd been like that since he was a kid. He'd had such a great example of unity from his parents and knew how lucky they felt to have one another. He wanted that. He hated himself for bringing William up without two loving parents as a foundation. Kate had never been his heart's mate. He knew it at the time; he was even more sure of it by the time she walked out. Even though he'd never really loved her, he never expected her to leave, either. He felt like the worst parent in the world for not

providing a mother for his son. It was just such a basic, simple thing, but he couldn't do it. "I don't think it exists."

"I have it with Frannie."

What was he supposed to say to that? He knew West and Frannie had it. He knew his parents had it. Why couldn't he have it? After another long, slow breath, he uttered almost without thought, "That night, when she was loving me... I felt like she gave me a piece of herself. I can't explain it better than that."

West looked out over the horizon. "I think you damn well explained it perfectly."

* * * *

"You sure this is it?"

Matthew sat in the truck staring at the diner. "Yeah, this is it."

They sat for another few minutes, and then West broke the silence. "Well, are we going in, or what?"

"I suppose."

He sat motionless, then blurted out, "It was just sex, a crazy sexual attraction, that's all." He tried very hard to force himself to believe that was true, because he wasn't sure what he'd do if he had to face the actual truth of it—that he'd left a piece of himself with her, as well.

"If it was just sex, why did you run?"

His head snapped in West's direction. "What?"

West shook his head and repeated, "If it was just sex, why didn't you stay the next morning and partake of it again in the sober light of day? Why'd you run away? I mean, the little lady seemed to have no objections to giving it away to a perfect stranger. I suppose..."

The truck door slammed hard, Matthew furiously paced a trail around the truck while pounding his fist into his palm. West got out of the truck and came up beside him.

"That's what I thought."

"I oughta hit you."

"Yeah."

"I *want* to hit you."

"Yeah."

West ducked as the fist tried to connect with his chin.

"Didn't say I'd let you, though. Now come on, let's go in and get your woman."

Matthew's rage dissipated instantly.

"She's not my woman."

Even as he said it, he saw her head pass by the window and everything else seemed to melt away. He remembered kissing her outside the bar. He remembered her warm soft body cuddling up next to him. Remembered that first brush of his fingers against her breasts, the first moment he tasted her, lying against her, skin to skin. He remembered loving her so deeply and so completely that it scared the hell out of him, and he knew that *that* was why he ran.

"She can't be more than twenty-five, twenty-eight maybe, but I think I'm pushing it at twenty-eight."

"And we're only going in to have some coffee." West put his arm around Matthew's shoulders and led him to the front door. "And give her the opportunity of throwing it in

your face.”

Matthew’s steps stopped dead, the bottom fell out of his stomach. West dragged him the last of the way. When they walked inside the diner one thing became very clear as both men stood cemented to the linoleum.

“Uh, Matthew.” Neither of them could take their eyes off the young woman. “Was she pregnant *before* you slept with her?”

Chapter Two

Six months ago

Matthew had never seen the like. It was loud and smoky, crowded to be sure, and lit solely by neon, as far as he could tell. He figured it made no difference; the alcohol would be the same as at any other bar. He pulled up a barstool. Then, appalled at the sticky grainy wood bar, he began pressing his fingertips to it and pulling them off.

“What’ll you have?”

Without looking away from his fingers, he said, “Whiskey, double, straight up.” The bartender started to walk away when a thought crossed Matthew’s mind. “Hey!” He looked back. “Top shelf, all right? And a wet rag, if you please.”

He’d said the last part under his breath, but not so low that the woman who’d come up beside him didn’t notice.

“Not from around here, huh?”

She was the exact definition of a buxom blonde. Matthew was hard pressed not to stare at her over-exposed chest. There was no doubt of her intentions. However, Matthew just wasn’t sure if he should play around for a bit or send her on her way immediately. On the one hand, he didn’t want some random woman. On the other, he’d been painfully aroused since the experience in the diner and could definitely use some release.

In the end, he bought her a drink.

He hadn’t wanted company when he walked in. He’d been lying on that lumpy motel mattress for an hour trying to sleep, but visions of thick-lashed violet eyes taunted him. He decided that if he could just drink enough to make the eyes a little bleary, his and hers, that would be good.

He wasn’t certain he’d ever even heard the term *honky-tonk* before, but now he gathered it meant “small crowded place with a sticky bar.” He noticed peripherally that there was a live band and he assumed what they were playing was country music, but he wasn’t sure he’d really ever heard any of that before, either.

The blonde was smiling at him as if he were a piece of cheese to her mouse. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been delighted by the young woman’s attentions, but lately he’d been feeling listless, and quite frankly—old.

After their third set of doubles, she talked him into switching to beer and moving to a table in the back. He knew if he planned to walk out of there on his own accord he’d better say no, but before he knew it, he was sequestered in the back. Daphne, or Chiffon, he couldn’t actually remember her name, but her tongue was lodged in his mouth, obviously roving for molars.

*

Sasha only went to the honky-tonk to borrow money from her brother, Johnny, who was the bartender. She wasn’t two steps in the door when she knew he was there, somewhere. The tingles skating across the surface of her skin couldn’t be for anything else. She took a deep breath and went straight for the bar, regardless. She wasn’t really supposed to be in there, but since they’d all grown up together and Billy at the door had always been soft on her, she was often let in.

“Bubba. Psst. Bubba!”

Johnny turned to her with a cool expression. “If you actually want my attention, why would you call me that?”

She waved a hand in the air in front of her face. “Oh, all right. Listen, I need some money.”

That phrase sobered him quickly. He motioned for her to follow him to the end of the bar. When she got there, they both leaned way over until they were practically nose to nose.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Pa just showed up at work today before I could put anything aside. He took it all and I have a couple of personal items I need to buy and I don't work again ‘til Friday.”

He looked at her so long, she thought he was going to refuse her, even though he never had before.

“All right.” He handed her fifteen dollars. “It’s been real busy for a Tuesday, so I don't suppose he’ll notice.” He closed her fist over the money. “But if he does, don't you come forward with the truth. You let me handle it, ya hear?”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I love you.”

“God, Shasta. We’re in public.”

“Sorry.”

She wasn’t really, though she told him so with her smile. He went back to work and she knew she should get the hell out of there and home before her pa got there, but she couldn’t resist the urge to look for *him*. Carefully, she followed the back wall, viewing the crowd as she went. Johnny had been right, the place was packed.

It was getting too late for games. Besides, if he *was* still here tonight, maybe he was sticking around for a few days. She headed back for the door, hoping not to get herself caught on top of everything else. Sadly, just before she hit the door, her peripheral vision caught him to the right and froze her in her tracks.

Disgust rolled in her stomach, as she watched him with a blonde in his lap, getting *very* friendly. She hadn’t thought of him as “just a guy”. Before that moment, she’d thought of him as a *man*. Foolishly, she’d thought of him as *her* man.

Sasha’s mother died when she was six years old, leaving her a pearl brooch, two older brothers, one younger one and her pa to take care of. Unfortunately she’d also left her with her feisty spirit which wouldn’t let her walk silently to the door now.

She slammed her palm down on the table, startling both her man and the blonde. It was Becky-Sue Baker, town slut. Even though it was unkind to think it, the truth was the truth.

“Becky-Sue, what are you doin’?”

With a sickeningly sweet smile she responded, “Why I’m helpin’ this here stranger to better know the community. What are you doin’ in here? You ain’t even legal.”

Sasha swallowed uncomfortably. After he’d told her earlier she was too young, she really didn’t want him to have any idea *how* young she was.

She eyed Becky-Sue with a feeling very close to hatred. She wasn’t jailbait, and she was *almost* legal, well sort of. She looked at him next. He was drunk off his ass!

Her eyes blinked furiously, trying to come to some decision to salvage this situation.

“Well, Becky-Sue, this here’s my cousin, Bobby ... and, uh...” She finished with

power. "And Pa sent me out here to get him." She tucked her arm under his and tried to lift him, but he was too heavy. "C'mon Bobby, let's go."

"Hey, Shasta."

Finally having gotten him part way to his feet, he seemed to notice her for the first time and actually had the temerity to nuzzle on her neck. Shocked, she nearly dropped him.

She smiled at Becky-Sue, who hadn't seemed to notice, then went back to tugging on "her cousin".

"He ain't doin' nothing, Shasta. Leave him be and I'll bring him home when I'm done with him."

The bleach-blonde's suggestive giggle made Sasha's determination all the stronger and she tugged hard, getting him to follow her.

"Pa said now. See ya, later."

Becky-Sue made a disgruntled sound, but Sasha caught her moving on to other targets, so thankfully she was able to focus on what she was doing.

Not that she had any idea, really.

She slipped her arms around him, trying not to notice how warm he was or how good he smelled. Eventually she got him outside, the cool spring air feeling great against her skin after being inside. He was humming badly off-key and seemed completely oblivious to her presence. She propped him against the side of the building and smiled at a group of guys heading in, trying to exude calm she didn't feel, since she knew most of them and knew it was only a matter of time before word got back and she was in trouble.

"Might as well live it up tonight then, since it's probably my last."

She shoved away the fear that tried to prick at her skin. What was done was done. She'd have to deal with her consequences, but right now this seemed more important.

"You smell like a meadow of wildflowers." He tucked his mouth up against her neck, tingles slid all over her skin and she had the most urgent need to giggle, but as much as she was enjoying it, she had to get him somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

"Do you have a car?"

"A bran' new truck."

He held up the keys in pride, and she snatched them from him. He somehow finagled himself away from the building and now she was pinned between it and him. The low timbre of his voice was startlingly sexy, even with the slurred words.

"You wanna shее my truck, gorgeous?"

She licked her lips convulsively.

"No, baby, I think you need to sleep it off."

Her words were meaningless, she'd love to see his truck; in fact she'd love to hop in it and drive off and never look back. He pressed his body tight against hers, she'd never felt so safe in her life, despite the facts. As he stared into her eyes, she felt all warm and gooey and moist in places she usually wasn't.

Without warning, he kissed her. It was hard at first, demanding and almost angry. His whole body smashed hers against the brick wall, and she felt the hard press of his erection against her, it made her want things she'd be better not to want, but she did want them. She wanted to touch him, explore his entire body with her eyes her hands and, god help her, even her mouth.

With a groan, he eased up. His lips became soft, pliant, his tongue searched for hers. Better judgment was waging war against her hormones. For once, she decided to let the hormones win.

He tasted of mint and beer. The wetness of his tongue, at first, was separate from her own, then they joined, becoming a new sensation, a new taste. Her knees weakened as the kiss became more intimate, more *theirs*. As if he'd never kissed anyone but her before this, especially not Becky-Sue Baker.

While her hands clutched desperately to the lapels of his jacket, his hands slid up her sides from her waist. She shivered. He moved along the bottom of her breast, then one thumb brushed over her nipple, bringing it instantly erect and sucking the air from her lungs. He groaned into her mouth, and she couldn't resist moaning in response.

No one had ever touched her like this. It was shocking, it was indecent, it caused a warm sensation to float throughout her entire body, it was ... *delightful*.

His mouth worked slow magic on her senses. He'd been hers from the moment he walked through the door, but now she knew it. Somehow, this proved it. His thumb brushed back and forth over her tender nipple, his mouth nuzzled the side of her neck until she couldn't think. She was lost to him, lost in him. She pressed herself against him, pushed herself harder against his shaft, wanting so much more than the circumstances allowed. This was the nicest dream she'd ever had, and she hoped to never come back to earth.

At some point she heard her name, was it him? She didn't think so, his mouth seemed too busy to be speaking. The lust infused fog in her brain started to clear and as he went back to her neck, she peered over his shoulder into the parking lot where Brandon Davis and Clive Jenkins were pulling into the parking lot, hootin' and hollerin' at her.

"This is very, *very* bad."

"Aw, no, sweetheart. This is incredible."

She braced her palms flat against his shoulders and pushed hard until he was standing upright.

"Okay, Romeo, we gotta go."

She pushed the buttons on his key remote until one of the trucks in the parking lot winked at her. She pushed him into the passenger seat and tucked his legs up inside, he seemed more sober somehow, certainly quieter.

"You stayin' at the motel?"

He rubbed his head. She felt sorry for him, it'd probably be a bitch in the morning. She waved a hand in front of his face. "Motel?"

"Yeah."

At least she had a direction now.

The drive was quiet, which gave her all the more time to contemplate just how much trouble she was in, but every time she looked at him, eyes closed, so peacefully sitting in the passenger seat, she simply didn't care.

Arriving at the motel she tried to placate him by acting *so* amused at his dangling the key in her face, rather than just handing it to her when she asked. Attempting to prop him against the motel wall, the cool night air was making the sweat she'd worked up maneuvering him feel cold against her skin. She'd gone out in jeans and a sleeveless button down shirt and her jacket was currently tied around her waist.

She once again perused the perimeter of the parking lot. She had to get him into his room without being seen by anyone else tonight.

Abruptly he held the key to his own face. The large plastic key chain, with the eleven mostly worn off, responded to his quick movement by hitting him in the nose.

"I didn't know anybody still had these old keys with the big plastic thing attached anymore."

She only smiled. He stared at it distractedly just long enough for her to grab it.

"Yeah well, we're kinda behind the times here in Jasper's Creek."

She put the old key in the lock and turned it, opening the door while attempting to keep him standing at the same time.

"It's blue."

"Uh-huh."

She got the door open and gravity seemed to do the rest, propelling him almost instantly to the bed. The aroma of stale, air conditioned, recycled, smoke-filled air hit her smack in the face. She hated that smell. Her older half-brother, Calvin, used to run the old motel and she'd spent many a summer day cleaning these old rooms, a disgusting job if ever there was one. As the tourist trade was not big in Jasper's Creek, the motel was mostly used for nefarious liaisons of all sorts. Most of which she would have been far more comfortable *not* cleaning up after.

"That's my favorite color."

His head fell back on the mattress. She stood, propping the door open by leaning on it. The pitiful sight before her was nearly too much to bear. He was flailing around like a tuna on land.

"Shashta, I can't get my jacket off."

She almost smiled. "Please don't call me that."

Stopping his efforts of removing the jacket, he lay back on the bed, propping himself on his elbows and looking at her curiously.

"I can't stop the sshhh part, but I'm trying."

She laughed.

"I meant Shasta, with or without the sshhh. Don't call me that."

He regarded her carefully for a while. She wondered if he was trying to tell if there really was more than one of her or not.

"What should I call you, then?"

Unable to resist the welcoming sight of him any longer, she looked around the parking lot and saw no one. She moved inside the room to help him with his jacket, allowing the door to close behind her. He seemed so relaxed and comfortable in her presence now. Probably the alcohol, she figured. Drunk as he was, he couldn't put up any pretense. Though he didn't seem like the suave, sophisticated man he had been earlier, she still had trouble keeping her breath steady around him. Above all else, he just seemed like someone she'd like to spend a long summer's day with.

"I don't care, just don't call me *that*."

She reached for the jacket sleeve and pulled, off-balancing him. The end result left him splayed flat on his back on the old floral bedspread looking up at her with a devilish crooked grin and two beautiful blue eyes.

"How 'bout I call you sssweetheart? You know that old sshhhong, uh, tune?"

He proceeded to sing, off-key, the very old song, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart".

She couldn't keep her smile at bay any longer. How could someone be so charming when they were so very drunk? By the time she'd wrestled his jacket off, he'd finished the chorus and surprisingly a verse. She wondered how he'd know a song like that and was hoping she didn't look too goofy smiling like a loon at being serenaded by a drunkard. She decided, even if he was drunk—and off key—it was nice to be serenaded.

Tucking long strands of hair behind her ear, she pulled off his boots. When she finished, she crawled up on the bed and leaned over him and was suddenly stilled by the connection of his eyes to hers. It seemed to last an eternity before he very clearly spoke.

“Or how about I just call you, *mine*?”

His breathless tone caused her to swallow hard and become very aware of the parts of her body that were pressed up against the parts of his, on a motel bed, no less. She needed to get out of there before her entire world came crashing down around her, but then, it wasn't much of a world to begin with.

Not knowing quite what came over her, she leaned closer to him. Brushed her hand through his hair, she pressed her lips softly against his. It only took a fraction of a moment for him to respond. His tongue ran the seam of her lips, which she opened, allowing his tongue to sweep in. Her breathy moan sounded something a lot more like a seductress than a naïve, sheltered girl from nowhere.

His hands tentatively came to rest on her hips. As the kiss deepened, he moved his hands until he cupped her ass and maneuvered her so she was straddling him and pressed very firmly against his shaft. The sensation left her breathless, and needy and wanting so much more than this.

His tongue pushed deeper into her mouth, so she grabbed it and sucked. It was a need out of control and she couldn't stop herself. His hands ran up her back, pushing her body even closer to his own. She felt heat, almost unbearable heat, searing her from the inside out.

She needed to stop. This was all going too fast and it was getting far too intense. As much as it killed her to do so, she broke off the kiss and pushed away from him.

“I, uh...”

He smiled, then dropped his head back on the bed.

“Don't be sorry just because you have more good judgment than I do.”

Standing to go, she plucked his jacket from the bed and made an attempt to place it carefully on the dresser, but it slid right back off. She gave a nervous little laugh then a quick smile as she picked it up again.

“I have to go.” Though everything inside her was screaming to stay. She picked up and placed the jacket back on the dresser, this time waiting a second to make sure it stayed. She tried not to think it, she really did, but she honestly couldn't imagine anything better than him calling her *mine*.

His.

As if she actually belonged to someone. It would be wonderful.

She stood frozen at the door. He was staring at her with lust-filled, knowing eyes. She couldn't breathe. Before she could change her mind, he came up off the bed and had her pinned against the door.

“*Mine.*”

This time he said it with a growl as his mouth came down against hers in a passionate lock, causing her senses to stir and her mind to fail. All she ever wanted was

him. Even if it was only for tonight.

* * * *

Sasha was standing behind the register. She'd just taken the band out of her hair and was running her finger through the long, stringy mess before rebinding it. It was when she looked up that her heart nearly stopped.

"Matti?"

Matthew looked as stunned as she felt.

"What did you call me?"

They continued staring. Finally the second man grinned at her and shoved Matthew with his shoulder and spoke. "We'll just go sit over there. Bring us a couple of menus, would you, please, miss?"

Sasha could feel her heart beating hard and fast.

What on earth am I going to do now?

As soon as she got control over her limbs again, she ran into the back.

It had been six months.

Six months.

Why is he here now?

Sasha pattered around the kitchen, trying to find anything to do to keep her busy. If her pa happened to walk by the diner and figure out who he was, she'd get another beating for sure. She couldn't speak with him, no matter how desperately she wanted to.

Besides, he had walked out on her.

She remembered waking, cold and alone, the following morning in his motel room. She'd decided the night before—after—that she couldn't go back home. Even if he wouldn't take her wherever he was going, she figured she could hitch a ride somewhere with him, but he'd been long gone already. As if nothing had happened, or at least what had happened hadn't meant a damn thing to him. She could feel tears welling the more she thought about it. If she didn't stop, she would cry—and that was totally unacceptable.

"You know, I could spill something on him. He'd have to come back this way to wash up, and no one would be the wiser. Ain't that busy out there right now, anyway." Verbena gave her a sad smile then added, "I was young once, myself. I remember how it feels."

Sasha returned the smile. "I can't. You know that." She went to washing out a grease pan. "Besides, it wouldn't make any difference now, anyway." The baby kicked her hard just then and she absently shushed it. If only she could ... but it was impossible.

She'd just have to wait it out. Hopefully, it wouldn't get too busy and she could simply avoid him. Hopefully they'd eat their food and leave. Hopefully he'd get the message and take his friend and go back wherever they came from. Sadly, she hadn't put much stock in hope lately.

Her hand flew over her mouth. What if he'd told his friend about how easy she was, and they'd come back to...

She turned from the dishwater. No, that was too horrible to even think. No matter how it had ended, she remembered every beautiful minute of it. She remembered lying in his arms, how tightly they wrapped around her, as if he was afraid she'd leave.

She laughed. There had to be irony in that.

"Order up!"

Louie's voice made her jump. She ran to get the food and take it to her table. She just wouldn't look at him, she couldn't.

*

"Oh, *that* was smooth. You're a real Casanova there." West shoved Matthew in the booth and took the other side. Then asked in a whisper, "Is that your baby?"

It wasn't crowded, Matthew wasn't sure why he was whispering, but then, he wasn't sure about anything right at the moment. He sat staring at nothing.

"I don't know."

West tried to look casual about the whole thing, but Matthew knew him too well to buy the façade. This simple expedition had just blown up in their faces, big time.

"What do you mean you don't know? Did you use protection or not?"

Again with the whispering, He closed his eyes, trying to block West out. This had to be a dream. It was very similar to the nightmare he'd been having for seventeen years, only it was usually Kate in that one.

The shock was slowly wearing off, but try as he might to remember that night, it was of little use. There were a lot of things that he remembered vividly, but whether they'd used birth control or not wasn't one of them. He ran a hand over his face and slumped in the booth.

"I don't know. I was drunk."

At first he thought he'd never felt like this before, but then he remembered he'd felt very much like this once before. And as much as he loved William, the last time had been a nightmare and at least he'd known the woman involved that time.

After another minute of thinking about it he looked back at West, lowering his own voice into that whisper.

"I always use condoms. I've never slipped up on that one, not after Kate."

An older lady brought the menus. West smiled at her and waited for her to get far enough away before continuing the conversation.

"I never slipped either, until the first time with Frannie."

He continued to stare, but it made no difference, he couldn't remember and he had no answer. West opened his menu, knocking Matthew's closer to him as he did.

"Go on, at least make it look like we might have come here to eat."

Matthew did as he was told, but the words swam in front of him. When the other waitress came to take their order, he not-so-discreetly looked around for "his" waitress.

"She asked me to take the table. Sorry."

She didn't sound sorry. She took a pen from behind her ear and opened her order book.

"You ready?"

"I'll have a couple of cheeseburgers, an order of onion rings..." West looked back at his menu for a minute. "...Oh good, you have ice cream. Darlin' could you make me a Mountain Dew float?"

"I suppose I could." She didn't seem overjoyed about the idea. West looked back at the menu for another minute. "And a grilled cheese sandwich." He handed the woman his menu. "Oh, and can you have 'em throw some bacon on that and serve it up with a side of ranch?"

He smiled at her as if there was nothing in the world wrong. Meanwhile Matthew sat there next to him, looking shell-shocked.

The waitress turned a rather inhumane look on Matthew.

“What about you?”

He slowly looked at her. “She won’t see me?”

She only stared for a minute as if deciding whether to answer or not.

“Can’t is more like it. You don’t know her pa. What do you want?”

Matthew glanced at his menu, then handed it back without risking the wrath in the woman’s gray eyes again.

“Chicken sandwich, no mayo, no fries.”

“All right.” She took the menus and let out a heavy sigh. “You’ve already done enough damage. Eat your food and be on your way.” Matthew’s eyes met hers as she added with emphasis, “Leave it be.”

She walked away without another word. Matthew felt like he’d been slammed head on, by a semi.

West’s smile held until the waitress was out of ear shot, then it fell as he leaned across the table. “You’re in some kind of trouble here. What do you want to do? We can get up and leave, never look back, or, I’ll distract Trixie there, while you talk with the little mama.”

Matthew heaved a disgusted breath. The disgust was really directed towards himself, West just made a handy target.

“Their names are Verbena and Shasa. At least, I think.” He started to rub his head. “I have to talk to her, you know that.”

West sat back as if he’d expected exactly that.

“Yeah, but I’m a man of options, I thought I’d give you one.”

The bell over the door rang, welcoming more customers into the establishment.

“Lordi, Shasta. You still here?”

“I’m workin’ another double. Sit down, Mike, I’ll bring you some decaf.”

“I’d be mighty grateful for that, sweetheart.”

Matthew looked at West. “She’s working double shifts? On her feet all day when she’s gotta be six...” he rolled his eyes heavenward. “—or hopefully, *seven* months pregnant?”

Verbena came back with West’s float, plopped it on the table, dumped a straw beside it and walked away. West tapped the straw on the table, opening it.

“They’re friendly here.”

His eyes held Matthew’s, his facetious smile telling more than his words had as he placed his straw in the glass. He didn’t care about anyone else being friendly. How was it possible for a person’s entire world to blow to fucking pieces in the space of a heartbeat?

*

West was amazed by the tiny size Matthew could shred a napkin into. He was working on his third while rambling about all the reasons the baby couldn’t possibly be his. West also figured this was a conversation that required little input from him. Occasional grunts or yeahs should be plenty, so he did what he did best, he observed.

He watched Shasta as she went from the kitchen to the dining room. As she rung up checks and took orders. One thing was certain, the girl was jumpy as a flea and she was dead beat. At one point he was sure she had nearly fainted. The whole situation was bad, and regardless of what his friend had deluded himself into thinking, there wasn’t any way that girl was anywhere near twenty-eight.

“I mean, right?”

Matthew looked expectantly at West, he smiled and nodded, hoping that was the correct answer.

“It’s probably not mine anyway.”

“Right.”

Matthew’s long sigh signaled the end of his tirade. He looked at his watch.

“What time do you figure she gets off?”

West was keeping one eye on the girl and one ear on Matthew.

“I don’t know, but I hope it’s soon.”

*

Matthew was afraid to look. He knew his need-to-protect impulses. They’d take over, no doubt. He’d probably do something ludicrous like sweep her off feet and carry her out of this place. He dropped his head into his hands just as their lunch was delivered.

He watched with detachment as the mountain of food was placed on the table. Then he watched West stick a fry in his mouth that had come on Matthew’s plate regardless that he’d asked specifically that there be none, but since he wasn’t eating anything anyway, what did it matter?

“I can’t just accost her while she’s working. It’s not like she doesn’t know I’m here. I’m sure when she’s finished, she’ll come over.”

West chomped another fry. “And you’re basing that on how warm and friendly she’s been so far?”

Matthew felt like his insides had been run over with a weed eater. How could he have done this to her? It wasn’t his baby. It simply couldn’t be. As much as he hated to admit it, she had fallen into his bed without even knowing him. He had no way of telling how many men she’d been with. If her birth control failed, she probably wasn’t sure who the father was. That only made him feel sorry for her and want to help. He gave himself a mental slap.

You cannot help this girl.

A half hour later, West was still munching and Matthew was about ready to jump through the ceiling at the slightest provocation.

“I can’t have another kid, West. I can’t.” He started shredding a paper napkin, watching his hands as they worked. West only groaned. “William’s seventeen and I’m nearly forty. I’m too old for more children. When he was younger, I always hoped to have more. Preferably with a woman who would stick around this time. But it’s too much too late for any of that now.”

West’s blank stare screamed all the words of accusation that were already ringing around in his head.

“God, what have I done?”

West patted him on the shoulder. “I only hope it was worth it.”

Matthew remembered holding her tightly in his arms. Remembered her skin, her hesitant touch, her sweet laughter and erotic moans. He remembered calling her *mine*. He remembered feeling that she was his. He looked up at West.

“When I woke up, before I freaked out, I had her in my arms. I mean really in my arms. Our legs were wrapped around one another, my arms were wrapped so tightly around her, like I’d found something precious and didn’t want to lose it.” He went back to shredding the napkins. “Yeah, it was worth it.”

* * * *

"I'm getting soda-logged, Matthew." West checked his watch. "We've been here two hours. She hasn't come over once. If you want my opinion, she's hiding in the back, and you're hiding out here. Are you going to go to her or what?"

Matthew drew greasy air into his lungs a little too fast and began to choke. He held up a hand to West, signaling he was all right. West looked thrilled to know it, his deadpan expression not changing in the slightest.

"I've gotta be back by Thanksgiving. Either go and talk to her now, or let's just call it a day and head back."

Even the thought sent a sliver of sheer panic racing up his spine towards his heart.

Mine.

The word just kept coming back to him, over and over again. He kept pushing it away, resolutely. He looked over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of her heading back into the kitchen. Just before she completely disappeared, she looked at him, catching his gaze and holding it for almost a full minute before running through the kitchen doors.

"Look, you had sex with her and walked out. She's hurt, unsure of why you're here now six months later, and probably scared to death, seeing as she's about to become a mom. Just go over there and talk to her for a few minutes."

Matthew's gaze had been frozen in place watching the kitchen doors, now he turned it back to West. "You're right." He stood, determined.

"I usually am, but don't ask Frannie to back me up on that. I like to let her think she's usually right."

Matthew barely heard him, his mind was already behind those kitchen doors. He covertly checked for Verbena, but she had her back to him while taking an order. This was his chance, and he was taking it. He slid behind the kitchen doors to find her leaning against the kitchen wall with her eyes closed. He felt a wave of memory wash over him. How she smelled, how she felt, how she tasted. His heart knew things that his mind refused to let it communicate to him clearly, but he could feel it again now being this close to her.

Mine.

"Shasta?"

He knew she didn't like to be called that, but what else was he supposed to call her?

Her eyes flew open and for a split second he saw something warm and tender floating in them, but it was replaced so quickly by what could only be described as fear, a normal man would have questioned whether the first thing he saw had been real or not.

"What are you doin' back here?"

She came towards him with her arms extended. Foolishly, he thought she might hug him, his heart began to race, but she only made an attempt to push him back through the doors. He sidestepped her.

"You can't stay back here. It's against policy."

"Is that the only reason? Because I'll gladly go back to my table, if you'll just tell me when you're off and where I can meet you to talk." He saw the answer in her eyes immediately. He'd never known a woman so easy to read. Kate sure the hell hadn't been.

"I can't talk with you. Not now, not ever. Now just go."

"Why not? Is it because you're mad? Because baby, I comp..."

"Don't call me that." Her words were low and very, very serious.

“You don't seem to want me to call you anything.”

She took a step away from him, rigidly crossing her arms over her chest. “Right, because I don't want to talk with you again, ever. Now go!”

He came closer, but she backed away. “Are you afraid of me? Did I hurt you that night somehow?”

“No.” Almost under her breath she added, “You were perfect.”

He took another step towards her until he could push back a strand of hair that had fallen from her band. His other hand came up to cup her elbow as he closed the rest of the distance between them. “Then why do you want me to go?”

She looked at him with eyes quickly filling with tears, but not one fell, not even a sniffle. “Because what I did that night was wrong, and all hell broke loose on me for it.” She glanced over his shoulder into the dining room. “And if anybody catches me even talkin’ to you, I’ll be dead meat. Now *please* go.”

He didn’t go—couldn’t. Instead he brushed his fingers over her cheek, ran them back around her neck, and pulled her to him for the softest, sweetest kiss of his life. She went willingly and melted against him, sending shock waves of memory crashing down upon him. Flashes of her beautiful body under his, of her breasts and hips and thighs. Her tongue wasn’t shy that night like it was now; it had boldly caressed him, sending him to heaven.

He remembered the lust, the need to possess her, but he also remembered the tenderness of just holding her. He remembered being scared to death of everything he was feeling. All in all, he remembered so much more than he wanted to about that night. So much of it didn’t make any sense, mostly about how he felt connected to this woman now and had every day from the second their eyes first met. The eyes that now haunted his dreams and called to him endlessly.

He lost himself in the kiss, and the memories.

Chapter Three

Six months ago

"I can't stay with you."

Sasha painfully pulled herself out of his arms and sat up on the bed. She'd let feelings take over her ordinarily very-controlled self. She pushed the hair back from her face. Checking to see that all important articles of clothing were in place, she scooted to the end of the bed and already wished she had never left the safety of his arms. It hit her hard then, that was exactly how she'd felt—safe.

"Please, don't go."

She turned her head to look at him over her shoulder while she struggled to refasten her bra without removing her shirt. Relieved she'd had the sense to stop things before they went way too far, and at the same time even now she felt the tingles and butterflies his touch ignited and couldn't exactly be sorry about it. He reached up and brushed her cheek. It made her blush, made her ache, made her *want*. "I have to. I'm probably dead already."

She felt like a teenager out on a school night, being felt up, which was completely ridiculous. She was an adult who'd never misbehaved in her entire life and he was the best thing to ever come her way. She should be able to do whatever she pleased. She should be able to lie on that bed and let him explore her body, show her passion like she'd dreamed of all her life.

She wanted him to make love to her, mark her as his, just the way his words, "How about I just call you mine," had marked her. She'd always be his and she truly began to wonder if whatever waited for her at home was truly bad enough to miss out on the one thing she'd never had and always wanted. In all honesty, this could very likely be her only chance to experience it.

The longing she felt was pure torture and it only got worse when he reached out, circling her neck and pulling her mouth back to his. Then he stopped just as their lips barely touched and whispered, "How old are you, anyway?"

Her mouth dropped open. She was busily hoping to avoid answering, when he closed his eyes and held up his hand. "Never mind, I probably don't want to know anyway."

He kissed her, his tongue exploring slowly. She moaned and lay back on the bed, while his hand slid under her shirt and rested on her stomach. Abruptly he stopped, and his powder blue gaze met her violet one.

"I'm not going to jail for this though, am I?"

It was enough of a reality check to bring back her common sense. She pushed away from him and slid off the bed. He rubbed his head, closing his eyes. She grabbed for her jacket. "No. Besides, we really didn't do anything anyway."

He open his eyes catching hers again. It took her breath away.

"No, I guess not." She heard definite regret in that voice. Was it because of what they'd done, or because of what they wouldn't be doing? She didn't allow herself long to ruminate on that thought. She took in his appearance again. He looked more than a little rough around the edges.

“You really drank a lot tonight, huh?”

The regret shone in his eyes now. “I can’t actually remember.”

She looked at him for another minute. “Do you want me to get you some coffee before I go?”

His crooked grin showed up again, making her knees go weak as was seemingly her habit now. “Wouldn’t you have to go, to get the coffee?”

“Yeah, but I’d come right back.”

He stood up and walked over to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “You promise?”

His lips were on hers again, disallowing any answer or coherent thought.

How does he do that?

Every guy for twenty-eight miles—she knew because that’s how far they were to the next town—had been trying to get into her pants since eighth grade. He was the only one to ever come close and if she didn’t get out of there right away, he’d undoubtedly come a lot closer real quick.

She pulled back. “Did you want that coffee?”

He gouged his eye with the heel of his hand. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.” As she watched, he seemed to give up the fight of staying erect and sank back onto the bed. “And maybe some pain killer? There’s at least a twenty in my jacket and I think you still have my keys.”

He was an interesting drunk. She’d never seen anyone fight so hard against the effects of the alcohol they’d apparently willingly poured down their throat only a few hours before. She casually glanced at her watch. She was in *so* much trouble.

“Got a curfew?”

“No!” Yet internally she screamed, *Yes!*

And it was nearly two hours ago.

“I’ll be right back.” She grabbed for his jacket, noticing that it smelled like him, and she had to fight against the urge to pull it to her nose and inhale deeply. She stuffed one of the two twenties she found in her pocket, put the other back and headed for the door.

“I am sorry, you know.”

Curiosity caused her to turn back. Leaning against the door, her hand twisting the knob behind her, she took him in resting on the bed she’d just been rolling around in with him. “For what?”

His head was resting against the fake wooden headboard and, his eyes closed. He didn’t open them to answer her. “Wasting my time getting drunk in the first place to try and not.”

She looked at him for a second with raised brows. Now her head was beginning to hurt.

“Spend time with you, I mean.” His eyes were still closed, hers narrowed as she attempted to unravel that. She cocked her head at him thinking she was finally catching on.

“You got drunk because you didn’t want to see me?” She wasn’t sure how to take that.

He slid down the bed, fluffing the pillow beneath his head. Unable to help herself, she moved forward and tucked the blanket around him. He grabbed her wrist, pulling her face within an inch of his. His eyes were open now.

“No. I *wanted* to see you. Too much. *That’s* why I got drunk.”

She softly blinked at him. That was probably the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her. Tenderly kissing his lips before whispering, “Thank you,” then heading once more for the door, this time with a lump in her throat and serious questions about her mental stability.

Faint sounds of snoring welcomed Sasha back into the dark room. She smiled. He’d sleep it off and probably not remember any of it in the morning. Placing his keys and change, along with the coffee and Tylenol, on the night stand, she felt a deep sadness at leaving it this way. What if he left in the morning and she never saw him again? In many ways, tonight had been the best night of her entire life. She wished she could at least say good-bye.

When she kissed his forehead gently, he stirred. Pale blue eyes stared up into hers, saying so much that she couldn’t read it all. She wished she had a lifetime to learn. He spoke to her, his voice’s sexy timbre edged with sleepiness.

“Stay with me.”

Forever. She thought it, but said instead, “I can’t. I have to get home.” *And face my punishment.* She pulled away from him, only to have him capture her arm in his hand, her lips with his. She’d never kissed the same person as much as she had him tonight. His kisses weren’t like any she’d ever had either. They were soft, warm, and whiskey-scented. The thought made her want to smile.

If his tongue hadn’t been preventing it, she would have.

She pulled back.

“I have to go.”

She stood, not actually leaving, but looked at him, wishing there was some way she could stay. “Your coffee.” Pulling one of the large cups from the holder, she handed it to him, self-consciously tucking hair behind her ear as she did.

Sitting up, he reached for the cup, skimming her fingers softly. Their eyes met, both acknowledging the electricity from such an innocent touch.

“Aren’t you having any?” Before awaiting an answer he began gulping down half the cup.

Her face contorted into a grimace. “I can’t stand the stuff.”

His legs swung off the bed as he patted the spot beside him, smiling at her as if he knew something she didn’t. “Come sit by me.” She did so without thinking. “How are you getting back? We came here in my truck.”

Compulsively, she began licking her lips and tucking hair behind her ears that was already tucked there. She didn’t look at him, but instead studied the pattern on the threadbare rug.

“Oh, I uh, thought I’d uh, call a taxi.”

The town had one taxi, Eddie, and he was really more of a glorified designated driver, and if he picked her up at this hour from the motel, it’d be all over town within a half hour, so she’d probably walk, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. The man had caveman written all over him and she knew he’d never let her walk. She startled as he scooted over and laid back against the headboard, finishing the coffee and tossing the cup when he did.

“Lay down beside me, just for a little bit.”

She saw the regret in his eyes again.

“I have to leave in the morning. We won’t see each other again. I’m not going to take advantage of you, I think, for whatever reason, most of my wits are back and I just want to hold you for a while.”

Somehow inside that motel room all time and reason seemed to stop and she did exactly as he requested. She laid beside him. He pulled her tight against his hard muscular body. Lying quietly, the only sound in the room was their joined breathing and the whirl of the air conditioning. He kissed the top of her head, never loosening his hold on her. Sasha wished she could spend the rest of her life in that moment.

It wouldn’t go further than this, but lying in his arms was like finding gold in the hills—rare and precious and extremely valuable. She tried to memorize everything. His scent. The way his arms felt around her. The way his now-coffee-scented breath smoothed over her skin, moving some of her hair on its way.

She folded her hands around his arm, holding it, as if by her touch alone she could keep it wrapped around her permanently. She played with the light sprinkling of blond hair on it. Ran her fingers up, then back. He kissed her neck, tenderly, without passion this time. She snuggled deeper into his embrace. The quiet wasn’t awkward in the least—it was a comfortable entity shared by both. Eventually sleep came. First for her.

*

Matthew realized he wasn’t as drunk as he had been when she found him at the bar. Coffee, some sleep and a lot of sexual stimulation will do that for a man. He felt like a moron. He couldn’t even remember the last time he got drunk, but it was probably in college. He was a mature, business-owning, single father—who’d come so completely undone by a petite brunette, that he’d been driven to crazy behavior. He ran a hand up through his hair, then maneuvered both their bodies without disturbing her, but feeling an evident tug on his hormones as her body leaned more against him.

He could tell by her breathing that she was asleep. He hoped no one was missing her too badly, but selfishly he didn’t really care all that much. He briefly wondered about simply stealing her. What if he just took her home with him as he would groceries or something? Ridiculous, but still... He wanted her there, could picture her there. His Georgian-style townhouse was so empty without William. Pressing his nose into her hair, he felt his lungs fill with the wildflower scent of her shampoo.

Damn, she smells good!

It wouldn’t be empty with her there. His life wouldn’t be empty. The thing that was so overwhelming to him was that there wasn’t another person on the planet whom he felt that way about. He was picky about who came into his house, into his bed. In fact, there hadn’t been anyone. In all the time since Kate left, there’d never been another woman in his home.

It’s well past time.

And she was the perfect woman for the job. Everything about her spoke to him. He’d never felt anything like it before. It was as if he’d had other senses all along and they’d only been waiting for her to awaken them. He could smell her, *feel* her, sense her presence.

It was crazy.

I’m drunk. It’s just the alcohol.

He hadn’t come to this small town looking for a woman. In fact, he’d only been passing through in an attempt at some alone time. Something deep within him had been

restlessly calling to him lately until he simply couldn't take it anymore, so he got in the truck and just started driving. No destination in mind—he thought maybe Nick's or West's, but as he passed both and kept heading south, he just let fate roll his dice for him and he'd ended up here. Now he had an amazing woman—platonically—lying in his arms.

To the depths of his soul he wished it was more. He wished he'd made love to her half the night, and she was only sleeping for a bit to catch a second wind. He would wake her with lover's kisses and share an intimacy with her that few people would ever know. His hand ran over her bare shoulder. She had the smoothest skin he'd ever felt, but then, everything about her felt right. He held her tighter. "Mine," he whispered in her ear before falling asleep.

He woke several hours later with a searing heat piercing him to his core. His arms still wrapped around the brunette beauty as she slept in his arms. He kissed her temple, but he wouldn't do more than that. His head was still a little fuzzy, and he wasn't certain his best judgment would come into play if he needed it, but he couldn't let her go.

It was still dark outside, so he glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Four sixteen. He rolled her, still in his arms, onto her back, then ran his hand down the side of her face. A faint smile appeared in her sleep. She was everything, *his* everything if he cared to think it, which he didn't. How could he feel so strongly for someone he didn't even know?

It was as if knowledge of her had been written on him at a cellular level at the beginning of time and all his primal instincts had come into play at the very sight of her. He felt protective and fiercely jealous of the thought of anybody else touching her body. He ran his hand down her side until it came to rest on her hip. She turned slightly into him.

God help him, he undid the top button on her shirt. He brushed his fingers over her neck and collar bone. Her eyes drifted open and she smiled and breathed, "I don't even know your name."

He smiled back down at her. "Call me Matti."

He didn't know why he gave her that name. No one had called him that, probably since high school, but it felt right that she should use his first name as it was in all his memories of home and family. She belonged there somehow.

"Matti."

It was what his parent and childhood friends all called him, and hearing it come from her lips was right. She smiled again. He kissed her. Kissed her with such longing he thought he might ache forever once he stopped. Or maybe he simply wouldn't stop. He kissed her neck and shoulders. Sucked the soft skin between his lips, ran his tongue along, tasting her, loving it when she moaned before arching her head back, giving him better access. He drank his fill of her scent and then went back to her mouth. Her lips, her tongue meeting his, dancing with him as it was meant to be.

He brought his fingers back up and slowly undid another button. He swallowed as desire hit him hard. His cock ached from wanting inside her. He needed to feel her breast in his hand again like earlier, because this time he wanted a more clear memory of it.

He undid another button. It occurred to him he should give her the option of stopping him, but selfishly, he didn't want to. The thought that she might take him up on it scared the life out of him. Besides, she arched into him, her hands were running along the bare

skin of his back up under his T-shirt, and she was meeting his kisses with just as much passion as he was giving.

“I want to touch you again.”

She moaned and arched into him again, her entire body pressing against his. He reached up under her shirt and unfastened her plain white bra.

“Matti, I need you. I’m, I can’t ... I...”

He met her confused, lust-filled stare.

“Shhhh.” He brushed her hair back. “I know what you need, sweetheart. I’ll take care of you.” She closed her eyes, tilting her head back, pressing herself up against him until he almost couldn’t think. “Sweetheart, open your eyes.” He waited. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m still kinda foggy and, truth be told, honey, I want you more than I can stand. If I go too far, do anything you don’t want, kick me, hit me, bite me, whatever, just *don’t* let me hurt you.”

He brushed her hair back again. “Okay?” She nodded frantically. He took that for answer enough and ravished her with a kiss that seared his soul. His hands roamed over her skin back to the buttons on her shirt. He maneuvered the last of them open and, with her help, slipped it off her shoulders.

She sat up and he was caught in her violet stare as she slowly pulled her bra down her arms and off. She shivered as his gaze traveled over her half-naked body. Her dusky coral nipples were erect in the dim light. Unable to resist them any longer, he took one into his mouth. He hadn’t done that the last time, he hadn’t even unbuttoned her shirt the last time. It had been innocent, back seat of the movie theater feeling under the clothing, but this time, that wasn’t enough.

He suckled and she groaned in response. He was so hard he thought he might explode. “I want you. I want you more than anything.”

“Uh huh.”

Was she agreeing in the wanting or the taking? He wasn’t sure. He slid his hands down to the waistband of her jeans and unfastened them. He felt her hands attempting to do the same to him, but he stilled her. “We have all night.”

She swallowed hard. Tearing his gaze from hers, he slowly removed her shoes, her jeans, and then her white cotton panties, leaving her naked. She crossed her legs and her arms, but he stopped her. “You’re beautiful. Let me look at you.”

He pushed back her arms, then in the interest of fairness, he at least pulled his own shirt over his head. She was naked in the moonlight and she was glorious.

As she licked her lips, the vulnerability in her eyes made him want to grab her to his chest and protect her for life. He hated the thought that anyone might hurt her.

He watched his own hand as he ran it over her skin, from her shoulders, over her soft rounded breasts to the dark curls, her slim body, soft as velvet, she set him afire like he’d never felt in his life. It was amazing, wonderful, enticing, arousing and about a million other adjectives he couldn’t be bothered thinking of in that moment.

He sat back, yanked the clothes from his body, and went for a condom before lying back down beside her. He sat beside her, ran his hand down the length of her body again until he reached the juncture of her thighs. Dark curls hid her from his view, but he brushed past them and found her wet just as he’d hoped she would be. He settled himself between her thighs. The sight of her pink wet folds made him hungry to taste her. He spread her open for his view, running his finger between her folds, then pushed one

finger inside her.

She moaned and covered her mouth as he pushed in deeper.

She was tight, and wet, and warm, and if it was at all possible, he got even harder at the feel of her. He took his first taste, running his tongue the length of her, flicking her clit, then sucking gently. She raised off the bed, pressing her mound firmly against his mouth.

“I want you so bad. Do you want me, sweetheart?”

She only nodded her head furiously, her eyes already glazed over with passion. He went back to licking and sucking her pussy until she writhed and moaned and he knew she would come at any moment. He pushed his tongue inside her, used his thumb against her clit and she came hard, crying out in a low groan, that heated his blood to a fever pitch.

When her body relaxed, he slid up alongside her and lay down, instantly reclaiming her mouth. Her sweet intoxication was better than the best bourbon he’d ever had. He folded his hands with hers, pressed them into the mattress and eased himself atop her. As their bodies aligned, he slid his mouth over her skin, sucked her nipple back into his mouth and rolled it with his tongue.

“You’re so fucking sexy, I’ve never known a woman like you.”

She smiled shyly at him and he kissed her and fondled her until he couldn’t take anymore. Sitting up, he fitted himself with the condom and came back atop her, first taking a nipple in his mouth, then plunging deep within her. He almost lost himself right then. She was so damn tight she grabbed him hard. Sex had never felt this good. Maybe it was the alcohol, but even though his head was still somewhat fuzzy, he knew this was more than a great fuck with a great buzz. This was real, passionate, *incredible*.

Slowly he began a rhythm. At first she lay very still beneath him and he wondered if he’d made a huge mistake, if he’d taken advantage of her youth, her innocence. He stopped, pulled her gaze to his by gently caressing her face until she looked at him.

“Are you okay with this?”

“Yes, *please* don’t stop.” There was a desperate edge to her voice, at which he waffled, but she began to move with him, and slowly he went back to the rhythm they set. He ran his hands down her sides, then pulled her body close, bit her shoulder and fucked her wildly. She sheathed him like a glove, as if she’d been made only for him, only for this moment. He came down on top of her to kiss her neck and mouth again as the familiar spring began to tighten.

Neither spoke—they only loved. With their minds and bodies, their souls connecting in an eternal fashion that scared the hell out of him, but felt so completely right he couldn’t have stopped if the building collapsed.

This joining, this union, was different. He wasn’t sure how much of it his brain would remember in the morning, but his heart and soul would forever place her as his.

In the aftermath, he pulled her against him. Plucking the bedspread from the floor with his foot, he wrapped them in it. He wasn’t ever going to let this woman go. Not ever. He fell asleep thinking exactly that.

*

Sasha could tell he’d fallen asleep, yet his hold on her hadn’t loosened one bit. His arms wrapped around her in protective possession. She imagined some girls might have felt trapped, or fearful with such possessiveness, but Sasha only felt loved. Though she

knew it was crazy to even think it since she knew nothing about him. He could have a wife and eight kids two counties over, but she didn't think so. Something about him spoke to her from the moment he'd walked through the door.

She was his. She belonged to him.

Delicately she ran her hands over his bicep and shoulder. It was incredibly carved, rugged, hard and so very, very impressive. He was the type of man artists wanted to sculpt. She thought it would be an incredible treat simply to lie in bed with him all day, exploring and discovering every inch of him.

Her mouth watered at the thought of tasting him the way he had tasted her earlier. It had been wicked and wanton and gloriously decadent. She blushed as the memory rolled over her once more and shivered at the thought of putting him into her mouth. Definitely something she would have to try in the morning.

She really had no idea what the morning held, but tonight had forever changed her. Changed her in so many infinitesimal ways that ultimately she was more the person she was meant to be. More true, more real, more ... alive. She'd forever be grateful for that.

She maneuvered herself around a bit and touched his cheek. He was snoring slightly again. Something about that sound brought out her protective instincts. She wanted to take care of him, of his home, his children. Always make sure everything was all right for him. She reached down and pulled off the condom he'd worn, swallowing back panic at the sight of it.

Dizziness swamped her.

The condom was broken.

* * * *

Sasha lost herself in memories of the night he held her and loved her, lost in the memories until she was overwhelmed and could feel tears rising within her. She pushed the tears down and him away.

"I can't do this, Matti."

"Why do you call me that?"

She stared at him, thinking he'd completely lost his mind.

"You asked me to. Do you remember anything from the night we spent together?"

He rubbed a hand over his forehead then through his hair. "It's muddled."

"Well that's probably for the best. Now I want you to go. If you need something to remember, you can just think of me as the country bumpkin you fucked one night in a small town. Now *go*!"

She held the kitchen door open for him to walk through, but his feet weren't moving and she wasn't sure what else to do at this point.

*

Time seemed to stop. Matthew could hear the fryer, beef sizzling on the grill, Verbena hollering back orders, but they only stood there staring at one another. Panic was rapidly depleting his thoughts until all he was left with was the urge to pick her up and carry her off, kicking and screaming if she wanted, but he had to get her alone. Had to talk with her.

In a snap, he realized that even the baby didn't matter, not one bit. If it was his or not, he wanted her, he needed her. He'd raise her child as his own if she'd let him. He started to make an attempt at saying something along those lines when another man

walked through the kitchen door.

“This man givin’ you trouble, Shasta?”

Matthew took in the new addition to their group. He was tall and well built, maybe sixty, but then Matthew wasn’t good at figuring out people’s ages anyway. One thing he could do, though, was size up a threat. That was his business, his life’s work, and *this* guy was most definitely a threat.

“No, Jimmy, he’s not.”

Matthew caught the tremble in her voice and the possessive hand that slid around her shoulders and down her back and he didn’t like one bit. The man must have been old enough to be her father and the whole situation sent Matthew a horrible vibe. He couldn’t believe she would be with someone like that.

It was Matthew’s turn to receive the once-over. He watched as a wicked sneer curled up one side of Jimmy’s mouth.

“This the boy who knocked you up?”

“No.”

Matthew could feel her fear ratcheting higher, making him want to deck the guy and watch him sprawling around on the floor looking for his teeth.

“He ain’t, Jimmy, really. Just one of the customers, needed a knife and wandered back here.” She looked to Matthew, pleading with him with her eyes alone. “I’ll bring it to your table, right away.”

He stood still, taking in both her and Jimmy, deciding it best to go back to his table and hope she was serious about bringing him a knife. If nothing else, he could use it to slit his wrists when this was all over.

As Matthew moved past, he noticed Jimmy’s eyes never left him. He gave her a look that he hoped she could read, telling her he’d step in if she just gave him some kind of sign. He tried to question her with his eyes, but she wouldn’t look at him. She had her gaze firmly fixed on the floor.

“Go back to work, Shasta. I’ll wait to take you home.”

Matthew didn’t even like the quality of Jimmy’s voice. He certainly didn’t like the way that she—without even glancing at him—jumped to do as he said. Instead of returning to his table, Matthew took a seat up at the counter. Jimmy sat beside him, gnawing on a tooth pick.

“You ready to go?”

West’s appearance shouldn’t have come as such a surprise, but Matthew’s mind had been otherwise occupied. He watched West pull cash out of his wallet to pay the bill, but he saw that he had also noticed Jimmy and was checking him out as well.

Matthew shrewdly eyed Jimmy, while talking to West. “This is Jimmy, West. Apparently a friend of Shasta’s”

Jimmy sneered again. Matthew could almost see the horns protruding from the man’s skull. He didn’t like the guy one bit, even before he growled, “I ain’t no *friend*, boy. That girl’s my wife.”

Chapter Four

"If you miss Thanksgiving, Westly Dean, I'll..."

"Never forgive me. I know. Frances Louise." West smiled as he could almost see the shocked look on her face as she gasped on the other end of the phone.

"West!"

He couldn't believe how good it was to hear her voice. Like a soothing balm, he felt every frazzled nerve ending being healed. To say it had been a trying day would have been kind. He could only imagine how Matthew must be feeling right now. He moved further into the corner of the dingy motel room. He didn't think Matthew was listening, in fact he was only marginally sure the poor man was still breathing, but, all the same, he didn't want him to overhear this part of his conversation.

"I'll be home, but he's hurting bad right now and I can't just leave him."

He heard her long sigh come over the line. "I know that, and I really don't want you to, it's just..."

"Thanksgiving." He gave a small smile. "I know." God how he ached to hold her. It had only been two days but felt like a lifetime. "I'll be home. Trust me, sweetness." His voice was a caress he hoped she could feel through the phone lines. He looked over his shoulder at Matthew, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring into space. Those eyes had sent chills to his very core, when Jimmy announced his relationship to Shasta. In that moment, he'd hardly recognized Matthew.

All the years they'd been friends, he'd seen Matthew dealt several hard blows, but he'd never seen him fall apart like this—and in his opinion, the man had definitely fallen apart.

"Someone's not saying something. There's truth here to find, I just don't know what it is."

It was driving West mad. His gut told him all was not as it seemed, but he'd be damned if he knew how it really was.

"I'm glad you're there with him. Tell him I love him." Her voice caressed him right back. He sighed and leaned his forehead against the wall. "I love *you*."

If only he could reach through the line. He almost laughed at himself. The man Frannie had turned him into was still a stranger at times. He turned his head to look at Matthew again, *he* deserved someone like Frannie more than anyone he'd ever known. Certainly more than West himself had. He wanted this thing to work out for Matthew more than he'd realized. He wanted to see his friend happy like he'd been with Frannie for the past year. He'd never known such joy existed and he thought Matthew not only knew, but mourned its absence from his life. After disconnecting from Frannie, he made one more call. Then he went to sit beside his long-time friend, hoping to offer comfort, if nothing else.

"She hate me?" Matthew's gaze didn't move from the floor.

"She *loves* you, and told me to tell you so."

West joined Matthew in the study of the blue carpet. He had no idea what to say. Too many questions remained unanswered, in his opinion, to pack up and go home. But if that's what Matthew wanted, he could hardly put his own need for answers above that of

Matthew's need for distance. At least he'd been able to talk him into staying the night, and in the morning reinforcements would arrive. He merely needed to keep him distracted for twelve hours or so.

"You hungry? I'm starved."

Matthew's head slowly pivoted until his eyes met West's.

"After you ate half the diner?"

West shrugged and picked up the pizza menus from the bureau.

*

Matthew thought he might never eat again.

Married?

How was it possible? He had to wonder if that's why she'd been so determined to get home that night.

I can't stay with you.

It was obvious she was out when she shouldn't have been. At the time he'd passed it off for her still living at home with overprotective parents. He paced to the window. God, he'd been such a fool. Had she been married? His skin crawled at the thought of anybody else possessing that body.

Mine.

It was the thought that wouldn't leave him. She was his, every last inch of her, but he wanted her heart and soul, not just her body. He wanted a life with her. The thought brought him up so sharp that he nearly stopped breathing. In fact, he might have for a second or two. His heart probably even skipped a couple of beats. It was what he'd been afraid to admit for months and now there it was, the truth of it, the bottom line. And with it came memories. Memories of that night. He *had* been drunk, but not so drunk to block it all out, he'd done that of his own volition.

He pulled back the curtains enough to see into the empty parking lot as he remembered the cold chill capturing his heart. The fear that had torn him from the warmth of the bed, from her body, and forced him to flee.

Her age scared him, but the things he'd felt being with her literally terrified him to the depths of his soul. She'd touched him in places he hadn't known existed. She'd given herself to him, all of herself. He felt and tasted her even now as if she were in the room with him. In a way he supposed she was.

That night, he'd made her his, he'd put her mark on his soul and now she wouldn't leave him alone. It had been her calling to him somehow all those months, until he'd answered and come to find her. And it was still her calling to him until again he answered and came to find her. Only this time everything was different. Wrong, as if he'd wakened in an alternate time line.

Maybe you've just been watching too much Star Trek lately.

He ran his hand over his forehead, hoping to stop the pounding. He hated himself for leaving her that morning, but he hated himself even more for the deeply buried truth of why he did it. West had been right about him searching for his heart's mate all his life, so why had finding her scared him so much? He hadn't sensed that she'd already been taken by another? In fact if he had to bet on it, he'd say she hadn't been married the night he loved her.

His arms folded across his chest as he was sort of listening to West order enough pizza to feed the football team. He leaned against the window frame, gazing into the

blackness of the night, wondering where she was. Wondering if she was safe.

"Pizza'll be here in twenty." West checked his watch. "That's pretty fast. In Manhattan I was lucky to get anything delivered within two hours. In Chesterbrook, no one delivers, but I keep a couple of the high school kids on retainer."

Matthew laughed, a gesture that felt foreign now for some reason, but good. His big city friend had made himself at home in a small town. He shook his head and smiled, knowing how powerful love could be. It had brought him way out here to the boondocks on his crazy quest ... *twice*.

He scowled, realizing what a mess he'd gotten himself into and had no clue on how to fix it if she wouldn't even talk to him. He turned away from the window, noticing West had laid down on one of the beds and was eyeing him cautiously.

"So, you still want to leave in the morning?"

"Yes." He drew in a long breath and slowly released it. "No."

"Well, so long as you're sure." West folded his hands beneath his head. Matthew threw a pillow from the other bed at him before turning a chair around and straddling it. "How old do you think she is?"

"It's a big deal with you, isn't it?"

"I have a seventeen year old son, for God's sake. Besides the whole 'dirty old man' aspect, I can't picture myself married to one of his friends. They talk about *nothing* and find it fascinating."

West only smiled. "Well, she was in the bar, right?"

Matthew gave a quick nod.

"So she must be at least twenty-one." West sat up, crossing his legs in front of him. "But I don't see her age as being your biggest problem right now. She's married. She's pregnant. She looked half dead on her feet and timid as a mouse. How about we think of her first, and your feelings later?"

God, West was right. He gave a self derisive laugh and dropped his head onto his folded arms. "What a selfish bastard I can be."

West threw the pillow back, skimming Matthew's head before it plopped to the floor.

"Yeah, but a lovable one on most counts."

Matthew got back up and went to the window, looking into the parking lot again he thought they must be the only ones staying there tonight. His thoughts automatically drifted back to his last stay at the no-tell motel and why he hadn't just taken her with him? He knew the answer to the question and didn't think very much of himself for it.

"I really am a bastard."

He had to admit the truth, if only to himself, that the reason he freaked was because his heart's mate hadn't come in the package he'd been expecting. She was a young girl, who probably hadn't ever seen anything beyond the border of Jasper's Creek. She was beautiful, but she wasn't educated. She was sweet, but she wasn't sophisticated. Sex had been different with her, more soulful, deeper somehow ... but she had to be only a few years older than his own son.

He was a *sick*, selfish bastard.

The temperature in the room was stifling; he pulled at his shirt collar and turned up the air. If she had been already married that night, at least that meant the baby most likely wasn't his. That thought alone should have relieved him, but at this point he would have loved a reason to be tied to her. Something that gave him the right to demand she sit and

talk with him.

Suddenly coming to his senses, he grabbed for his cell. What had he been thinking? He had connections, he had tools at his disposal.

As he listened to the phone chime on the other end, an easy smile broke across his face. At the low timbre that answered he felt his confidence being restored.

“Chuck, I need a background check run. In fact, run a whole damn town for me.”

By the end of the conversation, he was feeling more like himself again, and in charge of his destiny.

* * * *

Sasha was dead beat. Trying not to breathe too deeply of the thick cigar smoke as it wafted into the kitchen, she rolled her shoulders before running the mop around the rest of the chipped gold linoleum. Another minute was spent rubbing at a shooting pain in her back, at least she was almost done. After another double at the diner, she'd come home to cook for Jimmy and his friends, now she was cleaning up after them and all she really wanted to do was sleep.

Sleep and never wake up.

He'd been there, his beautiful blond head had walked right in the diner as if nothing had ever happened between them. She leaned against the mop handle and re-thought that.

No, his eyes held everything that happened between us.

She shook her head out of the dreamy thoughts and went back to mopping. After all, he'd kissed her, and nothing had changed. Except her desperation—it had hit a new low.

She had to accept the fact that she was never going to wake up from this nightmare. Nothing was ever going to change. She wrung out the mop and dumped the water out the back door. He'd probably left town already. Maybe a little sorry that he hadn't gotten her into bed again—hopefully a lot sorry—but headed home anyway.

All those nights of dreaming about him charging in and rescuing her were ridiculous. She'd known that all along of course, but at least it gave her something to hang on to, *now* what did she have?

“Damn woman! All the beer's gone.”

Sasha jumped as she realized he was right behind her. She hadn't heard him come into the kitchen, hadn't heard the refrigerator door slam. Which she was sure it had when he'd discovered no more beer.

“I know. Y'all drank it tonight.”

She stood quietly, not breaking the stare. She had to keep whatever pride and spirit she still had or it would be the death of her. Eventually he reached for the keys from the peg board by the kitchen door.

“You best be here when I get back.”

She nodded. Where else was she going to be? He almost had the door closed before he leaned back in the house.

“And that couple's coming all the way here from Wichita tomorra. They're a good prospect for that brat of yours. Willing to pay big. I suggest you be nice to them.”

Slamming the door on his way out, Jimmy left her alone in the small kitchen covered in depressing dark wood paneling and fake wood cabinets. She heard the neighbor's dogs bark and Jimmy yelling at them to shut up. The truck door slammed, the engine roared and finally disappeared into the night.

She was alone.

It would only be for a short while, but she treasured every second that she wasn't being watched. She took a moment to sit down, since she'd have at least fifteen minutes before he came back. Her entire life was unraveling, although she'd never had much of one to begin with. She rubbed her swollen belly and came closer to tears than ever, but choked them back.

I will not cry.

She went through the house turning off lights and went upstairs to the junk room. It smelled like mildew as usual. The smell made her feel sick, but what she wanted was in here. After turning on the light, she pushed past boxes until she came to the back wall and sank to the floor. She removed the electrical plate from the wall and carefully reached in beside the outlet, pulling out a plastic blue key chain with a faded eleven written on it in white. She clutched it close to her heart.

It was all she would ever have. She had to accept that now. She shivered as she remembered his cold tone as he said, "Good night *Mrs.* Tolley."

He knows.

He knew she'd married Jimmy and was disgusted by her now. She wondered if he knew anything else. Wondered if he'd known all along. Wondered if he thought she'd been married the first time they met and if he assumed her baby was Jimmy's and not his.

She closed her eyes tight, her head falling back against the wood paneling. None of this wondering was doing her a bit of good. Jimmy would be back any time now and she—she forced a swallow past the sudden lump in her throat—would have to be ready for him.

She kissed the hunk of plastic that had become so precious to her and put it back into its hiding place before heading to the bedroom and another night of terrors. Matti wasn't going to save her now, she simply had to face it. The dream had ended tonight when he'd found out the truth about her. He wouldn't be back this time. She was on her own.

* * * *

West had his hands full as he came through the motel door, shoving it open with his shoulder. Matthew was on the phone, as he'd been almost constantly since last night. At least he was doing something. They'd driven four hours out and back to the nearest town for supplies last night and now their small motel room was beginning to resemble a mini command center.

"Coffee."

West held up the cup before placing it on the table and beginning to unpack the bag he'd brought in. By the time Matthew finished his call, West had breakfast all set up. Matthew took a long sip of the coffee before sitting down across from West who was feeling a little bewildered by their new surroundings.

"Why don't you just go and talk to her?"

"I tried, she didn't want to talk to me, and this..." he swept his arm across the bulletin board "...I know how to do."

West believed him. After college, West had gone to Manhattan to make his fortune, Matthew took his toddler and headed west, causing his parents many a sleepless night as he first became a stuntman, then a bodyguard to the Hollywood elite. Later, wanting to provide William with more security and family, he'd moved back to D.C. to open a

second branch of his flourishing security consulting firm.

It amused them all, the difference in the two branches. One covered celebrities to red carpet premieres, while the other covered dignitaries and politicians to thousand dollar a plate dinners. Matthew, however, loved the physical aspect of the work and considered it very rewarding on the whole. West gathered this was one of the few times he called in favors and used his business for his own purposes.

“She’s only been married two months. Was she there this morning?”

“I didn’t see her. It was Verbena and a new woman, Gretchen, I think. But neither were being overly friendly.”

“Two months!” Matthew slammed the table with his palm and got up, pacing his now worn path to the window. “It’s my baby.” He turned to face West. “I can *feel* it.”

The old take-charge Matthew definitely seemed to be back in full working order. West was glad, now he wouldn’t feel so guilty in leaving. He decided now was as good a time as any to bring up the touchy subject.

“What do you plan to do about Thanksgiving?”

Matthew came back to the table and swallowed a piece of bacon almost whole.

“I already called my mom and William. I told them it was work, figured I’d explain everything else later.”

West laughed. “Oh, I bet they loved that.”

“I leveled a little more with William, I told him it was personal. He figured if it was important enough for me to dump him on Thanksgiving, it must be big, said he’d hold a good thought.” He started on toast. “Then told me I could make up for it by sending him on a ski trip over New Year’s.”

West laughed even harder this time. “Oh man, he *is* growing up.”

*

Matthew finished his coffee and suddenly realized he was starving. His blood was pumping, his brain cells all seemed to be firing and he felt useful instead of terrified, as had been the case so much lately. Things might not work out in the end, but it wasn’t going to be because he wimped out and walked away like last time. He wouldn’t leave her again. His fist tightened into a ball against his thigh. Now if she’d only give him the chance to prove it.

He got up, moving to the stack of papers that had arrived early this morning, angry that the other package hadn’t arrived yet. He pulled out a picture of Sasha Green, winning an award for town beautification when she was eleven. He placed the photo in front of West.

“Why’d she change her name? She doesn’t like the new name, at least she didn’t whenever I tried to call her by it.”

At a knock on the door, West broke into a wide grin. “Reinforcements.”

Matthew looked confused, but only for a minute, until he recognized the face at the door. His heart lightened, if only for the moment. Breezing through the door, very Kennedy-like with his dark good looks and general air of family money, was his other best friend in all the world. The next minute he was locked in a bear hug with the man who’d just thrown a piece of luggage on the bed.

“Why are you here? I thought you had that political thing, and what about Thanksgiving?”

Nick took off his jacket and accepted West’s offer of coffee.

"I was, and Thanksgiving will get by without me. I'm not as necessary to my family as West is to his."

Matthew looked to West and finally it all clicked.

"I didn't want you to be alone, and I couldn't disappoint Frannie."

Matthew ran his fingers up over his head, through his curls. "You don't know how much you guys mean to me."

Nick grabbed for a bagel. "Sure we do; the same as you mean to us." Taking on a more serious tone, Nick looked Matthew in the eyes. "When Angie dumped me at the altar, who was there for me?"

Matthew chuckled. "Yeah, West talked you into taking your honeymoon cruise with us instead, and he met Frannie. I'm not sure that counts as *us* being there for *you*."

"I would have been beyond miserable for days, probably wouldn't have ever wanted to get out of bed again if it hadn't been for you two. And seriously, the Chilton gathering will be so large, very few will even notice I'm not there, and after the two weeks of hell they just put me through in California, I think I deserve the escape."

With all that settled, West and Matthew filled Nick in. It was decided that Nick would stay and West would go, but come back after the holidays were over, if they still needed him. Hopefully in a couple of days this whole thing would be straightened out and Matthew would be heading home, his woman and baby with him.

* * * *

"Sit anywhere you like, boys," the short, plump, dark-haired waitress called out to them as she walked by, arms full of dishes.

Matthew and Nick took a booth towards the back, where they could see the entire diner. Matthew hadn't seen Sasha yet.

Sasha.

He felt strange knowing her real name without her telling him, but he had a feeling he was going to have to find out a lot without her telling him.

"I'm Gloria." She placed two menus in front of them. "Can I get y'all some coffee?"

"Uh, yeah." Matthew casually glanced around while opening his menu. "Is Shasta working?"

The woman smiled at them. She apparently had no idea who they were, or if she did, she didn't seem to care.

"No, she has a the day off. I think it has to do with the adoption, but I'm not sure."

"Adoption?"

Matthew's heart stopped, his palms got sweaty and it took every bit of effort not to start pulling the place apart until he got answers.

"Yeah. You know about her baby, right? She's having to give her up."

"Her?" Nick questioned.

"Mm-hmmm. Jimmy said they'd get more from the adoption if they knew what sex it was up front. So he had me take her all the way to Atlanta for one of them fancy ultrasound thingies. It's a girl. I guess Jimmy just feels too old to start a new family at this point. Can't say as though I blame him, but then what'd he go an' marry such a young girl for? You know?" Her eyes grew distant. "Shame really, because I know how much Shasta loves that baby already." Her attention back to the two men, she added, "I'll just get your coffee."

Matthew and Nick sat stunned, staring at each other.

"Does that woman have any *idea* how much personal information she just gave out to total strangers?"

Matthew shook his head. "I don't think it even occurred to her." He held up one finger. "But that could be very useful."

Gloria came back with their coffee and Matthew and Nick both smiled guilelessly at her.

"So Gloria, we were wondering, about the adoption..." Matthew had a hard time even getting the word past his throat. "My wife and I have been having awful trouble conceiving, do you know what agency she's using?"

Gloria stared at the ceiling for a minute. "Can't say for certain, but I think it was just some friend of Jimmy's. You ready to order?"

"Ham and cheese, please. You have pumpernickel?"

"Nope, white or wheat. Though when Luther's feelin' generous, sometimes we get sourdough."

"But he's not feeling generous today?"

"Nope."

"Okay, I'll take wheat. When does Shasta work again?"

"Um, probably tomorra, but she'll want to spend the morning at the cemetery, so she's probably takin' the afternoon shift. If we weren't off the highway like this, Luther'd close us down on holidays, but he makes too much money from the truckers. What about you?" She pointed a finger at Nick, who looked at her with blank eyes.

"Me?"

"Your order, what do you want?"

He shook his head as if coming out of a trance, then stared at the menu as if seeing it for the first time.

"Ah, let's see... How about a BLT, white, toasted if you please. Do you do baked potatoes here?"

"Nope, fried or mashed, that's it."

"Okay, mashed sounds good. I'll have those. No gravy."

She picked up their menus and turned to leave when Matthew called after her. "Uh, one more question. Why does she go to the cemetery?"

"Her mom, of course. She always visits her whenever she can, but holidays she puts her foot down and goes. Food'll be up in just a jif."

She gave them a big smile and turned away. Nick and Matthew stared at each other, a multitude of feelings between them, but at least Matthew now knew where he'd be first thing in the morning. That much was certain.

Chapter Five

The morning air chilled Sasha as she glided through the graveyard towards the one spot on earth she ever felt peace. The cemetery was an old one, originally dating to before the civil war. It had been a private burial spot, but eventually the property was sold and it became a public cemetery. Most people would find it strange that she liked the old place so much, but she always felt safe, watched over and loved here. She liked visiting many of the graves, especially ones she knew no one else went to. But today was just for her mother.

All the way to the right, there it was.

Lillian Foster Green.

Sasha ran her hand over the small cement marker that she and Johnny saved for years to afford. Her mother's resting place. She sank to the wet earth beside it. She always imagined it that way, as her mother's resting place. She knew better than any how badly her mother had longed for rest. There were days when Sasha couldn't wait to join her.

Not many people ever came through here though, and it wasn't maintained very well. Sasha often felt she was the only person left on the planet as she sat behind the iron gates. If she could, she'd sit here day and night and never leave. She pulled some weeds from around her mother's plot and rested the wildflowers she'd picked on her way in across the top.

"I wish I could do better for you, Mama."

Crossing her legs, she got comfortable in her usual spot. She had hours to go before she had to be at work. She couldn't believe her luck. Jimmy had gotten so drunk last night, he was still passed out this morning so she hadn't had to fix him breakfast, clean up after him or even see him. She wished he'd get drunk every night.

"Sasha."

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of her real name, but her heart instantly recognized the voice. Momentarily bewildered, she couldn't understand why he was here, how he knew where to find her. Standing, she turned to face him as he came out of the fog by the ancient shade tree that she had liked to climb when she was younger.

Like a knight or a prince straight out of her fantasies, he approached her as she struggled to keep her feet on the ground and her heart barricaded. This place of all the places on earth was the only one where she felt safe, so she knew it would be way too easy to let her guard down here. That risk she couldn't afford to take.

"What are you doing here?"

Moving slowly, carefully but deliberately, the way one does when approaching a scared or wounded animal, he continued to close the distance between them. Her heart beat faster. She wanted him to wrap his arms around her. No one would know, not here. Here she was invisible and could act on all the feelings she'd been pushing aside since he reappeared in her life. Then again, that's what she had done the first time and look at the trouble it caused for her long term.

"I wanted to talk. I thought we had some things to sort out that we obviously weren't getting done at the diner the other day."

Turning her back to him, Sasha looked down at her mother's grave. Matti was

probably the only person in the world she didn't mind being there. It seemed right to share this place, *her* place, with him. Still, she needed to hold her ground, that was the only road to safety—for all of them.

"I can't talk to you."

He put both hands on her forearms and pulled her back against him. She knew she should have resisted him, but he felt so good, so right, warm ... perfect. She let herself rest against him, awash in his warmth and his scent. She felt herself losing some ground on her defenses.

"Why not?"

His voice was so deceptively soothing that she felt she could disappear inside him. That he'd take care of her and the baby, she'd never have to worry again.

She stiffened.

That wasn't the case. She wouldn't trust him, not ever. She stood away from him but simply could not face him.

"I'm trying to spend some time alone."

She wondered if he wanted to pull her back into his arms half as much as she wanted him to go there.

"I know. If there's a better place..."

"There's no place!" She turned and vented some of the anger she always held deep within her. "I can't be seen with you. Not ever. Don't you understand that?"

He held his hands up as if to surrender. Emotions warred within her, emotions that kept sending her mixed signals, "run into his arms", "don't trust him", "stay with him forever", "run now before he can do more damage to your heart".

She nearly laughed ... how much more damage could he really do to a heart he'd already obliterated?

"There's a lot I don't understand, but what I do know is that there is something between us. I know you felt it that night. We both did. I got scared in the morning, so I ran like a coward and I'm sorry. But I came back."

"It's too late." She sank to the damp mossy ground against the tree. "I can't talk to you now."

He crouched down beside her.

"Why not? Is it your ... *husband*?"

He sounded as if he nearly choked on the word. His eyes were so filled with pain that *she* suddenly felt the urge to comfort *him*. She quickly checked that urge.

"Partly, and my father, and my half-brother. They all watch me every moment of every day, other than when I come here. I never get away with anything."

She looked into his eyes. Worn out, she just didn't know how much more fight she had left in her, only that she needed to make it until her baby was born. After that she didn't care. They could fucking kill her, maybe then she'd find peace like her mother had.

"I'll take you with me. We'll go back to DC, and I'll take care of you..." His eyes darted downward to focus on her belly for a second. "...and the baby."

There was a strange frail hitch in her voice as she simply stated, "The baby *is* yours. The condom broke."

"Ah. I wondered."

She pulled some grass and started tearing it, staring at her hands as she did.

"I thought maybe you'd think it was Jimmy's."

Moving all the way to the ground, pulling her into his lap, he tucked her head against him and rested his chin on top. It felt like home, and she allowed it because in some strange way she found it gave her strength and she needed all she could get right now.

“For a second, maybe, but as soon as I saw you, I knew. I’m so sorry.”

“Wasn’t your fault. I wanted you that night, probably worse than you wanted me.” She looked up at him. “I thought you were my life line, my only shot at ... life. Stupid, huh?”

He brushed her hair tenderly. The familiar sparks raced along her skin to lodge in her heart. His soft look in his eyes nearly undid her and in the space of a heartbeat, she wanted him again. Now. Here on the damp ground she wanted him to love her again.

“No, not stupid. I was the stupid one for not considering your feelings for a single minute. Only my own damn need.”

Never in her life had anyone apologized to her, but she thought that was what had just happened. She watched his clearly evident silent struggle to keep his own emotions at bay. It tugged at her heart. She wanted to make it better, fix it all somehow, but there just wasn’t any way to fix the mess they’d gotten themselves into.

Still, would it be so wrong to take some comfort from the man she loved? Before she could over think it or talk herself out of it, she leaned closer and pressed her lips against his. He moaned at the contact, which caused her to relax even further and allow his tongue to brush against hers.

“Good Lord, Sasha, I’ve missed you.”

He wrapped his arms tighter around her waist, the kisses growing deeper and more passionate. Eventually she straddled him and pressed what she could of her body against him more fully. His hands came and rested against her belly. This felt so protective that she shivered from the touch.

“I’ve missed you, too, Matti.”

The breathy quality of her voice spoke of how aroused she was. She wished they were back in the motel room, naked, stretched out on the bed and free to touch and explore to their hearts’ content, until they were both sated and exhausted. Then she wanted to fall asleep in his arms again and this time when she awakened, she knew he’d still be there beside her.

His hand skimmed along her thigh, finding the top of her stocking, then bare flesh. He groaned into her mouth. She wasn’t trying to be sexy, she simply found thigh-highs more comfortable now with the large protuberance that stuck out three feet in front of her at all times. Still, the feel of his fingers on her skin was mind melting. He pressed his hardened cock up against her.

Freaking hell, I want him so bad.

It was good to know that their one night together hadn’t been a weird aberration. It was still just as molten between them.

“Touch me, Matti.”

He gazed deep into her eyes for a second, then slipped his fingers beneath the edge of her panties. She knew he’d find her wet and she nearly exploded from the simple touch as he slid his fingers over her, then pushed inside her.

She clasped his face between her palms.

“I want you. Now! Please.”

“Sasha, we ca...”

He stopped, she begged with her eyes. For this one moment in time the rules had ceased to matter. She just wanted to be a part of him again.

He adjusted her and reached between them, and she realized he was unzipping his pants. She licked her lips, breathlessly anticipating the feel of him as he slid into her.

“I don’t have a condom this time.”

She laughed.

“Well, it didn’t do us any good the last time and it’s not like I can get more pregnant.”

Something lashed in his eyes—she wasn’t sure what, but it looked like second thoughts—so she kissed him again. Kissed him long and slow and deep. She slid her tongue around his, suckling gently on it. The groan her action pulled from deep in his chest thrilled her. Moments later he was pushing aside her panties and sliding inside her.

She moaned as she welcomed the thick length of him within her. This was how it was supposed to be. This felt so good and wonderful and right. Her mind started its warning bells—of how he had left her, of how she couldn’t trust him, and all the rest—but trust or not, she could do this with him and she intended to.

“Mmmm, baby, you’re so tight. Squeeze me.”

She did, he groaned and ravaged her mouth with a kiss filled with desperate need. Riding him felt natural, as if she’d done it a million times before, and so damn good that she could barely catch her breath. When he added his fingers into the mix, playing with her clit, she nearly exploded.

“Oh fuck! Oh God, yesssss!”

She didn’t know who the hell she was, but wasn’t going to let her knack for overthinking every damn thing ruin this moment. Catching sight of the moisture in his eyes ripped at her heart. Fingers weaving through his hair, she pulled him even closer and kissed him roughly, screaming into his mouth the moment he made her come hard.

She rode him a minute longer and was really glad he came so soon after her, because after the powerful climax he’d given her, the lethargy had begun taking hold of her, making her feel as if she’d run a marathon. She collapsed against his chest, still reveling in their bodies being connected. Having him inside her, half hard, felt spiritual, magical ... perfect.

He stroked her back and ran his hand through her hair. She looked up and he kissed her again, deeply, passionately. What a life they could have had together, but it was over before it had started and neither of them stood a chance of changing that. She pulled back some, snuggled against his chest, basking in his warmth for as long as it would last.

“Tell me about your mother.”

“She died when I was six. A cold in her chest turned to pneumonia. We didn’t have money for the doctor bills, and my pa didn’t care enough to take her, anyway.”

He held her closer. Being in his arms was the nicest feeling in the world.

“I’m so sorry. I know it’s redundant, but it’s all I know to say.”

She shrugged and inhaled deeply of his scent trying to commit it to memory. The sadness was beginning to swamp her. As beautiful as it was with him, being with him would never be more than a moment out of time. A tremendous gift of freedom and love in her otherwise torturous existence, but nothing that could ever stand the test of time and reality.

“I really can’t be seen with you.” She made a half-hearted attempt to pull away. He

only pulled her deeper into his warmth.

"You can't leave me, honey, not after this. I want to fix this between us."

"You *can't*. And please don't make me promises I know you won't keep."

This time she did pull away. As hard as it was, she twisted, bent and wiggled until she was freed from him. He grabbed her arm with one hand while he adjusted himself with the other, but when he had to release her to finish the job properly, she pulled the rest of the way away. Standing, she wrapped her coat around her as far as it would go and tried to say good-bye.

He jumped to his feet and placed his hand on her stomach. The intimate nature of the gesture, even after what they'd just done, took her unawares and her breath caught.

"You can't be warm enough."

"Jimmy says he's not wasting money on a bigger coat when I'll be smaller again next winter." She shrugged one shoulder and cocked her head. "Doesn't get all that cold around here, anyway."

"You're cold now."

She was only cold because she missed his warmth so much already. He took his own trench coat off and wrapped it around her. She immediately pushed it away.

"I can't."

He shoved his fingers into his hair in a frustrated gesture.

"Sasha, you just let me make love to you!"

She flinched at the harsh tone. "I shouldn't have, I know, but can you blame me? You are the only hint of love and safety I've ever known. I'm so tired, Matti. I can't keep going much longer. I needed you."

She dropped her gaze to the ground. Ashamed now of what had been so profoundly beautiful moments before. "I'm sorry."

He shoved his hands into his hair again. "What are we gonna do here?"

"There's nothing to be done. Fact is, you know nothing about me. Nothing about my life, my reality." She released a defeated sigh. "There's nothing to be done."

"I know more than you think, Sasha. And I could know everything if you'd just tell me."

She looked back into his eyes, the pull of him too much to ignore. *Moth to a flame*. She laughed. That was a perfect description and as the flame, he would no doubt annihilate her.

"How'd you know? About my name?"

"I found a newspaper clipping from when you were eleven, getting an award."

She smiled, remembering.

"Pa was furious."

She almost laughed, but not quite, she honestly didn't have the strength for it.

"Why does everyone else call you Shasta if you don't like it?"

Her arms folded tight around her middle, protecting herself from the memories.

"When my mama died, Pa said Sasha was too highfalutin' a name for these parts and that I was just puttin' on airs to use it. After he beat Johnny for usin' it to call me for dinner one night, no one ever did again."

She didn't believe in him anymore, but she *wanted* to. Maybe it was crazy, but there was a part of her that still wanted for him to make this right somehow. Wanted him to be her white knight, her savior. Even though she didn't really believe such things existed.

*

Matthew's heart broke. He swallowed his own rage by taking a step towards her, wanting nothing other than to wrap her in the safety of his arms like she'd just been. He knew it was the height of stupidity to have made love to her again, with so many things unsettled between them, but like a moth to a flame he couldn't resist her.

"Let me help. Let me take you away."

Her eyes filled with tears, but as he remembered from last time, none fell.

"I won't ever trust you enough, Matt."

The word was harsh, making him take an involuntary step back, feeling slapped. After the closeness they'd just shared it made her rejection of all he wanted to offer her even more excruciating to bear. "What happened to Matti?"

She shrugged at him again; he'd never seen anyone look so lost. "He never existed."

She couldn't have hurt him more if she'd plunged a knife into his very heart. Five minutes ago they'd been as close as two people could get and now she looked at him as if she honestly hated him. He rushed forward, grabbing her cold hands in his.

"He did. *I do*. I was more myself that night in that motel with you, than I've ever been in my life. I was a selfish bastard, and a royal jackass the following morning, but don't make us both pay for it the rest of our lives." He glanced down at her stomach again. "Don't make our baby pay for it."

She rubbed a finger over her eye.

"If you want your child, Jimmy'll probably sell it to you as well as anyone. But don't go through me to ask him."

Sell it to me?

"What do you mean?"

She looked so tired. She'd said she was worn out and quite frankly, it showed. He wanted to wrap her up and let her sleep for a year if she wanted to, while he stood guard over her.

"He won't let me keep the baby. That was part of the agreement. He's gonna sell it to whoever's willin' to pay the most. There have already been three couples willing to pay tens of thousands."

He watched as she shivered and placed her hands protectively over her stomach.

"It's for the best. They'll be good to her. Jimmy would..."

She let her words drop as she watched the ground. His eyes fell with hers and he watched her feet wiggling within the white waitress shoes she wore.

"Does he hit you?"

Another shrug, as if it didn't matter. "Not as often or as bad as my pa did, but then, I didn't have to have sex with Pa."

Matthew needed to hit someone now, but before that thought completely settled on him, she left with only one last, "Please go back to wherever you came from. *Please*."

He'd never seen anyone so desperate. He wanted to puke his guts out at the thought of her having sex with that man, of someone selling *his* baby. He had to be able to fix this. There had to be a way. "I won't let you go, Sasha. You're mine and you belong with me."

"I don't belong to *anyone*. Take your friends and go home. Leave me the way you did that morning and this time don't bother coming back."

He watched her run through the wrought iron gates of the cemetery, feeling stunned

as a cold bitterness tried to worm its way into his heart. She was his, and he'd just damn well have to prove it to her.

* * * *

Jelly slid down the suede faster than Matthew could catch it.

"Bloody hell!"

Briefly glancing around the motel room as he came through the door, he quickly spotted Nick talking quietly on the phone. Exchanging a nod, he headed for the bathroom in an attempt to try and rescue his jacket from the effects of his jelly donut. He hoped he'd at least be successful in this rescue attempt. Maybe then he could still hold his head high not being a complete failure.

A few minutes later Nick's tall figure appeared in the doorway. "I think you'll need a dry cleaner for that. Any change today?"

Matthew gave up on the stain and came back into the room, throwing the jacket on his bed. "None. A week, Nick. I've been here a bloody week and all I know is her real name, that she's afraid of essentially three people, and that she's only been married two bloody months."

He sat down in a chair rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Oh, and the most important detail, she still won't talk to me."

"Well maybe this will help, then." Nick walked towards the bedside table and called back over his shoulder. "You know your Scottish ancestry comes out in you when you get frustrated."

Matthew made a face at him, Nick just laughed. It was a rare occasion when Matthew wasn't the one in charge, handling everything. It felt awkward to lean on other people, even if they were his best friends. Nick picked up a wire bound note pad and came back to the table.

"I called in a few family favors. It took a little longer than I'd hoped because of the holiday."

"Yeah, I know. I'm having the same trouble on my end and I'm not nearly as well connected."

Nick waved the notebook back and forth. "But I have a boatload of information now."

Matthew's eyes sparkled for the first time in days. He sat back, arms folded across his chest. "Well then, let's have it."

They shared knowing smiles as Nick began his report. "Frank Green."

"That's my dad's name." Matthew's voice was soft, he hadn't really meant to say anything aloud.

"Frank Green?"

Matthew gave Nick an annoyed look. "Don't be funny, you know my dad's name is Frank. Funny how two people with the same name can be so different."

"How do you know they're so different?"

Sadness washed over him. "Sasha would never be afraid of *my* dad."

Nick quietly agreed and held the notebook up for permission to continue. Matthew nodded.

"Frank Green. Sixty-eight, military background. Married his first wife Marian the summer he turned twenty. Had one boy, Calvin." Nick looked up. "I'll get to him in a

minute, he's a real treasure.

"Marian disappeared nine years later, the assumption around here being that she ran off, but no one's heard from her since. Calvin was sent to live with relatives until Frank wooed and wed Lillian Foster. He was thirty-five at the time, and Lillian was all of seventeen. Out of that union was produced Jonathan Green, now twenty-five, tends bar at the ... Loose Moose?" Nick looked up, lowering his glasses to the bridge of his nose. "Can that be right?"

Matthew laughed and nodded. "Been there myself." He patted Nick on the knee, thinking about his friend's very wealthy republican upbringing. "We should go, it'd be an education for you."

Nick stared for a second then shook his head as if to clear it and bent his head back over the notes. "All right then, other children from this union were Sasha Green..." He paused again and stared Matthew in the eye as he continued. "...age twenty."

There was a prolonged silence as Matthew took in the information he'd craved and feared all at the same time. He paced to the window, a pattern that had become comfortable for him in the past week, and then back. He looked Nick directly in the eye, showing nothing. "Go on."

Nick took a minute before bringing the notebook back up and speaking again. "And Jeremiah, age fifteen."

Matthew looked up at that. "Fifteen?"

Nick double checked his notes. "Yeah, fifteen."

Matthew got up and took the familiar walk to the window again. "Sasha said her mom died when she was six, so Jeremiah had to have only been a year old at the time." He looked back at Nick. "She raised him."

Nick took in a deep breath. "I'd imagine so. Because best I can tell, Frank Green is an alcoholic and a gambler. Hasn't worked for twelve years, draws a small pension from a factory, but up until Sasha was married, both her and Jonathan still lived at home, I assume supporting their father. In fact, it was right after Jonathan started his first job—at age fourteen—that Frank quit at the factory. I'm gonna ask around town, but I'd bet both those kids had already been working under the radar by then."

Matthew folded his arms and ran his fingers through his thin beard. "What else have you got?"

"Calvin Green, forty-seven." He looked Matthew dead in the eye. "County sheriff."

"*This* county?" The alarm in Matthew's voice couldn't have been missed.

"For nearly fifteen years. Nobody's even run against him for twelve of those years after Tommy Johnson's farm was burnt to the ground, his wife and kids still in it, after *he* ran against Calvin."

"Were they hurt?"

Nick checked his notes again. "The family dogs were the only victims, but the baby was burnt pretty badly and they all had to move to Atlanta for her to get treatments, so no more running for sheriff, and they never came back."

Matthew sat down hard. "God. I'd say this stuff only happens in the movies, but unfortunately I know better."

"So do I."

Matthew motioned towards the notebook. "What else have you got?"

"Not much. He used to own this motel; there were some accusations about

prostitution going on. The theory was he took a percentage and gave the girls the rooms, but nothing was ever proven.”

“Who owns the motel now?”

“Uh.” Nick flipped pages in the notebook. “Someone by the name of Seymour Halifax.”

“Maybe we could run a check on him.”

“Okay, but why?”

“I don't know, it's a feeling.”

“I trust your feelings, so I'll add his name to the list. Other than that, Jonathan's clean as a whistle. There's a gap in Sasha's records, though, but it doesn't look like she's been in any trouble. Jimmy Tolley...” he glanced up with a worried look before finishing. “...is also sixty-eight.”

Matthew's blood started to burn, the muscle in his jaw began to tick, but other than that he made no movement and said nothing. Nick continued.

“He went to high school with Sasha's dad. They've been friends ever since, I guess. Served together.” He visually skimmed his notes, checking another page for a minute. “Again, nothing criminal on his record.” After a moment of silence he added. “I have my family's P.I. service checking into it further, but that's all I've got for now.”

Nick pulled off his glasses and set them on the table as the door knocked. Both looked at each other in question before Nick got up to answer. A man, a woman and a baby waited on the doorstep.

“You gonna let us in or what?”

West's smile beamed. Matthew felt elated and relieved to see them. Frannie was a rock and wise when it came to the heart. He'd been half in love with her ever since they met, so had Nick. He swore if West had messed things up with her he would have killed him, then gone after Frannie himself. She gave Matthew the longest hug and whispered in his ear.

“I just couldn't stay behind if there was any way I could help.”

She released him from the hug but stayed joined at the forearms, she stared intently into his eyes.

“Sometimes it's easier for a woman to be open with another woman. You never know, she might talk to me. And I underhandedly brought Sarah as a last resort. If she's anything like I was when I was pregnant, she'll be soft for all babies.”

“She's giving it up.” Matthew swallowed back the lump. He'd had four days to think about it and still had no answers. That was his daughter, but did he really want to raise another child alone? He didn't know if he had the strength to do it again.

“Oh, Matthew, I'm sorry. West didn't...”

“I haven't really mentioned it.”

Nick was with him when they heard about the adoption, but he hadn't been able to bring up the details of selling the baby to either of his friends.

She looked at him, all the love in her heart shining through her cobalt blue eyes, “I won't say a word until you do. I promise.”

Matthew hugged her again, so glad she'd come. “Let me see my niece now, if you please.” His smile was forced, but his love for everyone in that room was genuine and he felt strengthened by having them there. He took Sarah from her father's arms and remembered what it was like to hold William at that age. Then he thought of his little

girl, she needed rescued, but so did her mama, and whether she liked it or not, that was exactly what he was going to do.

Chapter Six

West eyed the rest of the dance floor and the area by the front door as he held Frannie close in a slow dance, not exactly certain what he was looking for. He shook his head, trying to figure out why Nick hadn't wanted to escort Frannie tonight. In a subtle maneuver, he'd ended up staying behind with Sarah, while the rest of them had come to The Loose Moose with the idea of getting information from Sasha's brother. It was subtle, but West had caught it and had spent half the night wondering about it.

His fingers ran over Frannie's bare back. Feeling her shiver at his touch, a devilish smile appeared and he wondered if he could get Nick and Matthew to keep Sarah overnight. A minute later he purposefully put his mind back to business.

"Doesn't look like Matthew's having much luck."

He saw the bartender obviously avoiding the end of the bar Matthew sat at. He watched Matthew move further into the middle, but the guy still ignored him.

"What do you say we go see if we can help?"

Spinning her around one last time, he escorted her from the floor to the bar. His arm secured her to his side the entire time. He was a possessive man when it came to his Frannie, he just had to accept it.

"He say anything?"

Frannie asked wide eyed as she scooted on to the bar stool beside Matthew. Matthew shook his head.

"Won't even let me order. How in the world does he know who I am?"

"Because honey, we don't get too many people in here from the big city. The three of you stick out like sore thumbs." The tall brunette squeezed between Frannie and Matthew and laid a tray on the bar as she hollered for Johnny.

"Two drafts and a tequila shot." Then she turned to Matthew while waiting for her drinks. "Look, he ain't never gonna talk to y'all, but come sit in the back and when things slow down, I'll mosey over, see if I can help you any." She gave him a big smile while crinkling her nose at him.

Matthew and Frannie gratefully accepted, but West had a suspicious nature. He grabbed the girl by the arm as she was leaving. "Why?"

"West!"

The waitress held a hand up to Frannie. "It's all right darlin'." Her eyes moved back to West who still had her arm and had nearly upset her tray. "Cause I dated Johnny all through high school and I've always been fond of Shasta." Her gaze then moved steadily to Matthew. "You probably have no idea the scandal you've caused, do you?"

Matthew slightly shook his head.

"Go sit in the back. I'll come talk to you when I can."

The three of them started to move to the table, but first Frannie leaned over the bar. "Johnny!" When he gave her an edgy look she started her plea. "We aren't here to get you in trouble, or your sister. I was just hoping we could have three beers. Please?"

Johnny looked at her for a minute, then grabbed three drafts and slid them in front of her.

"Thank you."

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True to her word, the waitress came by around ten when things slowed down measurably. With her tray on her hip and a rag in her hand, she started to wipe down their table. "I can't sit, but what do y'all want to know?"

Matthew leaned forward. "How about what happened?"

She stood straight and gave him a wink. "Well honey, I think you'd know better than I would?"

Matthew gave her a frustrated glare, but knew better than to alienate his only ally. "I meant *after* I left."

She went back to cleaning the table. "Well, town gossip being what it is and all, it had already started before you left. That night several witnesses saw Shasta and a stranger..." She stopped again and gave Matthew a saucy look. "...I take it that was you—makin' out right outside this very bar.

"Johnny was livid when word got inside, he searched everywhere for the two of you. I guess he never imagined Shasta would go to the motel with some guy she barely knew. Hell, most of the town figured her for an uptight virgin. She never dated—and not for lack of the local guys tryin', either.

"Anyway, by the followin' mornin' when she hadn't come home, her pa thought she'd run off with you like she had the last time. He had Calvin and half the deputies from here to Atlanta lookin' for her. Then she just walked in the kitchen as if nothin' had happened." She stood back up, putting the back of her hand on her hip. "The way I heard it anyway."

"Joanie, you ain't got no business over here." Johnny grabbed her arm and jerked her hard. Both West and Matthew were on their feet to defend her but she held up a staying hand.

"Johnny, just tell 'em. Maybe it'll help your poor sister out in the long run." She mouthed a sorry over Johnny's shoulder as she made her way to another table.

Johnny stared down at them all, ending on Matthew. "You the bastard that knocked up my sister?" His voice barely registered above a whisper, and with the band still playing, it was difficult to hear him. Matthew getting the idea that town gossip ran rampant, matched the whisper out of courtesy to both him and Sasha.

"I am. I want to do right by her, but she won't talk to me."

"My pa beat her near to death that morning. Jeremiah and I had to stay home with her for three days takin' care of her. She couldn't hardly move."

Johnny took off the cowboy hat he'd been wearing and pushed back his hair as he sat at the table with them. Matthew and West followed suit and sat back down. Johnny didn't look at any of them, it was almost as if he were simply reliving the memory out loud. "Then, when he found out she was pregnant, we thought for sure he was gonna kill her." He looked Matthew dead in the eye. "He said he ain't gonna have no whore for a daughter and married her off to Jimmy."

Matthew felt every word as the accusation it was. He was guilty as hell and as long as he lived he'd never forgive himself for what he'd done. There was no defense, so he remained quiet, allowing Johnny to finish.

"Most the town gives lip service to the baby bein' Jimmy's, but they all know different. You had no right fuckin' around where you didn't know no better. Now leave her be. She's better off with Jimmy than home with pa, anyway."

Johnny started to leave, but Matthew stood quickly and grabbed him. "I want to marry her, give my baby a proper home. Can you help me or not?"

Johnny stared at him for a long time. Then slowly shook his head. "I can't."

Matthew sunk into the chair, dropping his head into his hands. Frannie rubbed his back.

"We need some alcohol." West rubbed his hand through his hair.

"There isn't enough alcohol on the planet to fix this, but thanks. I'm not giving up." One by one, Matthew looked his friends in the eye. "This may be the fight of my life, but I'll win this somehow, some way. I'm not giving up."

* * * *

Sasha recognized him right away, although it wasn't difficult. There weren't too many people who came in here she didn't know, and he obviously wasn't a trucker. He sat in the corner booth with a pretty woman with deep auburn hair and a tiny baby that made her own heart seize. She wondered where Matti was.

"Can I get y'all somethin' to drink?" She slid menus in front of them. The woman smiled up at her; the man looked her over suspiciously.

"I'll have an iced tea and my wife here will have a diet soda, no ice." He narrowed his eyes at her. "So you're talking to us today?"

"I wasn't ever not talkin' to you. I just can't be seen talkin' to Matti." Against her better judgment she looked down at the baby, all soft and pink and tucked in her carrier. Sasha felt her emotions starting to unravel.

"Did you want to hold her?" The woman asked with a big smile.

Sasha looked down at her food-spattered uniform. "Oh, no, I'm all greasy."

But the woman was already unfastening her daughter and stood beside Sasha, holding her out. Sasha ever so gingerly took the child and cradled her against her breast. "She smells so sweet."

"Huh, not all the time."

The woman twisted her face in the direction of her husband and flung her arm in the air. He took the message and shut up. Sasha nearly laughed at the scene. It was so ... *normal*.

"She's beautiful. How old is she?"

"She'll be five months in a few days."

"She your only child?"

A strange expression washed over the woman's features, almost as if she'd caused her pain by asking. "Yes." She seemed to recover herself quickly and smiled at Sasha. "When's your baby due?"

Sasha was running her cheek across the soft downy hair on Sarah's head. "February, but I'm not keepin' her." A tear came far too close to falling. Handing Sarah back to Frannie with a wan smile, she said, "I'll go get your drinks."

She ran into the back to get control over herself first.

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Frannie settled back into the horseshoe shaped booth with West, tucking Sarah back into her carrier. "Iced tea?" She raised her brows at her husband. He looked casually away.

"I've been thinking about cutting back on caffeine and sugar for a while, that's all."

"Mmm hmmm." She smiled a knowing smile but didn't bother to remind him that she'd told him he needed to do that three months ago. She put her mind back on Matthew and his problems.

"What are we going to do?"

"We were supposed to get information, and so far all we've got is that the baby is due in February, which we could have figured out ourselves."

She was headed back their way, they both smiled, probably with a little too much innocence.

Sasha set the glasses on the table, then the straws.

"I brought you extra lemon." She set a small bowl with lemon slices on the table and raised one shoulder towards her ear then dropped it. "Just in case. You decided?"

"Oh, I haven't even looked. I'm sorry." Frannie's smile got bigger. Sasha took a deep breath and scratched her neck, pulling her collar just low enough for her to catch the hint of a bruise. She flashed a look at West, and already knew he'd caught it because he'd tensed in the seat beside her. She soothed her hand over his thigh beneath the table.

"You hurt yourself?" He pointed to the spot below her collar, she instantly pulled it up.

"I don't have the energy to make up stories for you, now do y'all want lunch or not?"

Frannie remembered that defensive feeling all too well, she could also tell that Sasha was about worn out and past playing games. Frannie closed her menu and looked up brightly at Sasha.

"I'll have the chicken salad pita and West'll have the veggie burger."

West groaned, Frannie jabbed him in the ribs, continuing to smile.

"All right." She started to turn away, then looked back. "Look, it isn't anything personal, you know? It's just a matter of stickin' with the devil I know. I ran once, with someone I didn't know very well. It didn't work out well for me that time and I won't do it again." She straightened her spine, gathering her resolve. "Tell Matti I said good-bye. Tell him I said not to look back." She turned again, then once more hesitated. "Tell him I'll never forget him, but I wish he *would* forget me."

Frannie watched her walk away, firming her resolve, there was no way she was leaving that girl in this situation. She knew if she really got to know Matthew, could learn to trust him ... she looked at West, so happy she'd taken one last chance on men.

*

"Well that just settles it." Frannie crossed her arms firmly across her chest.

West knew his wife well enough to know when she was setting her mind to something, and that was exactly what she was doing now. He waited, watching her with a small smile twisting at the corners of his mouth.

She pointed in the direction of where Sasha went. "I'm not going anywhere until I've had a good sit-down with that girl. If I have to, I'll call every one of my sisters down here as well."

West dropped his forehead into one palm. "Oh, God, not the whole Songer clan." He glanced sidelong at her from his defeated position. "She's a frail child, sweetness. She couldn't take it."

Frannie folded her arms across her chest again, this time radiating determination. West could practically see the wheels churning. "Then she best sit and talk with me." She turned her entire body half way to face West. "She's in *love* with him." She turned her

body back around, refolding her arms and settling back against the vinyl. "And we aren't going anywhere without her."

And that was final, and West knew it. They enjoyed their meal, mostly in silence. West watched Frannie and Frannie watched Sasha as she took orders and delivered food. At one point she quietly leaned into West, accepting his embrace. "She's exhausted."

West kissed his wife's head. "I know. We need to fix this, for both of them."

She turned to look at him. "Take Sarah and go back to the motel. Send Matthew to get me in a half hour." He was about to argue with her when she held her hand up. "Don't argue with me."

"This town is *full* of woman-hating morons and I am not leaving my wife unsupervised with them."

She gave him a look that said he was sweet but way too credulous. He didn't give a damn, he wasn't leaving his Frannie.

"They're not interested in me, and besides, the sooner we fix this, the sooner we can all leave."

He kissed her forehead. Well, he had to admit he did like the sound of getting out of this God-forsaken place. He began scooting out of the booth. "I don't like it. I'm sending Matthew right back, but I'll tell him to wait in his truck for a half hour."

She smiled. "Good enough."

*

After he paid the bill, he left. Frannie moved to the counter and waited for Sasha's attention. They'd purposefully come between lunch and dinner so it wasn't too busy, but Sasha was obviously very good at keeping herself occupied. When she finally did come by the counter, Frannie saw her look around before turning curious eyes on her.

"I asked him to leave me here; Matthew's gonna pick me up in a bit."

Sasha actually went two shades paler than she already was. Frannie reached out and took her hand. "You said you'd rather stay with the devil you know. What if I swore to you Matthew wasn't a devil at all, but a sweetheart? He made a grossly and unimaginably stupid mistake when he left you that morning..."

Sasha's mouth dropped open. Frannie quickly continued. "Yes, he told us. He's miserable and my husband is one of his best friends. The three of them are like brothers, thick as thieves and all that, but that's neither here nor there. Matthew's not a devil, and if that's his child you're carrying, he'll take care of both of you. And honestly, by how in love with you he is, I'd imagine even if it's not his, he'd still want to take care of you."

Frannie took a breath and Sasha looked over her shoulder, then without letting go of Frannie's hand pulled her outside and around the corner.

"I don't want anyone to overhear us." Frannie nodded as if she understood, but she really understood very little of what was going on and was primarily winging it.

"There was a time when I thought Matti ... Matthew, was the answer to all my prayers, but he turned out to be just like every other guy. Now you come in here and say it was a mistake. Well, how am I to know he won't make another? Leaving me and the baby alone someplace I don't know and I'll have to do Lord knows what to survive. *This* I can survive. *This* I know."

Frannie rubbed her hands up and down Sasha's thin arms. "What if I make you a solemn promise that if he ever does anything nearly as stupid again, you can come and stay with me and West? We have a big house that we're barely using and would be happy

to take you and the baby in.”

Frannie waited, hoping she’d trust—just a little bit.

A woman with graying blonde hair stuck her head out the back door.

“Shasta, you on break?”

Sasha tensed. “I have to get back.”

Frannie wasn’t going to give up, she hollered back at the woman. “She’ll be right in, she’s helping me with something right now.” Frannie pulled Sasha’s arm until they were around the building and couldn’t be seen. “I know what it’s like to be afraid. I haven’t had near as much reason as you, but I was with someone once who hit me.” Frannie swallowed the lump that came to her throat every time she thought of Keith. “He kicked me so hard, I lost my baby. He degraded me and lied to me the entire time we were together. When I met West, I wasn’t too interested in trusting either, and I certainly couldn’t understand what someone like him would see in someone like me, but I made the jump, and it worked out for me. I have an amazing man and a beautiful little baby, and my grandmother’s house. It’s everything I’d ever dreamed. Do *you* dream, Sasha?”

She closed her eyes, slowly releasing her breath.

“I used to.”

“Don’t ever give up your dreams. Giving up is the only way to be sure they’ll never come true.”

“You don’t understand, I...”

“No, I probably don’t, but I don’t think you understand everything, either. The best we can do is go by the information we have, and what purpose would I have to lie to you?”

*

Sasha’s head was spinning, this woman was clearly a witch, casting a hypnotizing spell over her until she couldn’t think straight anymore. She’d thought this all through over and over and was sure she’d made the best choice. She didn’t have the strength to jump and miss again, she just didn’t.

“I have to get back. I’ll think about what you said, though.”

Frannie smiled at her.

“That’s all I can ask.”

As the two headed back for the front door, a very tall, handsome man with powder blue eyes and blond curls met them at the side of the building. Sasha’s heart stopped. She wanted to cry and throw herself into his arms, but didn’t. She only gave him a shy smile. She felt Frannie’s grip on her arm tighten slightly; then loosen completely.

“Just talk to him.”

Sasha’s eyes never left Matthew’s as Frannie went back into the diner alone.

“I wasn’t sure I should come. I argued with them about it for twenty minutes.”

Matthew nervously ran his hand through his hair. “Sasha, I love you. I know it’s crazy, I know it’s fast and I *know* it doesn’t make a damn bit of sense, but I felt it from the minute I first saw you.” He blew out a nervous breath. “It’s one of the things that scared me to death.”

“Have you ever been in love before?”

“I thought so, once.”

“Well, how do you know you aren’t wrong about this too, then?”

She needed him to convince her, but she hadn’t expected his next move. He grabbed

her forcefully and pulled her tight against him, his mouth coming down on hers with the same sense of desperation she'd been feeling.

The kiss that started fierce changed almost instantly. It softened, and she felt Matthew's lips brush over hers with aching tenderness until she was helpless not to respond. Her hands pressed against the sides of his face, feeling the rough hair on his cheeks beneath her fingers. His moan permeated her soul, his tongue, slowly pressed inside her mouth, caressed hers and she was aching and wet and wanting before she could think better of it.

She felt her nipples harden and became hungrier. She wanted to devour him right here and now.

"Mmm, Matti."

"Trust me. Love me."

*

Matthew knew the second she'd come back to her senses, her soft pliable body that had melted into his suddenly stiffened. She withdrew her tongue from his mouth, but still had her lips against his, and her hands still rested against his cheeks, but he knew she'd pulled away emotionally all ready.

This *was* different, he just couldn't put into words why.

If the circumstances weren't so dire, he wouldn't have told her how he felt, not yet. They would have dated for a while, then maybe moved in together, he didn't know. He'd screwed up so badly the last time, he figured he'd go excruciatingly slow the next time. Slow, until they were both so sure there wouldn't be any other answer than to marry. None of this was how he'd spent the past fifteen years planning it, but *this* is what he was given, and *she* was who he loved, who he wanted beyond all reason.

She was soft and warm and pliant as he kissed her. She melted into his arms as if they were the only two people on earth. He'd felt his baby kick within her and nearly came undone. He would not lose her. He pulled back just enough.

"Marry *me*."

The light went out of her eyes almost instantly as she pulled out of his arms.

"I can't. Your friend made my head swim. I almost bought everything she was selling, but the bottom line is, I'm already married and I can't undo that."

He saw the tears swim to the surface again, but no further. He pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her waist, his chin coming to rest over her shoulder.

"Why'd you marry him?"

She drew in a sharp breath. Knowing she was trying to hold back tears, he pressed himself closer to her.

"Because he won the card game."

His arms went slack with the shock and she easily pushed away from him. She looked at him with such sorrow and regret. Matthew was struck with how his one cowardly act had so deeply and profoundly changed another person's life.

"Go home, Matthew."

She walked away and he was still staring after her when Frannie came around the corner and put an arm around him.

"I think we made headway. She's scared, Matthew. Just go slow and I think she'll come around."

He only heard half of what she said as his mind was replaying everything Sasha had said. He could see only two options at this point, her father or her husband. He decided to pay a call on Frank Green as soon as he had a firm hold on his temper.

Chapter Seven

There was no way in hell Nick and West were going to let Matthew go to the Green residence alone. They tried for over an hour—without any success—to talk him out of it completely. In the end, it was the three of them now sitting in the gravel driveway of a small brick structure, with garbage and old tires strewn around the yard and a rusted chain link fence surrounding the perimeter—where it hadn't fallen, anyway.

Matthew let out a breath. The one thing he could not do was lose his temper. Getting out of the truck, he heard dogs start to bark from the neighboring yard. He strode with purpose to the front door, with Nick and West right behind him like avenging angels. The knock on the door was greeted by a boy about a head shorter than any of the men with big brown eyes partly hidden behind black glasses and shaggy brown hair. Matthew knew right away that this must be Jeremiah. He smiled, instinctively liking the boy.

"Hi, I'm Matthew. Is your father home?"

The boy brushed his bangs out of his eyes. Although Matthew was aware of the boy's age of fifteen, something about him struck Matthew as much younger, as if the child's innocence were still intact. He thought of how hard Sasha must have fought for that, what she herself must have sacrificed.

"Nah, he's gone over to Uncle Jimmy's." The boy's eyes lost some of their shine before his head bowed. "Probably another problem with Sash."

Matthew smiled, the boy had found a way around the name problem.

"Ah. Mind if we come in and wait?"

"Not supposed to let anyone in." He clutched a book close to his ribs with one arm. Matthew could see he'd sketched on the pages. "You Sash's guy?"

He realized he was a little slow, but that even Jeremiah would know who he was surprised him.

"I guess you could say that. I love her. A whole lot."

The boy didn't move away from the door, but his gaze skimmed over Nick and West then back to Matthew.

"She's always looked out for me. Took beatin's for me an' everything. I love her, too."

It was in that instant he realized he had just gained another soul to save. They weren't going to be able to leave this boy behind, and *his* age *was* going to be an issue.

"Tell you what." Matthew pulled a card out of his pocket and handed it to Jeremiah. "You hide this, and if you need anything while I'm still in town, you call. Either here or directly to the motel, I'm in room six. Meanwhile, can I ask you one more thing?"

He nodded.

"What happened when Sasha was sixteen?"

Nick had been out schmoozing the residents of Jasper's creek for two days and had come up with a lot of information. The one gap was a few months right after Sasha turned sixteen. Some folks thought she'd gone to stay with relatives, while some said she ran away. He figured her brother might be the only one who'd give him the truth.

"She ran off. A smooth talkin' big city guy told her he loved her and she left with him. He promised to send for me once they got settled. Eventually, Calvin tracked her

down and dragged her back. She won't ever talk about it beyond that."

Matthew felt hope draining from him. That was why she didn't trust him. Some other guy had already pulled all the same moves on her and she'd been burned. He must look like a player, like he had all his moves down pat and knew exactly what he was doing to get her to believe him. What a joke that was. He cringed, remembering how he'd told her he loved her. She must have thought it was a hokey line at best, a ploy of some sort at worst. How was he ever going to get her to trust him now?

* * * *

Sasha had to walk home from the diner this afternoon. For some reason, Jimmy hadn't come to pick her up, as had become his habit. Although she appreciated the escape from his attentions, the mile-long walk, when she was already dead on her feet, didn't leave her feeling very good. Finding her pa inside with Jimmy made her feel close to terrified.

"Pa."

She gave him a smile, but kept a safe distance from the two of them. They'd been drinking and she was outnumbered.

"Hello, darlin'." His deceptively happy smile did nothing to smooth the hairs that had risen on the back of her neck. She rubbed her arm, then scratched beside her ear before tucking loose strands of hair behind it.

"I guess I'll go upstairs and change."

She made a dash for the stairway, but Jimmy's voice stopped her dead.

"The Petersons from Topeka, or wherever the hell, bought your baby today."

She froze on the bottom step for a minute before turning slowly to face him. He'd also turned in the recliner to face her.

"They paid us a hundred thousand dollars."

He spaced each word out slowly as if even he couldn't believe it.

"Seems they're bettin' on your unusual eye color bein' passed on. After I give your pa here his cut, that still leaves me with more money than I've seen in my life."

A chill ran up her spine as a look she could only describe as depraved, or baneful, ran over her from head to toe.

"So your pa here and I were just discussin' a business venture."

She wanted to run. She wanted to drop dead right there. She wanted anything other than to hear what they were about to say.

"We're gonna breed ya. A hundred grand every other year or so for the next fifteen, twenty years. Do you have any idea how much money that is?"

Evil laughter filled the room as her heart filled with dread. Her stomach lurched and she had to run to the bathroom to be sick. She heard them still laughing from the other room as she sunk down on the bathroom floor, clutching her arms around her precious baby.

Matti's baby.

He said he loved her, but then so had Julian. She was confused and scared, but even Julian would have been better than what they planned for her. But they'd just send Calvin after her. She shuddered at that thought and was sick again. He'd made her a promise the last time he'd come after her that she didn't for one second think he wouldn't keep.

Crying wasn't going to get her out of this mess. She needed a plan. She needed a

way out. She thought for a moment of Jeremiah. Next spring he would be sixteen, and then he could work. He was almost ... no he wasn't, he wasn't ever going to be as big as her pa. It was all confused. Maybe it was a joke, a very cruel joke. They couldn't be serious, could they?

"Shasta, get your bony ass outta that john an' fix your pa an' me some dinner."

Sasha stiffened before standing. She couldn't fight them both. She'd fix dinner and then figure something out.

Somehow she was getting out of this.

* * * *

Matthew thought he was dreaming until he felt Nick's elbow, sharp in his spine. He looked at his watch, alarm settling in his heart.

"Honey, it's nearly three in the morning. What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

He shook the fuzziness out of his head and stood back to allow her to enter the motel room.

"Of course, honey. Sorry."

It was a different room from the last time they'd been together but every memory of the encounter flooded the space along with her presence. She was beautiful, delicate. Like an exotic bloom, he thought.

He held out one of the chairs from the table for her. Seemingly without any thought, she took it.

"Can I get you anything? We're limited, but I can rustle up something."

She shook her head.

"Nothing."

He sat down beside her, watching her tuck hair behind her ears. She seemed to do that when she was nervous, and now it made him smile. Nick had quietly disappeared into the bathroom, where Matthew heard the shower come on. He put his hand gently on top of Sasha's.

"What's happened?"

Her violet eyes pierced him, even his heart was hit by the look she gave him.

"They've sold her."

Matthew closed his eyes for a minute attempting to rein in his rage. "Sweetheart, that's illegal. We can call the authorities, and you can get a divorce..."

She pulled her hand from beneath his and slapped it down on top like a child's game, only this wasn't a game. She obviously needed his attention and he needed to focus on what she needed for a change as opposed to what he wanted.

"They said they're gonna get me pregnant again, and sell that baby, too. Again and again. Until I die, I guess." Hysterical laughter bubbled out. She slapped her hand over her mouth and muttered through it. "I don't know who to trust or who to turn to, but you've gotta be better than either of them." She looked into her lap then back, and almost as an afterthought she added, "but I won't leave without Jeremiah."

She was putting herself into his hands. Matthew felt relieved and elated, but first he needed to kill someone, which meant he needed Nick out here. Now.

He stood up and walked to the bathroom door, pounding on it with his fist. He walked back to Sasha.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I'm so mad right now, I don't trust myself."

Nick came out wearing only a towel.

"What is it?"

"I'm gonna kill them, Nick. Don't let me walk out that door, or I swear I'll kill them."

Nick knew he was serious. He didn't need any further information, he would have seen the truth of it in his eyes and Matthew trusted him not to let him go off.

*

Sasha felt herself blush and gave a shy smile in the general direction of the half-naked man. Without looking, Matthew made introductions. Then he was on the phone. Nick didn't bother dressing, he sat beside her, obviously concerned, which confused her. He didn't know the first thing about her, yet it was very plain that he cared.

"You okay?"

She looked at him and nodded, licking her lips, biting the top one. "Will you answer a question for me, honestly?"

"Of course. My family's not real big on lies, probably the only thing I ever got whoopings for." He gave her a crooked grin that was terribly endearing. She tucked her hair again then asked.

"Is he really a good guy? I know you're his friend and all, so I don't suppose you can be unbiased, but I'm scared."

Nick touched her shoulder softly.

"No, damn it!"

At the outburst they both turned their heads towards Matthew, but he was still deeply involved in something on the phone. Nick turned back to Sasha.

"He's one of the best people I know. When I first heard about what was going on down here, I was scared to death he was going to get his heart broken again." He looked away for a minute and added, "And it's been such a long time since he's risked it."

Then his eyes returned to hers.

"But then I saw it, in his eyes. He loves you, and when that man loves, it's permanent. He has a good job, a nice place. His son William is in boarding school, so he's been lonely lately. William's been his life for the past seventeen years."

Sasha felt herself relaxing, hearing about normal day to day things.

"What happened to his mother?"

"She walked out on them when William was two. They hear from her every now and then, but Matthew's raised William by himself."

"I raised Jeremiah by myself."

Nick squeezed her hand.

"I know you did, and from what I heard from Mrs. Waterbury in the grocery store, you've done a fine job of it, too."

She smiled, shy and yet proud of the one good thing she'd ever done.

"I'm sorry you've had it rough, but Matthew will protect what's his with his life. He won't let anybody hurt you ever again."

Could it be true? Could she actually have gotten that lucky? She jumped slightly at Matthew's touch as he rested a hand on her shoulder after coming back from the call.

Nick looked up at him. "Everything okay?"

"Don't know yet. Go get dressed, you clown." He nodded to the bathroom with his

head.

“You gonna be here when I get back?”

Matthew rubbed both hands over his face. “Yeah.”

He sounded resigned. Nick gave Sasha’s hand another squeeze. “Trust him. It’ll be okay.”

He left them alone and went to dress.

Matthew took Nick’s vacated seat and Sasha was suddenly overwhelmed with memories and emotions from the last time they were in a motel room together.

“I’m sorry. I have rage issues at times, but I’d never take them out on you.”

Somehow, instinctively, she believed him. “I’ve seen pretty bad, doubt you could shock me.”

He cupped her cheek in his palm and she leaned into it. For just a second it seemed that everything would be all right.

“I’m so sorry for that.” His eyes locked on hers and he felt the stirring of passion. He pulled her forward, leaning the rest of the way until their lips met softly. It was a brief kiss, their tongues meeting, then pulling away after just a taste.

“I’m sorry I scared you. That I let you down. That you feel you can’t trust me.”

She smiled, looking at him through thick dark lashes.

“That’s a lot to be sorry for.”

“Believe me, it’s just for starters. We don’t have a lot of time here and we need to make some decisions.” Nick came out of the bathroom wearing only a pair of sweat pants. Matthew gave him the once over. “That’s dressed?” He motioned to Sasha with his hand. “There’s a lady present.”

She gave a little laugh and then explained, “I’m scarcely a lady, and I grew up with three brothers. A shirtless man is hardly gonna send me into a faint.”

She pushed her fingers into the tense flesh at her neck. Suddenly Nick began to rub it for her. A strange tense moment passed between him and Matthew. Nick smiled tersely and pulled on a bright blue T-shirt that Sasha thought, when he came back to stand beside her, brought out the blue in his eyes.

Matthew cleared his throat drawing her attention back.

“We’ve got a couple of options, and I need to know what you think.”

“I think we should just run. Grab Jeremiah and hit the road and don’t look back.”

Sasha’s interruption bordered on desperate and she was sure they both heard it. Especially when she heard the sound of a growl emanating from Matthew’s chest.

“All right, now I’m back to my favorite option. The one where I just kill them all.”

He took a very deep breath. Sasha had never had anyone in her life so fiercely protective. It was nice and yet frightening at the same time.

“Do you know what papers were signed, Sasha? For the baby?”

“No.”

She was so worried. Matthew truly was her last and only hope left. He brushed the backs of his fingers over her cheek as if he knew how scared she was.

“Well, it would help if we knew, and we have to file for divorce, we need to...”

Sasha got up and pushed the chair back in under the table hard.

“No! I just want to go, never look back. It took me all night to get up the courage to come here. You don’t know what it cost me. I don’t ever want to see any of them again.”

She was close to hysterical, but Matthew pulled her into his arms and caressed her

back making gentle shushing sounds, he kissed the top of her head.

"It'll be all right."

*

Matthew and Nick shared looks over her head. Matthew knew that neither of them were too sure about what to do. Eventually Sasha pulled herself back together and straightened out of Matthew's arms.

"If we're not leaving tonight, I have to go back."

"Are you *crazy*?"

Nick was quick to second Matthew's sentiment. Only he was a little more kind. "You *can't* go back there."

She looked at them both like they were the ones that were crazy. "I have to. If Jimmy wakes in the morning and I'm not there, all hell will break loose and I'll never get away."

"You're not *ever* going back." He grabbed her forearms tight and shook her. "You're *mine*. You're *not* going back!"

He was desperate and terrified and when he grabbed her, he wanted her to feel his passion, his desire and how fiercely he'd protect her if she'd only surrender to him. It wasn't control he wanted, it was just *her*.

"Nick was right. I was right."

She touched his cheek, kissed it gently, then quickly moved away. "I know you want to protect me, I get that, I do, but you don't understand it and until you do, I'm not going to let you take chances with my life, or our baby's."

She looked down and rubbed her stomach.

Nick stepped forward. "Let me take her."

Matthew turned all his anger and frustration on his friend. "No! She's not going."

Nick put what he probably hoped was a calming hand on Matthew's shoulder, but it only made him want to rip Nick's arm off and throw it across the room. "Let me take her. I'll sit out front and watch until she leaves for work in the morning."

Matthew stood very still, clenching and relaxing his fists by his side. After several minutes and a few calming breaths, he conceded.

"We'll both go."

* * * *

Nick turned off the lights as they turned onto the street, then drove into the dirt drive. He didn't turn off the engine because they'd agreed the vehicle would make more noise restarting it. The house lights were still out and Sasha felt a little better knowing she hadn't been missed. Matthew stood out of Nick's Mercedes and helped her out. Pulling her down towards the trunk, then into his arms. "You don't have to..."

"I *do*."

"You're stubborn."

She actually smiled. There was a time only ten hours ago or so when she thought she would never smile again.

"I guess I can be." She looked up at him, feeling almost safe for the first time in years. "Thanks for letting me win. I don't usually get supported. In fact, I don't think I've ever been supported."

"This isn't support." He sulked. "This is capitulation." He kissed her head. "But your mother would be very proud of you."

Tears began to bubble up again; she was having to work harder and harder to keep them at bay. "I have to go in."

She started to pull away; he pulled her back, his lips coming down on hers. Matthew's kisses were something she knew she'd never tire off. Every time he looked at her she felt butterflies in her stomach and tingles on her skin. His kiss was gentle and restrained yet it still sent shivers to her toes.

He finally released her, pressing his forehead on hers. "We're going to work this out, and then you're going to marry me, right?"

She gave him a quick smile and cupped his cheek before looking away. "How about you see if you can get me *unmarried* first?"

He took two steps forward and kissed her one last time. "We'll be right down the street if there's trouble."

"There won't be. But don't follow me to work in the morning or there might be, all right?"

"When can I see you again?"

"When I have the papers, I'll come to you."

He scowled and she realized she loved his scowl.

"I hate that. I hate all of this and I hate that I'm responsible for it yet can't convince you to let me fix it."

She smiled at him then turned and ran up to the darkened house. She had a feeling he sulked all the way back to the car.

Sasha didn't sleep the rest of the night, just lying still in bed beside Jimmy, waiting for daylight when she could slip out of the bed, cook his breakfast and leave for work. But first she had to get a look at the papers. Jimmy had them last night, him and Pa kept snickering over them and doing a victory dance over her pain. Not that she expected either of them to give a damn about her feelings anyway.

Jimmy turned in his sleep, draping his arm over her. The weight of it intensified in her mind until she couldn't breathe. Panic was trying desperately to take hold of her. She wished now she hadn't come back, but she reminded herself she really had no choice. He never paid any attention to her, he wouldn't notice if she was more tense than usual. His head rested against hers, causing her stomach to lurch. She pushed him off her and ran for the bathroom.

Instead of returning to bed she decided she would dress and start on breakfast, but when she returned to the bedroom, Jimmy was not only awake, but dressed. She nervously tucked hair behind her ear. "You're up?"

"Where the hell were you?" He didn't turn from the dresser, so she reached for her clothing, trying to be casual.

"Uh, the bathroom. I felt sick."

"Not now. In the middle of the night. Where the hell *were* you?" The back of his hand struck her across the cheek so fast she hadn't even seen it coming.

"Downstairs." She was near frantic now. She needed him to believe her.

"Liar!"

He hit her again and she backed away from him.

Not again.

"Where were you?"

He kept coming at her. She kept backing up.

“I took a walk. I was upset about the adoption.”

She hadn’t realized she’d backed right out of the bedroom and was now standing on the stair landing. Frannie’s words came back to her.

He kicked me so hard, I lost my baby.

She reflexively put her arm around her baby. She had to stay safe.

“Jimmy, be careful of the baby. If you hurt it...”

She was silenced by another slap then he threw her to the ground and climbed on top of her.

“I’ll damn well show you who’s your master, whore.”

He began to undo his pants, Sasha knew she couldn’t panic though everything inside her was screaming to do so. His weight was killing her, she felt trapped, wildly frantic.

“You don’t go sneakin’ ‘round on me.”

He hit her again and she tried the only thing she could think of—she screamed.

Chapter Eight

Matthew couldn't say which one was out of the car first, but it was him that plowed into the meaty body of Jimmy Tolley. Knocked him off Sasha and pinned him to the floor, his fists rapidly beating the man into oblivion.

Peripherally he was aware of Nick helping Sasha off the floor; she was shaking and clutching her stomach and Nick was soothing her back while keeping one eye on Matthew to make sure that things didn't go too far.

Matthew was grateful when he took Sasha off to the side and turned her away from the scene because she didn't need to see this.

It was such a surreal moment for him, because while a part of him was clearly out of control, taking out all his anger and frustrations on this man, a part of him was still aware enough to hear Sasha pleading with Nick to stop him.

A moment later Nick was pulling him off a bloodied Jimmy.

Jimmy wasn't a small man by any standards, but he'd been caught unawares and Matthew's fury had given him the advantage. Nick checked the man's injuries. He was still breathing. He even seemed to be conscious, though certainly dazed and out of it.

Matthew took a minute to pull in his rage before going to Sasha. He tried to rub the blood from his knuckles before pulling her tight against him.

"Are you okay?"

She only nodded. He held her back to look at her, bruises were already beginning to form.

"He hit you?"

She shrugged. His rage began to boil again.

"*It's not okay* to be hit, Sasha!"

She winced and he instantly regretted the force he'd put into his tone.

"I'm sorry, honey, I'm sorry about all of it."

He heard the people coming up the steps and wondered what the hell they were in for now.

* * * *

Calvin Green was not a nice man. No one thought it, and he'd probably even be the first to tell you, unless of course he was in uniform—which he currently was—then the facade was up in full swing.

"So what happened here, little sister?"

Matthew didn't like the way he was looking at his *little sister* one bit. He stood, his arms rigidly crossed in front of him while the medics from the town's voluntary fire department were tending to Jimmy. No one had spoken a word to Matthew or Nick. It was as if they weren't even there.

"He tried to rape me."

Sasha's voice was barely audible. She was shaking and looking at the ground—nowhere else. Matthew could have killed the brother, too, at that moment. He wanted to hold her. To make her know it was going to be okay. But Calvin wouldn't let him near

her.

“Now, sugar, you and I both know you can’t rape your wife.”

Sasha nodded agreement.

Matthew felt Nick’s firm grip on his arm faster than his own feet could have moved, even still he felt himself pull against it. Nick’s grip only grew stronger. Some rational part of his brain told him Nick was being a good friend, but the adrenaline and rage told him Nick was being a bastard and should back off.

“When we arrived, he was on top of her and she was struggling against him. He obviously hit her.”

Nick’s voice was so calm and authoritative. When it was all said and done, Matthew knew he would be eternally grateful that he was there with him right now. Calvin turned a cold eye on the two of them, seemingly recognizing their presence for the first time.

“A little spat between married people shouldn’t be blown out of proportion.”

“We’re takin’ him to the hospital. He’s havin’ trouble breathing and I think his nose is broke.”

The small deputy broke in. Matthew thought he couldn’t have been much older than William.

“Thank you, Shepherd.”

Calvin gave the deputy a pat on the shoulder but never took his eyes from Matthew and Nick. He moved a step closer, lowering his voice.

“Which one of you two sons of bitches knocked up my sister?”

“That’d be me.”

Matthew straightened his spine and lowered his voice to match the sheriff’s threatening tone. Just then, Sasha shrieked in pain and doubled over. Matthew ran to her side only to be pulled back by Calvin.

“Get your filthy hands off her.”

It took all of his fortitude not to lay the bastard flat, but even in the angry haze, he knew the uniform had to be respected, if not the man.

“What’s wrong, Shasta?” Calvin had all the tenderness of a viper.

“The baby.” She slid down the wall to the floor and doubled over, moaning in pain.

* * * *

Matthew, Nick, West and Frannie all sat in the waiting area. Along with Frank, Johnny, Jeremiah and Sheriff Green. Matthew stood leaning against the wall a small distance from the group, watching. He could see concern etched on the two younger boys’ faces, at least someone in her family gave a damn.

Jimmy had been taken to intensive care when he was first brought in, since he’d stopped breathing twice on the trip down. Matthew knew he should be concerned that he’d nearly killed a man, but all he could think of was what the man had done to Sasha and how he had deserved it. Moreover, what was truly infuriating was that they wouldn’t let him anywhere near her. The hospital staff had been told from the second they all arrived that only her father should be allowed to see her, and the sheriff.

A domestic dispute.

He heard the words in his head even now. It wasn’t a domestic dispute; it was one crazy son of a bitch trying to exert his control over a small helpless girl.

His girl, his woman.

His fist clenched involuntarily. If the man weren't already near death, Matthew would gladly put him there. He straightened immediately as he saw Sasha's doctor coming towards the group.

"We've stopped her labor. It's not unusual with twins for..."

"Twins?"

It was Nick's voice, but it was the question everyone had. Frank's eyes lit up. The man was practically drooling. Matthew would have liked nothing better than to wipe the grin off his face with his fists, but he figured he'd done enough damage already and took a mental step back. Where all the violent impulses of late had come from he wasn't sure. He'd always been physical, it was something that made the whole bodyguard thing suit him so well, but this was out of control. It was as if being Sasha's protector was the job he'd been born for and he was recklessly trying to accomplish it, but if he wasn't careful and didn't rein it in, he'd lose everything instead.

Nick's voice brought him back. "Sorry, we didn't know. Go on, doctor."

"Yes, well, twins. And as I was saying, pre-term labor isn't unusual with multiples. We've given her medication to stop the labor, and so far it seems to be working. We've treated the various injuries she sustained, and if all goes well, she can go home in a day or two. She'll need to remain on bed rest until delivery, though. We want to keep those babies in for as long as we can. Now I was concerned over her lack of pre-natal care..."

Frank Green rose to his feet and put a hand over his heart.

"That's Shasta, headstrong. She won't listen to anyone. I've been telling her all along to take better care of that grandbaby of mine."

Matthew thought he actually saw a tear come to the man's eye. He rubbed his head hard; he was done with this bullshit.

"I'm going to see her."

He walked passed only barely noticing the opposition voiced. Fact of the matter was, he didn't care anymore.

* * * *

Sasha lay in the hospital bed, numb. The drugs they'd given her had stopped the pain. She wished they'd stopped her heart as well. She felt as if Wolverine's claws had torn it to shreds, leaving only enough of it in tact to keep it beating.

Wolverine. A warm smile passed over her lips. Jeremiah loved the X-men. He sat around drawing them all the time. He was such a gifted artist, and she wanted him out of Jasper's Creek. Her pa wouldn't listen, not even when he'd gotten the full scholarship to that art school in Tampa. Her pa wasn't ever going to let him go. *She* had to do something. It was always her and quite frankly, she was tired. So very, very tired. It was the kind of tired that wore its way into your bones and never let you go.

Her eyes were closed when he walked in the room, but she felt him. She opened her eyes and caught him; he seemed overwhelmed by something, but then covered it and moved towards her.

"I wondered why I didn't tense up when someone came in the room. Usually I'm very sensitive to other people's movements."

"I bet you are." He kissed her head and let out a breath. "Are you okay?"

She stared at him for a while not sure how to answer.

"I don't know anymore. I'm tired, Matti. So tired."

A tear actually rolled down her cheek. She tensed and wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"Sorry."

"For what? Honey, you've been through hell. You deserve, at the very least, a few tears."

She picked fluff of the hospital blanket, watching intently as she did so.

"Pa said it's damned foolishness to cry. If any of us ever did, we got beat. I don't cry anymore, not ever."

"Aw, honey." He scooted into the bed beside her, pulling her close to him. "You cry, baby. You cry all you want and I'll hold you while you do."

She looked at him, wondering if he was serious. He was the damndest mix of heaven and hell and she wasn't sure which vision was real.

"Its okay, baby, you cry."

He pulled her head down against his chest and for a time she just sat there, curled up against him and very, very still. But eventually the tears began to fall and she did cry, she cried and cried and Matthew did exactly as he said he would and simply held her.

It was probably the first time in her life she completely let her guard down with someone. It was a very strange thing to feel safe. Part of her wondered how much to trust that feeling, but honest to God she was just too tired to worry about it today.

*

Frannie sat beside Nick, who slumped over his knees. Bumping her shoulder into his, she asked, "How's Suzannah?"

He smiled at her. "I don't think even you can make this better."

"Maybe not, but how's Suzannah? You guys have been dating what, six, seven months now?"

"Mm-hm. She's fine." Nick surveyed the room, his head hanging down. He was hoping the Greens wouldn't realize he was watching them.

"Fine? That's all?"

He sat straight and looked at Frannie. Every time he did, he remembered the one kiss he'd shared with her. It still sent shots of desire through him. He half wondered if she'd ruined him for other women, but that seemed overly dramatic. He stood up and brushed a hand through his hair. "Yeah, that's all."

He moved to the window, but didn't miss the possessive look West shot him. He laughed to himself. West probably didn't realize the tiny bundle on his shoulder drastically reduced how dangerous he looked.

Nick was tired. He'd been up for nearly twenty-four hours now had watched a terrified girl being harassed, a man nearly beaten to death and Sheriff Green's threats hadn't been lost on him during the ride down here. He hadn't grown up in a powerful political family and learned nothing. The problem was, he knew the good sheriff had enough ammunition and if he wanted to cause trouble for them, he could. Men like that weren't interested in justice; they were interested in having their own way, which presented a problem. He could bring charges against all three of them, if they didn't agree to do his bidding.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what the man wanted, either. The thinly veiled order to drive Nick and Matthew down to the hospital served his purpose. He'd made it clear along the way that he held all the cards. The problem was, Calvin didn't have a

clear understanding of who he was dealing with. He'd be willing to bet his trust fund that the Chiltons had more connections than Calvin Green had even dreamed of.

He felt a curious heat churning in his belly and casually slid away from the group, walking down the hall towards Sasha's room. He knew Calvin would threaten Sasha with incarceration if she didn't just quietly go back to her husband. He wanted to make sure she realized it wasn't likely he could prove anything, but if Tolley died, Matthew's ass was definitely on the line.

When he peeked in on Sasha and Matthew, the sight that greeted him, only poured gasoline on the fire that was already burning within him. The poor girl was crying her eyes out in Matthew's arms and something inside Nick snapped.

He'd walked the good and moral line his whole life, and it hadn't gotten him much. Angie had played that aspect of his personality to the hilt, stringing him along for years then dumping him at the altar, ten minutes after the ceremony had started. This morning he watched Matthew beating the brains out of a senior citizen and all he did was hold the girl. He was worthless.

Matthew and West always had a way about them. They took what they wanted, they rarely feared failure or disappointing anyone. It was those traits that had drawn him towards them in college. A few years older than he, they were everything he wasn't. Not that he disliked everything about himself, but his moral streak was a mile wide and more than he could bear at times. It kept him from really living. He was always too afraid of getting caught doing something wrong.

He hated being in trouble. Even as a child, all his parents had to do was look at him the right way and he'd confess everything. Well, it was time for Nicholas Gabriel Chilton to stand up for something, and Matthew and Sasha's happiness seemed like the right thing.

* * * *

Matthew would never know how long Sasha cried for, but finally she fell asleep. Leaving the room he knew he'd never forget the dizzying crush of emotions that hit him when he walked in the door and heard the machine projecting the babies' heartbeats. It was the first thing he'd noticed, a sound he remembered from when Kate was pregnant with William, and a flood of emotions he wasn't prepared for washed over him. It was all the more real now and somehow he needed to pull a happy ending out of a hat somewhere and he needed to do it fast.

He came into the waiting area, rubbing his sore neck muscles and feeling like he could use a good nap, as well. He'd never seen anyone cry so much, she obviously had a lot of years to cry over. He continued rubbing the back of his neck while putting an arm around Frannie. "She's asleep. Where's Nick?"

"Probably snuck out, leavin' you to answer for all the charges."

Calvin stood and turned to face Matthew. He was too tired for this ass now.

"Maybe he did. He's probably half way to Richmond by now. Better put out an A.P.B., Sheriff."

Frannie put her hand in Matthew's and pulled him towards the back of the room where there was a modicum of privacy.

"How is she?"

Matthew let out a long deep breath. "She's a mess. I don't know what to do."

She squeezed his hands.

"Just be there for her. She has so much going on, I can't even imagine." She seemed to watch him, looking for something, and then hedged, "You know about Keith, right?"

He raised one shoulder and lowered it. "Enough."

"Okay, well that was the only time in my life anyone has ever treated me with anything less than love and respect, and it still threw me for a loop. I hated myself. I believed every nasty thing he said about me, even though I had a mom, a dad and five sisters that were all telling me otherwise. Sasha hasn't had *anyone* telling her otherwise. She's got spirit, and that's all that's kept her alive. I think if you can get her away from all this, eventually she'll be okay, but it will be long road."

He took another deep breath, filling his lungs with hospital scents. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because if you even have the slightest doubt that you can stick this out for the long haul, you'll be kinder to walk away now."

"Frannie, I can't leave her here!"

She looked over her shoulder, an obvious smile shot at West so he wouldn't come over, then lowered her voice.

"That's not what I meant. I'll take her home with me. She can live in the big yellow house with us. God knows we've got the room. I'll look out for her. Being the youngest, I always felt gypped of having someone to look out for. I'd be glad to take Sasha."

"She's not a puppy." His head was throbbing and he was stunned, both at her offer and the voice screaming at him to take it. He rubbed his forehead, then pushed his hand into his hair. "I'll think about it, okay?"

She kissed his cheek. "That's all I can ask. I really like her, Matthew, and I empathize. I really do want to help, so however you need me..."

She let the words hang just as Sarah began to demand her lunch. She gave Matthew's hand one last squeeze before going to tend her. Matthew wondered whether the world would ever tip right side up again.

* * * *

When Sasha woke, Matthew was gone. She half wondered if she'd finally scared him off. It wasn't ever going to work between them. That night in the motel was one night out of time, it wasn't real and it wouldn't last in the light of day. Still, she needed some sort of plan. She wasn't becoming breeding flesh for her pa and Jimmy. The fear over her baby dying had shown her something as well, she wasn't giving them up. She protectively covered them with her hands. They were hers and she would protect them the same way she had Jeremiah.

She was strong. She had to be, regardless of what she'd been told, because otherwise she wouldn't still be here. She'd have jumped in the creek one of the many, many times she'd stared down at the churning water, contemplating it. Her life held purpose, something deep inside her told her so, and she wasn't going to give up now either.

She rubbed her hand over her belly. *Two babies.*

God, she'd had no idea how she was going to take care of one. She brushed hair from her eye and scratched above her brow. She'd run. It was the only way. Tomorrow, she thought, after she got some of her strength back, but before they released her. If she ran far enough fast enough, maybe Calvin wouldn't be able to find her.

Her door opened and for a split second she assumed it would be Matthew again, but it was her pa and Calvin. She sat up straighter in the bed, refusing to let them see the fear they instilled in her.

“Well, yer lookin’ mighty healthy. Better’n Jimmy, at least.”

She looked away, out the window.

“What? You don’t want to know how your husband’s doin’, girl?”

“I hope he’s dead.”

The venom in her tone surprised her. She’d never spoken to her pa like that before. She half expected a slap for it, but he didn’t move from the foot of the bed.

Calvin stepped forward.

“Well, if he was, your boyfriend would be in a heap of trouble then, wouldn’t he?”

“That’s why we’re here, darlin’.” Her pa moved towards her now, brushing her hair back with fake concern making her want to cringe, but she wouldn’t show fear. “Figure you’d do just about anything to help that man of yours. Even go along with your brother and me. If Jimmy dies, I’ve decided to cut Calvin in on our business deal. Hell, girl, you’ve already doubled our payday, first time out the gate.” He slapped his thigh and hooted. “Calvin has some very profitable ideas for how to get you pregnant again if Jimmy, bless his soul, doesn’t make it.”

Calvin was looking out the window, he turned back to her now.

“Got me a sideline business of my own, you’d come to work for me. Girls willin’ to do it without protection pull in more money these days.”

“Get out!” Her voice cracked as the fear choked her and they laughed at her.

“Girl’s got backbone after all.” Calvin walked a few steps closer. “Think of that boy of yours. He’s far too pretty to go to jail.”

“Get the hell away from her, now.” The deep growl coming from the door came not from Matthew, but Nick. Either way, Sasha couldn’t help but feel relieved, and safe now.

Calvin straightened away from her and Frank took a couple steps back.

Nick’s voice could have been carved from ice. “I’m not playing with you two hicks, get away from her.”

Calvin took the challenge. The man walked directly into his space.

“Who you givin’ orders to? I’m the law, you know.”

“Not in this room you’re not, and you don’t have the faintest clue who *you’re* dealing with.” Sasha swallowed hard, sick of the drama, sick of the threats, sick of all of it. Nick shot her a “don’t worry” smile over Calvin’s shoulder before he continued.

“Now, if you don’t mind, gentlemen, let’s take it outside so as not to bother the lady further.”

He held the door open and waited for Frank and Calvin to walk through it. Sasha was honestly surprised to see them go without a fight, but desperately happy about it at the same time. Nick winked at her and gave her another smile before closing the door. She only hoped he knew what he was doing.

* * * *

They moved into an empty alcove before Nick turned on them with laughter lacing every word.

“You two really think you’re big and bad, don’t you?”

“Get to your point, boy.”

Frank Green had cold eyes. As cold as Nick had ever seen. His son's were a close second.

"I'm going to make you an offer. It's a one-time offer that will stay on the table approximately thirty seconds before I call my father and have you, sheriff, investigated..." his gaze turned from Calvin to Frank. "...and you, Mr. Green, brought up on charges of abuse and baby selling."

He waited a minute and let that sink in and watched suspicion roll across Calvin's eyes feeling a trickle of thrill run through him when he realized it was fear in Frank's eyes.

"Just who is your pa, boy?"

Frank was obviously suspicious, even a little afraid, but he wasn't backing down. Nick couldn't help but feel pride as he calmly stated, "Theodore Chilton." He really didn't know if the name would be familiar to these peasants or not, and didn't really care, he knew he wasn't making empty threats. He was glad though when he saw the dawning of awareness come over Calvin.

"The Senator?"

Nick smiled. It was a smile to terrify a shark. "The very same." He took a step closer to the two men. "And do you think, growing up in a family like mine, I haven't learned how to sling a little mud ... and bury a few bodies?" Nick almost laughed as Calvin actually visibly trembled for a split second.

"What's this deal?"

"I want four things. One—no charges against my friend or Sasha, *ever*. I want to see a closed case file. Two—you arrange for Sasha's divorce, nice and quick. You won't be peddling her for baby flesh, is that understood?" He was relieved when they both nodded. "And if I even *think*, for a half second, you've found some other poor girl, all hell will come raining down on the both of you. Three—and this one's just for you, Mr. Green. I want Jeremiah's legal guardianship transferred to Sasha. And four—they'll both be leaving with me and my friends, and neither of you will *ever* contact them again. Have I made myself clear enough on what I want?"

Frank had the nerve to argue. "But them folks from Kansas, they already paid some of the money up front."

"Then you better hope Jimmy didn't spend any of it, because you'll be returning it. Won't you? Does either of you have any idea what the sentence is for peddling in human flesh?"

He didn't either, so he hoped they didn't call his bluff on this one. He was relieved when Frank seemed to shrink back and only nodded.

"So do we have a deal?"

"What do *we* get from this *deal*?"

Leave it to Calvin to push his luck. Nick leaned in on him.

"For the time being, you get to remain sheriff..." he didn't know where the next part came from and he hoped it was believable, "...and breathing."

He almost laughed, saying it. It sounded so ridiculous to his ears. He only hoped Calvin knew enough bad guys to know it might be more than a threat. He'd thought about simply offering them both money, but once he got rolling, he started channeling his father and just couldn't offer such dregs of humanity cold hard cash. No matter how easy it would have been.

“You have fifteen seconds remaining, gentlemen.” He saw the look go between them, it was Calvin that yielded. “Yeah. We got a deal.”

“But...” Frank’s argument was cut short by his son grabbing his arm and pulling him down the hall away from Nick.

“I want to see papers by the time Sasha’s released.”

Where the hell had he gotten the nerve? Maybe he was more of a Chilton that he thought. Regardless, he couldn’t help wanting to jump up and down. For the first time in his life, he’d done something on his own, and at least on the surface, it seemed to have worked.

* * * *

When Nick pushed the door to Sasha’s room open he was glad to see his friend in the bed beside her. She was sleeping in his arms; it was exactly as it should be. He stepped into the room quietly, Matthew greeted him with a smile.

“She say anything to you about her kin being in here?”

Matthew visibly tensed. “No. What happened?”

“I think we reached an understanding, and when I just checked on Jimmy’s condition, he’d been upgraded. Looks like he’ll be fine.”

Matthew ran his free hand through his curls.

“Part of me’s not all that glad to hear it.”

Nick took the chair beside the bed.

“Can’t blame you.” He looked at them. Sasha was so relaxed in the arms of the man she loved, whether she’d admitted it yet or not. He took a deep breath; his own nerves were running a little raw after his confrontation. “You really love her, don’t you?”

His smile was answer enough, but he gave a verbal one too. “Damned if I can figure out how it happened, but yeah. More than anything.”

Nick rubbed his friend’s arm.

“Her family has seen the light, let’s just say, and won’t be giving you any more trouble. Ever. You can take Sasha and Jeremiah home as soon as she’s released.”

“What did you do?”

He gave a crooked grin. “Invoked a little family influence.”

“Never thought I’d be glad to be so well connected.” He sobered. “Thank you.”

They sat quietly for a time, both lost in their own thoughts.

“I’m going back out to California next month. I’m thinking of moving out there.”

Nick was touched by the sad look that passed over Matthew’s face, but it was the right thing to do now. Both his friends were settled. They had lives. He suddenly felt very alone.

“But why?”

He shrugged. “I need to discover something. I’m not sure I can do it in Richmond.”

Suddenly, he saw the dawning in his friend’s eyes. Matthew understood.

“I hope you find him quick. I’ll miss my best friend more than you can know.”

Nick had never felt more like crying in his life. But he was Chilton, and Chilton men didn’t cry. He gave Matthew a watery smile though.

“You’ll be so busy with your new family, you won’t have time. By next Christmas, you’ll have two babies running around.”

Matthew dropped his cheek on the top of Sasha’s head. “And hopefully a wife.”

Chapter Nine

The truck peeled around the corner into the parking lot, making a horrible screeching sound as it did. Matthew jumped out before it truly stopped, not at all missing Nick's gasp of horror.

"Park that for me, will you?"

He didn't wait for an answer, he took off at a dead run and was swallowed up by the main entrance of the hospital as the first rays of sun cracked the dark gray sky.

A heavy frost covered the ground, but, thank God, no snow, and the roads had been clear all the way from D.C. As the warmth of the lobby enveloped him out of the cold morning he thought casually that it was going to be a beautiful day.

There wasn't much going on as he stood at the nurses' station hoping someone would acknowledge him. One woman on the phone held up a *just a minute* finger at him, he blew out a breath and tried to relax. He picked a dead leaf off a philodendron on the desk and casually looked around to see if Nick was coming yet. Before he got a nurse's attention, he was tapped on the shoulder and turned to find West smirking at him.

"What'd you do? Drive all the way at ninety?"

He let West pull him to a side waiting area and noticed a sleeping Jeremiah in one of the chairs with West's leather jacket over him. It was an oddly domestic scene. He moved his attention back to West.

"No, I tried to keep it around eighty, but I wasn't going to get a flight out until later today. Where is she?"

"She's with Frannie. I haven't heard anything for the past hour. You know the nurses remember me?" His face washed over with irritation. "They said I was bossy."

Matthew rolled his eyes to heaven and started tapping on the counter.

"Why don't you move down by us? You could rent a house for awhile, give her more of a chance to adapt before you take her to the crazy evil city." West bugged his eyes as if to express his point, then slurped the last of his soda through his straw. "In fact, I know of a little house not far from us."

He looked at Matthew with one raised brow and a mischievous grin.

"I have to get back, West. I have a business to run."

"Ah." Another slurp. "You run the California office from a distance."

Matthew didn't like this conversation for some reason. He rolled his shoulders and notched up his resentment and wondered if that woman was ever going to get off the phone.

"Yeah, from the D.C. office. You're asking me to be away from both."

West threw the paper cup into the trash and turned his full attention on Matthew.

"Couldn't you take some time off? I mean, you're gonna have two babies to get used to and a woman to win over. Maybe it's just me, but that seems pretty full time."

He was right. Matthew felt like a complete idiot for not even thinking of it before now. His life was undertaking a major change and he'd thought to just continue on as usual and all would fall into place. It suddenly hit him with the force of a typhoon it wasn't going to be that easy. He was worrying about Sasha's ability to adapt, he was going to have to adapt nearly as much.

“I need to take her home. Take them all home.”

He couldn't wait anymore, if he had to walk up and down each hallway yelling her name at least he'd be doing something. He started to walk away and West yelled after him.

“Room one-oh-three, all the way to your right, on the end.” His shout got even louder when he added. “I got her the good room!”

Matthew wondered if he had enough time to punch him for not telling him the room number to begin with. Instead he just smiled, he had the best friends in the world and he'd never have gotten through life without them.

He stood outside the door of Room 103, frozen by an emotion he wasn't certain of. It wasn't fear exactly, and it wasn't joy, it was some strange hybrid he didn't remember ever feeling before. He rubbed his palms together, but even deep breaths weren't working. He off-handedly wondered when he started taking deep breaths as a way of calming down, then shook his head slightly to refocus on the situation.

A nurse moved down the hall past him giving him a strange look.

He gave her a smile. “Nerves.”

The nurse's look went from concerned to knowing. “It happens to the best of us.”

She hurried on down the hallway with her bundle of towels. Somewhere he heard a woman screaming, and he wondered if Sasha had been screaming. Screaming for him and he hadn't been there.

He hadn't seen her in two months. Not since she'd been released from the hospital in Georgia and informed him she wouldn't go with him, nearly stopping his heart. She was the most difficult woman he'd ever met. At least she'd agreed to go with Frannie, but not having any contact with her for two months had about killed him. He talked to Frannie every night, but Sasha wouldn't talk to him. Said she was trying to get her head on straight.

He took another deep breath as a distant baby's cry rent the air. He prepared to go through the door. She damn well better have her head on straight now, because he was taking his family home with him whether she liked it or not.

The room was dimly lit, though the curtains were pulled back in expectation of the dawn. It was warm, there was a sofa against one cream colored wall. There were pictures of mothers with their babies hanging around the room along with two watercolor landscapes. The light of the television flickered its light across the room, but the volume was muted. The entire room was quiet. Too quiet. It smelled of lotion and flowers and for the first time he noticed two vases of roses on a table and Frannie, who stood in the center of the room holding a very small bundle. His breath abandon him and his knees were no longer doing a very good job of holding him up. He found himself only able to stare in awe.

When she noticed him, she smiled. “Did you want to meet your son?”

Son.

Happiness washed away every other feeling, until. “But I thought...”

Frannie pointed to the plastic bassinet beside the bed where another equally small bundle slept. “*And* your daughter.”

His hands were shaking as he took the bundle Frannie offered him. He snuggled the baby up close to him and could smell the baby powder as a tear rolled down his cheek.

“Benjamin Quincy McKinnon.”

Matthew had forgotten anyone else was even in the room with him. He looked back at her startled. "That's my name. I mean Quincy, my middle name."

She ran her hand down Matthew's arm and patted Ben's back.

"I know, she asked me. I didn't know, so I had to ask West. I won't even tease you about it. For now, anyway."

Her smile was already teasing him, he thought.

"It's a family name, my grandfather's." He placed a gentle kiss on the baby's blue cap. "What did she name the girl?"

"Lillian Margaret."

He closed his eyes and smiled. "Our mothers."

Nothing more was said for a time. Matthew walked around in a little circle as he tried to take in the wonder of it all.

"I've missed so much already."

His voice was thick with regret. Frannie put her hand on his back.

"I know it's been hard on you, Matthew, but she loves you very much. I think she's just afraid to admit it."

"What if she won't?" Probably his greatest fear at the moment.

"She's been seeing a counselor. I think it's been helping."

He turned his body to be able to see the bed. Sasha lay sleeping only half under the blankets as they appeared to have dropped off her and were partially hanging on the floor. She looked so young, so beautiful.

"Was it a hard delivery?"

"Not too bad. They were born about an hour ago."

"West didn't say anything."

"I haven't told him." Matthew saw the glint of amusement and mischief dancing in her eyes. "I knew he wouldn't be able to keep his mouth shut."

"If you're okay, Daddy, I'll go inform them now. I assume Nick is here?"

"Yeah."

She put a bottle in his hand.

"She's nervous about breast feeding. Try and convince her. I think she'll take to it and it'll be something real special for her if she gets past her skittishness." She cocked her head. "And it is better for the babies, too."

She started to leave but he called after her. "Hey, Frannie? Thank you. For everything."

He couldn't really begin to truly thank her for everything she'd done in the last few months; it was a debt he knew would never be repaid, not that she'd expect him too. She gave him one last smile before slipping out to find West.

Matthew stared down at the little red blotchy thing in his arms. He saw William's nose. He counted fingers, but didn't want to unwrap the tiny precious bundle to count toes. He looked in on Lillian who lay silently sucking in her sleep, then up to the most beautiful face in all the world. The woman he wanted more than anything. Now that the babies were here, and he'd had time to sort out his own feelings, nothing was going to stop him from making her his, in every way.

He hated himself for his doubts, but he'd already had one marriage blow up in his face, and he *really* didn't want a repeat of that experience. Everything with Sasha had been so intense, so surreal. He was as confused as she was, but he'd done nothing except

think about her for the past two months. He'd talked all this out with anyone who would stand still long enough, but it was his father who had given him the most help.

His parents had recently celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary and his father had simply told him to stop being such a sap about the situation. The heart loves who it loves. Then he asked him if he was going to deny it in order to find something that looked right to his brain.

Leave the brain in charge of what it's good at, but trust the heart when it comes to love.

Those words still rang in his ears. He loved his dad and knew he was a smart man. Looking down at Lillian and Benjamin, he couldn't wait to take them home. He looked at Sasha and thought of how anxious his mother was to meet her. Then he laughed quietly, remembering when he'd warned his mother not to spook Sasha with an overabundant display of emotions. She'd told him to mind his own business and that her displays were her own affair and she'd pour them out on whomever she wanted.

He took Benjamin and sank into the softness of the sofa thinking about the two long months he'd been without her. That had been torture, but looking back, Sasha had been right. Things between them had gone supernova. It was too hard to separate all the emotions. That first night had seemed so simple, because it had been drenched in a thick layer of desire ... and fear, at least on his part.

He enjoyed being with her too much—more than any other woman—and when they'd made love they'd touched on another level he wasn't prepared for. This past two months had given him time to come to grips with all the feelings he hadn't been able to handle back then. He hoped so, anyway. When he thought of how he'd nearly beaten a man to death over her, he couldn't believe it. Yet he still didn't think he'd have done anything differently.

Maybe it was simply because she needed him so much, but something about her brought his protective instincts to full life like he'd never felt before. At the same time, he couldn't help but smile, thinking about how stubborn and independent she could be. God, he was glad she'd survived everything and that he'd found her.

She turned in her sleep, moaned a little, then seemed to settle. She was a mother now. She'd come through so much. He looked down at Benjamin and could hardly believe he was there, nestled in his arm asleep with two fingers in his mouth. He was so proud of Sasha that he thought his heart might literally pop from his chest.

For Christmas he'd sent her a faceless figurine of a woman holding two babies—something he'd seen in a shop. It seemed perfect for her. She'd sent him word that her divorce was final. It was the best Christmas present he would probably ever receive.

He wondered if anyone had called Johnny? He knew she'd want him to know, even if it did mean her pa would probably find out, too. Whatever Nick had done back in Georgia, though must have been something else, because they all slithered back under their rocks and nobody had heard a peep since. Thank God for Nick.

She moved again. This time her eyes opened, immediately resting on Matthew, and a smile graced her beautiful face. Matthew's heart stopped for a moment. He smiled back at her, afraid he'd drop the baby if he stood up right now. She made him weak.

"I've missed you," he whispered. More than he'd probably ever missed anyone.

"Me, too."

She moved a little more and placed a fisted hand between her head and the pillow

while pulling the blankets back up. She looked more relaxed than he'd ever seen her. She'd put on weight, too, she was too thin before. The dark circles were gone, her skin glowed, she looked happy. Finally he moved beside her, placing Benjamin in his bassinet on the way. He sat beside her and took her hand, watching it, running his thumb over her knuckles he felt about fourteen on his first date.

"Thank you. For the names, I mean. They're perfect." Something deep inside made him ask. "Why Benjamin?"

"Before Jeremiah, Mama had another boy, Benjamin."

He saw darkness come into her eyes, but it didn't engulf her this time. He could see her handling it. She was stronger than the memories now.

"He was only a few months old. Pa shook him."

He caressed her head and ran his fingers through the dark silk strands of hair.

"I'm so sorry."

"Maybe we could stop bein' sorry, at least for a little bit? It seems that was all we said to each other before."

She reached out and touched the lapel of his jacket with her fingers; he could feel the heat of her touch reach straight through him.

"That'd be good." He kissed her hand. "Are you willing to start over with me, Sasha? Give us a fresh chance?" His fingers brushed her hair back gently as he waited for the answer he needed so much to hear.

*

Sasha felt tingles—all the way to her toes. She wanted to cry, she hadn't imagined all of it as her counselor suggested; it had been real. The desire sparked back to life the second she opened her eyes and saw him sitting there. She'd been wanting him beside her all night and wished she'd let Frannie call him sooner, but he was here now, and that was what mattered.

It must mean he hadn't given up on her, even though she'd forced them to be apart. She hoped he understood why. She'd hated every second of it and spent so much of that time thinking about him, even she began to wonder why she'd insisted on the time apart.

"I'd like that, Matti. Do you really think we can? There's so much water under the bridge at this point." Her heart waited on a precipice for his answer, hoping it would be the one she longed to hear. He leaned closer and she could smell sandalwood. She'd never noticed him smelling of that before, it filled her senses and made her wish more than anything that he'd kiss her.

Then he did. Gently. On the forehead. Not quite what she'd hoped for, but she'd take what she could get. Then he leaned his face against hers and whispered, "I know we can."

That was the moment she realized he felt it too. Everything she'd felt from the moment he walked into the diner, he felt it, too. It seemed so easy and uncomplicated now without all the other clutter in her head. She touched his cheek, wondering if she dare kiss him. "Can we go slow?"

There was a brief dimming of the light in his eyes, but then he smiled. "I'll try. That's the best I can do."

Slow? That's exactly what his head wanted, but he wasn't sure his heart or body would be denied or held back. But he could try. He would try, for her. He leaned his elbows on the bed beside her and brushed her hair again.

"I want you and the babies to move back to the city with me. Jeremiah too."

Even though she'd loved her time at West and Frannie's, she knew it wouldn't last forever, she'd been expecting this but she hesitated long enough in her agreement for concern to show in his eyes. She pulled his hand to her lips, pressing them firmly against his palm before she spoke her greatest fear to him.

"I want to be with you, but I can't imagine I'm what you want, Matti. I'm so young and I've never been anywhere or done anything. I'll bore you within a week."

There, it was out, what she'd been fearing and wondering about for months. She'd never seen anything outside Jasper's Creek and she could only imagine his world, in the nation's capital, no less. She didn't know how she'd ever survive there. She alternated chewing on the inside of her cheek and top right corner of her lip anxiously awaiting his response. Hoping that it wouldn't matter to him, but instinct told her it had bothered him, from day one.

*

Matthew felt ashamed, as if she had read his thoughts. They were thoughts he deplored now and wished he'd never had them, but it was time for honesty. He took both her hands, he wanted her complete attention until he was through.

"Those were the very thoughts I had the morning after we made love. That's pretty much why I ran. It was crazy, Sasha. You were the love of my life—my heart recognized it, but my brain freaked out because you weren't what I expected."

He tried to reassure her with his smile and caressed her cheek. She seemed to be awaiting the worst.

"I've had a lot of time to think between now and then and I realize what a moron I was, and that to throw love back in its face is a heinous act." He closed his eyes for a minute then grabbed her with his intense stare. "I did that, and we both paid for it dearly. I won't do it again. I do love you. I'm more sure of it now than ever. I'll take it as slow as you want. You lead, I'll follow. I can't promise to be perfect..."

Her laughter seemed to bring the rest of daybreak with it. It filled the room along with the morning light and it filled his soul in a way nothing had for years. She kissed his hands.

"I don't want perfect. I just want *you*."

Looking down at Sasha now, he hated himself for ever worrying about any of it. It wasn't as if he was of the upper crust or anything, but he always pictured his wife well cultured. He'd always regret his snobbish views and what they'd almost cost him.

"If you hate the city, we can try the suburbs after a while and if that doesn't work, we'll buy a house in the country." He looked over his shoulder at the twins. "I bet they'd love the free space to run. We could get horses, dogs."

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He noticed Sasha had drifted away from him. He tucked his fingers under her chin and pulled her back.

"What?"

"I've never had a dog before, or any pet, really." He saw the darkness again and refused to let it live. "Tell me." He kissed her gently and chastely until he felt her body relax. "Tell me." His words gentled.

Her violet eyes shuttered themselves.

"I had a dog once, for about a week."

Her voice was cold, matter-of-fact. He hated that because he knew what ever she was about to tell him had cost her greatly. He held her hand firmly in his and waited. It was

all he knew how to do.

“Pa said we could keep it if it stayed out of the house. I think I was ten maybe at the time, and that dog was the mangiest lookin’ thing you’ve ever seen, but he was sweet.”

She smiled to herself and a tear rolled down her cheek, he was glad to see it. She wasn’t forcing them back anymore.

“He got in one day and knocked over the trash. I suppose it was inevitable. Johnny took him back outside and I was tryin’ to clean up before Pa saw, but he came in the kitchen before I was done.” She looked straight into his eyes he could see the pain, but he saw her strength as well. “He never even gave the poor thing a chance, just shot it in the head. Johnny had to bury it later that night. We never even tried to bring an animal home after that.”

Matthew felt the familiar tension her father always brought to him. He released it on a breath and hugged her close to him.

“We’ll have a damn zoo, sweetheart.”

He couldn’t hold back any longer, he brought their lips together as the last moments of darkness lost their battle with the daylight and a swath of sunlight bathed the room. This was his love, the one created for him, and he would do anything to protect her and make her feel safe and happy for the rest of his life.

*

It was all he said, and it was everything she needed to hear. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she didn’t even care. She loved him so much. Her tongue eagerly met his. She’d felt starved for his touches, his kisses. When she’d been deprived of them for those months before he came back, there were days she didn’t think she’d survive another moment without being held by him. Over the last two months she’d felt it again. She never wanted to be separated from him again, not ever.

*

A small baby cry ended the quiet. Their lips separated and they smiled. Matthew went and picked up his daughter from her bassinet. It was the first time he’d held her, and she was wet. He kissed her wrinkled face and brought her to her mother.

“Lilly.” She held out her arms for her daughter and Matthew placed her in them. “Do you think I will be a good mother?”

He couldn’t believe she would even ask it, but the concern etched on her features told him she was serious. He scooted in the bed beside her.

“The best.”

He dropped a kiss onto the bridge of her nose. With every fiber of his being he knew it was true and he wondered how on earth he’d ever gotten so lucky.

Epilogue

The day arrived, thankfully unseasonably cool for D.C. in the middle of summer. Nick's parents had graciously allowed the couple to use their estate for the nuptials and Matthew's mom Maggie, who'd taken Sasha under her wing from the moment they met, had been by Sasha's side, overseeing everything from start to finish. Now Sasha looked at herself in the full length mirror only minutes before the service was about to begin. She was wearing a glamorous chiffon gown in softest pink with a flowing skirt and double spaghetti straps with delicate rhinestone beading and satin rosebuds.

One of Matthew's cousins who worked in the fashion industry had seen to it that a renowned stylist was flown in to do the bride's hair. Although Sasha felt terrible that she hadn't recognized the man's name. She touched the elaborate style wrapped in ribbons and baby pink rosebuds. He had done a wondrous thing, even if she didn't know who he was.

She wore a pair of antique diamond earrings that Maggie loaned her as her something old and borrowed. Although Maggie also whispered that after the ceremony she planned on giving them to her new daughter. Last, but not least, she wore a traditional blue lace garter that Frannie had given her as her something new and blue.

She took a deep breath of fresh warm air and was so glad they'd had the real ceremony three months before. She imagined that was the only thing keeping her nerves at bay. She picked up her bouquet, bringing it to her nose and relishing the glorious scent of the Georgian wildflowers for only a moment before she couldn't help but laugh. She sobered quickly, in case one of Nick's high falutin' relatives heard her and thought she was crazy, and covered the smile that still remained with the lush bouquet. She couldn't help but laugh. Every time she looked at her bouquet she laughed.

She'd had a hell of a time getting the one she wanted, the nicest things she could say about the florist's opinion of her floral choices was that he was *appalled*. The rest of the wedding party held roses and gardenias which were all very nice but Sasha wanted something from home and if it hadn't been for one of Frannie's sisters strong-arming the florist, it probably wouldn't have happened. The man had even managed to silence Maggie.

She lay the bouquet back on the table and went to peek out the bride's tent over the enormous lawn that she would cross at any moment to meet Matthew. Her secret wedding three months ago in Vegas with just Matthew and Nick in attendance had been a much simpler affair, but nothing could have been more beautiful. She wore white to that wedding, a long silk gown with the tiniest pearls she'd ever seen. The gown had brushed the floor as she walked and swooshed around her feet. She'd never felt more beautiful in all her life, although this came a close second.

She went back to the mirror and played with the mother of pearl rosebud at her neck that Matthew had sent her as a wedding present, the platinum and diamond engagement band catching the light and winking at her reflection. Glancing in the mirror she saw a handsome man poke his head through the tent flap. She smiled warmly at him even as she teased him.

"Good thing I was decent."

“Well, I *was* hoping for a free show ... but then, Matthew’d probably have to kill me...” Nick stroked his chin as if in contemplation. “So you’re right, it *is* a good thing you were decent.”

She laughed and turned to face him.

“I thought men had been exiled. Maggie can’t know you’re here.”

He took a step closer to her and lowered his voice. “They were, but I’m a sneaky bastard when I want to be.”

He gave her his most wicked grin and she couldn’t help but laugh more.

“So why are you here?”

“Doing best man duties.” Which he actually shared with William and West. “Making sure the bride wasn’t planning on running out.”

She gave him a sad smile and placed a hand on his cheek.

“I’m so sorry, Nick.”

By now, of course, she knew all about Nick’s wedding that wasn’t and that he still hurt from his fiancée leaving him at the altar, but today was a day for joy so she smiled and teased him.

“Anyway, you know better. You were practically the only person to witness our first wedding. If I didn’t run then, why would I now?”

“Have you seen the crowd out there?” He pitched a thumb over his shoulder. “*I* almost wanted to run.”

Her knees wobbled and she would have sat down, but knew it would crease her gown and she’d been lectured by the dress maker more than once about that.

“Hand me my bouquet, would you? Then you can walk me to the aisle.”

Johnny and Jeremiah were walking her down the aisle. She felt a twinge of guilt that she hadn’t been able to ask her pa to even attend. She hadn’t spoken to him in almost a year and accepted that nothing would change on that front because basically he still didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. It was hard to dole out forgiveness to a man who didn’t want it and worse, didn’t think he needed it.

She smiled knowing that Matthew’s family, every last one of them, had adopted her. She was not familyless anymore. She tucked her arm in Nick’s.

“Ready.”

*

“Well, I got her at least to the end of the aisle. If she runs from there, you’re on your own.” Nick whacked the back of his hand against Matthew’s chest as he took his position on the other side of William.

“That’d be all right...” West’s devilish grin came into full play. “...you’re going to Fiji on your honeymoon, aren’t you?”

Matthew growled at him. “Yes and I intend to take my bride, not the two of you.”

The violins started and Matthew and Nick’s youngest relatives paraded down the white runner in their white taffeta, dropping flower petals along the way. Matthew’s heart skipped a couple of beats. Even though they’d already been married, and he’d never forget that day as long as he lived, this moment was still one of the most exciting ones of his life.

“She was winking at *me*, you know.”

West referred to Frannie as she hit the end of the aisle and turned to take her position as matron of honor.

“Clearly she winked at me.”

Matthew had to smile at his best friend’s possessive streak, he didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d clearly winked at him and not West.

The two of them had been married for over a year and still acted like a couple of honeymooners. Matthew hid a grin. He expected it would be much the same for him and Sasha, if the last three months were any indicator.

His gut twisted and he glanced sidelong at Nick, wondering how his life in California was working out for him. He was always so quiet about it, not sharing anything more than monosyllables when asked direct questions, but the glint in his eyes made Matthew wonder if he’d met someone.

He truly hoped so, because he knew Nick would be even lonelier now that both he and West had wives. He hated that part; he wanted Nick to find someone. Someone right this time.

He was stopped from thinking anything at all when the most beautiful vision in pink started down the aisle towards him. He felt both West and his son’s hands at his back which was good, because he wasn’t sure he could stand of his own accord right now.

He had wanted to look at his children in this moment. Ben and Lilly sat with their grandmother in the front row, and William stood right here beside him, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Sasha.

Sasha, who he was going to have to have a serious discussion with about birth control since he seemingly blanked out like a damn fool whenever she came near him. She’d told him last night that she was pregnant again!

Well, he always had wanted a big family. He couldn’t stop the half-grin from spreading into a full-fledged smile. At the rate they were going twelve seemed like a good round number.

“I’m so happy for you, Dad.”

William’s voice barely penetrated the fog as Jeremiah gave him his sister’s hand.

Johnny looked at Matthew directly.

“Thank you for doin’ right by her, and lovin’ her the way you do.”

He shook Matthew’s hand. Johnny would be starting work at McKinnon Services after the honeymoon. Meanwhile he was staying at the house with William and Jeremiah and Matthew was really glad to have him. Jeremiah would start his senior year in the fall, then was determined on art school.

William was starting in just a few weeks at Georgetown, but they had Ben and Lilly and the new baby, and who knew how many others. It would be a long time before the McKinnon household was an empty nest again. As he stood looking at Sasha, her hair moving slightly in the afternoon breeze, he saw his entire life. Forever stretched out before him, and he knew it would hold times of sorrow and grief, but more importantly, it held the fulfillment of dreams. His. Hers. *Theirs*. And he’d never been happier.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to present for the first time: Mr. And Mrs. Matthew McKinnon.”

And the crowd wholeheartedly cheered.

The End

About the Author:

Passionate and creative to the point of insanity, Samantha lives in the mountains of southwest Virginia. A self proclaimed hopeless romantic, she writes about what happens when that one person you can't live without walks into your life...ready or not. Her greatest joy is to finally be able to share her stories with readers and she hopes they find a place in your heart.

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