

Baby Decision



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Chapter One

“There are many levels of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*.” Colt Lefevour’s voice crawled over Susan York’s skin. A cold sweat trickled down her spine. Added to the nausea twisting and the turning in her stomach, she wondered how much longer she would be able to stay in class.

These days, being sick preyed on her like a stalking panther, ready to spring at any moment. She smoothed her hand down her throat, trying to ease the lump forming there.

Susan knew her sin, was paying for her crime, but Colt’s cologne locked her into a new level of purgatory.

Hot bile hit the back of her throat. She swallowed the acidic liquid, hoping not to lose her battle in the middle of English Lit. Throwing up wasn’t her idea of making the grade, but the strong scent was waging war on her senses, a contest she wanted to overcome. Most of the semester, she had managed to avoid sitting anywhere near him. But today he was standing at the front of the class, only a few feet in front of her desk. She couldn’t escape the queasiness that assaulted her senses.

“Based on the severity of your crime, you would descend further into hell.” Colt softened the harshness of his words with a smile and continued his speech.

Susan took in his relaxed stance. He stood, leaning back against their professor’s desk. With a strong, athletic body, he looked like good sex wrapped in soft worn jeans. His attitude, almost cocky, seemed to disappear when he smiled. Add in his sandy blond hair and green eyes, and she could easily see why women found him hard to resist. Her breasts tightened with longing. She marveled at the feeling, which had deserted her the last few months. Her stomach, on the other hand, rumbled loudly with distaste.

She’d noticed most of the girls in the class wanted to win his favor. He’d been nice to all, but he still remained unattached, which only added to his appeal.

A quick surge from her abdomen caused Susan to grab her purse. She couldn’t make it to the end of his speech. Bolting from her seat, she sped to the classroom door.

She ran down the hall, bent on getting to the bathroom. After six months of pregnancy, she should be used to getting sick at the drop of a hat.

Once in a bathroom stall, she dropped her purse and allowed her body its release. She gripped the cold, ceramic toilet with her hands to hold herself erect.

She took a deep breath after her stomach emptied itself. “I hate this,” she mumbled, flushing the toilet.

Coming out of the stall, her reflection in the mirror hit her in the face. A sigh escaped. She looked awful. She swished back her dark brown hair and turned on the faucet. Cold water stung her face when she splashed it against her skin and rivulets ran down her pasty white cheeks. Her hair hung limply over her shoulders, lifeless and dull. The red lipstick she’d added to her lips this morning to give them color completed the ugly picture. She looked like a Gothic queen.

She couldn't believe the girl in the mirror had been called beautiful only a few weeks ago. But then, the guy only wanted to get laid. He hadn't known she wasn't in the market for any man.

The door to the bathroom squeaked opened, and she turned.

"Gosh, Susan, are you all right?" Tracy, a cute blonde from Susan's class, rushed forward.

"Yes, I'm fine." Susan pulled paper towels from the dispenser and patted the moisture from her face.

"Well, you should have seen Colt's face when you went barreling out of class. I thought he was going to take off after you. He just stood there, staring at the door." Tracy dropped her jaw and opened her eyes wide in a parody of shock.

Tracy laughed at her silly face in the mirror. "Mrs. Murphy had to tell him to continue. Then when class was over, he helped me gather up your stuff." She dropped Susan's book bag on the counter with a thud. "The man must really have the hots for you."

The admiration in Tracy's eyes didn't help Susan feel any better. She didn't welcome his concern. Now, because of it, she was going to have to apologize for running out on his speech.

Even worse, she was going to have to endure the scent of his cologne again.

* * * *

A cold October breeze whistled across the community college campus. Susan glared at the clouds blocking the sun's warmth. It was after two o'clock, and the temperature still hadn't topped fifty. She adjusted her oversized coat to cover her baggy sweater and scanned the people coming from the parking lot. If she could catch Colt before he got to class, then she could apologize for her rude behavior Monday. She didn't want a crowd overhearing what she had to say.

She caught a glimpse of him coming toward her. When he was a few steps away, she spoke. "Hey, Colt, can I talk to you a minute?"

"You bet." He smiled and stopped beside her, letting the cute blonde who was walking with him go on ahead.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Susan glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "I wanted to apologize for running out on your speech the other day."

He shrugged. "No big deal. Mrs. Murphy explained the problem."

A rush of dread washed over her. She grabbed the sleeve of his jacket, unable to stop herself from asking, "She told you I was pregnant?"

Colt shook his head. A confused, almost pained look passed over his face. “No, she said you warned her that you might have to leave in a hurry because you have a sensitive stomach.”

“Oh.” Susan quickly released his arm and turned away. “I, uh, have a problem with your cologne. It seems to upset my sinuses.”

She walked away from him, trying to escape and catch her breath. *How could I be so stupid?*

With his long stride, he quickly matched her pace. “Is that why you’ve been avoiding me all semester?”

She glanced at him. The pungent odor didn’t invade her senses. “You’re not wearing it today?”

“I was in a hurry this morning and forgot.” He smiled.

“Well, uh, I’m sure most of the girls in our class enjoy the scent. I just can’t seem to stand the, uh . . .”

An increase of people in the open area told Susan their class would be starting in a few minutes.

“You can’t stand the smell of it,” Colt finished.

“Yes, well . . .” Susan hedged and reached for the door.

“You could have told me,” he said, holding the door open.

“Right.” People streamed past her out the door. “And how do you go about starting that conversation?”

In the hall, packed with students, no one was allowed to stand still for long. Susan walked forward, weaving her way down the hall and away from Colt.

She hoped to escape him, but he kept up. He entered the classroom right on her heels. “I would have understood. My mother has allergies.” He sat down in the desk next to her and took off his jacket. “I just won’t wear my cologne to class anymore.”

“Thanks.” Susan took out her notebook. She wondered why he was still bothering to talk to her. He had to know she wasn’t in the market for a boyfriend, not with her being pregnant. She couldn’t think of a bigger turnoff for a man than a fat woman with another man’s baby kicking around in her belly. And as a broke college student, he couldn’t afford a ready-made family.

* * * *

Colt glanced over at Susan’s notebook. Her long, graceful fingers sketched a leafy vine along the edge of her notes with a lead pencil. The innocent frill ran along the margins, strangling the seriousness from the classic literature.

The naïve nature of her drawings had him reflecting on what she had mistakenly told him earlier.

She is pregnant.

The thought hit him in the gut, reopening a tender wound.

He blinked, struggling to refocus on the present. His eyes followed along on the long, silky veil of her hair. Draped over her shoulder, it blocked his view of her face. Was she trying to hide from him?

The slip of her tongue earlier had caused her grief. She'd wanted to escape, but he hadn't let her get away. All semester he'd been trying to get close to her, but the closer he got, the more she retreated. Now he knew why.

What she didn't understand was her pregnancy didn't turn him off. Instead, the fact fueled his desire to get to know her better. He wanted to know if she had a boyfriend, and who would be helping with her child.

Or was she all alone?

At the end of class, Colt quickly gathered up his things and stood, admiring Susan. Her hair ran down her back, almost to her butt. Bending over to pick up her backpack, he checked out the nice curve of her rear. He let his gaze follow the line of her skin-tight jeans to her pink sneakers. He glanced back up into velvet brown eyes when she started to leave.

The girl is hot, even if she is pregnant.

"Why don't you let me buy you a cup of coffee over at the cafeteria?"

She shook her head. "It's kind of you to offer, but I don't think so."

Before he could answer, she turned for the classroom door.

"Why not?" He followed her out of the room and down the hall. The crowd flowing both in and out of the building brushed by them on their way through the door. The noise so loud, he had to yell to be heard. "I don't bite, and most people think I'm a nice guy!"

Susan walked outside and stepped to the edge of the sidewalk to let people pass.

"Colt, look, I . . ."

She faltered when he put his arm around her shoulders. He drew her into his chest and felt her tremble. With his lips next to her ear, he whispered, "I'm not going to argue with you. We both know you can use a friend. Why can't it be me?"

She jerked back and studied his face. He could tell she was judging his motive for wanting to be her friend. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

He smiled and walked beside her toward the parking lot. "Why don't we go somewhere else for coffee?"

* * * *

Susan questioned her sanity when she saw Colt's old, rusty truck turn into an apartment complex. They had agreed. She would follow him to someplace quiet where they could talk and get something to drink.

But now he was taking her to his apartment, and she wondered if she should just keep driving. Yet, her curiosity about why such a good-looking guy wanted to be her friend wouldn't let her turn away.

Was he just after easy sex?

She took the turn.

The guy could have any girl he wanted. Why single her out?

Putting her car in Park, Susan reached for her purse. The door beside her opened.

"I thought for a minute there you were going to ditch me when I made that final turn." He took her hand and helped her out of the car.

She walked along the sidewalk. His grip around her hand soothed some of her unease. He didn't make her feel as if he was trying to force himself on her.

"I thought about it, and then I decided you were probably trying to find a place where we wouldn't be overheard. Or it could be you don't want to be seen with me. Whichever it is, I don't plan on staying long."

"Fair enough, since I pitched you a curve by bringing you here." He led the way up the steps and turned to open the door to the first apartment on the left. "Come on in." He walked across the threshold and held the door.

Susan checked out the décor of his apartment. A gray card table took the place of a dining room table. Four folding chairs with various articles of clothing tossed over them sat around the small alcove.

She paused after taking a few steps and turned. "Colt, you know I'm pregnant. What is it you want from me?"

He smiled and walked past her into the kitchen. "Unrestricted sex without the fear of getting you pregnant."

"What did you say?" Susan couldn't believe she'd heard him correctly.

He turned to face her. "Is that the answer you're expecting me to give? I'm not after your body, Susan." He opened the refrigerator. "But I must say, I never would have guessed you're pregnant. That is, if you hadn't told me."

He drew out a can. "Cola or do you want me to make some coffee?"

"Neither. I'm trying to stay away from caffeine." Susan leaned against the doorway leading into the kitchen. "Okay, Colt, if it's not sex, then what is it?"

"How about some water?" He put back the soda and handed her a bottle of water. "I guess you don't think it might be because I find you interesting. Or that I just might want to get to know you better."

Susan twisted the lid off and took a long drink of the cold water. The serious look in his green eyes had her wondering if he was sincere, but her limited experience with men told her differently. She didn't know a single guy who wanted to get to know a girl unless he was after more than just friendship.

His hands cupped the curve of her shoulder. He tugged her purse strap down her arm. "Look, sit down, and let's talk. I promise I'll behave." He stepped around her, set her purse on the card table, and walked into the other room. "You can leave whenever you want."

Still suspicious, she followed him into the living room, which had all the essential items for the classic bachelor pad. A worn, red leather recliner waited for Colt, while the panther print loveseat could be used to make out on. Perched on what looked to be an end table was the television. The elegant oak coffee table looked out of place with the rest of the furniture.

Susan sat down on the couch. "All right, Colt, who do you know that is pregnant?"

"No one. Why?"

"Well, your interest in me seemed to have increased once you knew I was pregnant." Susan glanced around, looking for signs a woman might share the place with him. She set her water on the coffee table.

"That's not true. I've liked you since the first day of class. This is just the first day you've said more than two words to me." He sat down in the recliner and leaned back. His relaxed pose eased her worries, but she noticed he didn't have a drink in his hand.

Why ask her out for coffee if he wasn't thirsty?

"I thought I'd better take advantage of your talking to me. Or who knows? The next time we meet, you may not even speak to me." His words came short of accusing her of being rude, but she ignored the insinuation.

The baby rolled against her bladder. She rubbed her stomach with her hand. She wondered briefly how long she'd have before she'd need to go to the bathroom. Maybe she should think about leaving.

"I haven't noticed you lacking any female attention."

"Yes, well, I can't help it. I'm gorgeous." He grinned like he was laughing at himself.

“And modest, too,” Susan added and returned his smile.

“I know. It’s a curse I’m struggling to live with.” His face fell into a sad puppy-dog look. “You should have mercy on me and offer to save me from those hordes of women.”

She laughed and realized with a start she hadn’t found anything funny in a while. “It helps build character.”

“Exactly,” he said, leaning forward, “but what about my mind? Don’t you think it needs work too?”

Suspicious, Susan hedged. She didn’t want to be caught in some type of trap, so she gave him a vague answer. “Well, I think that’s part of the reason why we’re going to college. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, but . . .” He stood up and slipped into the empty space beside her on the loveseat. “I’m not very good in literature. It’s part of the reason I’ve waited until my junior year to take the class.” He placed his arm along the back of the couch.

“But we’re only going to a two-year school.” She shifted her shoulders away from his hand. With him so close, her body tingled like a current of energy was sizzling through her nerve endings.

“I know, but I’m transferring the credits to University of Texas at Dallas where I’m also attending classes. I wanted to graduate by next May.” Colt stretched out his long legs. He relaxed back into the sofa like they were going to be there all day.

His body, so close to hers, radiated a heat which called to her senses. She gripped her hands together in her lap to keep from touching his thigh.

“I couldn’t get the course at the time I wanted at UTD, so I decided to take it at a community college.” He had his arms open wide with one lying on the back of the couch and one on the arm. “I thought you might be willing to help me.”

Susan eyed him, curious if he really needed help with the class. He looked more as if he was asking her to help him with a different type of problem, one that would get her into even more trouble than her heart could take.

“I don’t know, Colt.” She wanted to help him, but she wanted to resist the temptation. “Tracy is doing much better in the class than I am. And she’s crazy about you. Why don’t you ask her?”

He shook his head and said in a deep, staged voice of regret, “I can’t. My curse would cause her to fall madly in love with me.” He shifted and put his hands dramatically over his heart. “And then I’d have to break the poor girl’s heart. A sad destiny for both of us, she’d be heartbroken and I would be considered a scoundrel. You have to save us.”

He covered her hands, which were clamped together over her stomach. His touch loosened her hold. “You’re strong. You can resist my charm.”

Gently prying her hands apart, he placed one in his palm. She tugged back, but he wouldn't let go. "Colt, the class isn't that hard."

"See? Your brilliance is shining through." "Come on, Susan," he said dropping his theatrical tone, "you know I like you, but I do need help with this class."

"Is that why you brought me here?"

"Partly." He placed her hand against his chest and looked down at her stomach.

"And the rest?" She watched his face closely. The serious concern in his eyes when they met hers surprised her.

"I was curious."

"About?"

"You."

"Why?"

He looked back down at her stomach. "Not many girls your age and unmarried attend college if they are pregnant."

"Are you saying I shouldn't be there?" She could hear her father's voice ring in her ear about how she should stay home until after the baby was born.

"No, it tells me a lot about you. Things that make me want to get to know you better."

"Right, like I'm an easy lay." She shifted her hands in his grip to free herself.

"Not for me, because I don't think my curse works on pregnant women." He lifted her hand to his lips. "No, when I look at you, I see a strong, courageous woman who has a mission to get an education no matter the obstacles in front of her."

Susan blinked. Did he really see that in her? Funny, no one in her family saw her strong determination to go to school in that light.

His lips brushed over her knuckles. Shivers of awareness rushed up her arm. In the dark green depths of his eyes, she could tell he was reading her reaction.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" She tugged lightly on her hand.

He smiled briefly before his tongue moistened the small valleys between her fingers. She had to bite her lip to keep from moaning with pleasure. For months she'd been without sex, and her hormones were screaming with need.

She shifted. The wetness between her legs told her she was in big trouble if the man could turn her on by just kissing her hand. “I, uh, think I’d better go.”

“Are you going to help me?” He released her hand.

She worked her way to the edge of the loveseat. “No.”

He kept her from rising by laying his hand on her thigh. “And why not?”

She lifted his hand off her leg, stood up, and said in frustration, “Because I’m six months pregnant with another man’s child, I’m cranky and fat and horny as hell. And if I don’t get out of here in the next five minutes, I’m going to make the second biggest mistake in my life.”

Rushing across the room, she picked up her purse and ran out the door.

His soft chuckles dogged her steps.

Chapter Two

“It just doesn’t make sense to me, Kelly. He’s a smart guy. Why would he need me to help him with the class?” Susan watched the blade of the knife go through the onion. She was glad her job in Kelly and Jason’s household didn’t include cooking. Kelly had insisted she liked the chore. Susan, as the maid, only had to clean up.

“Jason is a smart guy, too. But he can’t spell worth a damn,” Kelly said around the matchstick in her mouth. Susan really didn’t believe the technique kept the tears away.

“Yes, but Jason loves you.” Susan wondered if anyone could not find Kelly loveable. Besides being a beautiful blonde with blue eyes and a killer figure, she was smart. Too bad she . . .

“Maybe, but when we were teamed up together in the master’s program, he was a royal pain.” Kelly threw the match in the trash. “I think the man went out of his way to find big words to use in our report so he could ask me how to spell them.” She scooped onion pieces off the cutting board and put them into a skillet. “And believe me, he was just like Colt. Jason wanted me to go out with him, and he thought if he pestered me enough, I’d give in.”

“So what should I do?” Susan shifted on her wooden barstool to get more comfortable. The baby rolled over and stretched. The soft pressure against the wall of her abdomen drew her hand to her stomach. “The man is hot. I’m not going to be able to resist him.”

“What’s wrong?” Concern rang in Kelly’s voice.

“Nothing, why?” Susan said, confused by the quick shift in topics.

“You had a funny look on your face.” Kelly picked up the green bell pepper and started chopping.

“Oh, the baby is moving.”

“Really?” Kelly’s eyes lit up.

Susan knew how much Kelly wanted to have a baby. It was part of the reason she was living with Kelly and Jason. “Do you want to feel the power of an all-star kicker?”

“Yes.” Kelly put down her knife and walked around the counter.

Her hand must have alerted the baby, because a kick hit Kelly’s palm.

“It must be amazing to feel a little person growing inside you,” Kelly said in awe.

“Usually.” Susan shrugged. “Sometimes, though, it’s more discomfort than amazement. Like at night when the baby wakes me, or during the day when he lays on my bladder. Sometimes I feel like an alien is invading my body, with demands I can’t meet.”

“You know you don’t have to face this alone. Jason and I will help you in any way we can, even if you don’t want to let us adopt your baby.” Kelly placed her hand on Susan’s shoulder. “You know we think of you as part of the family.”

“Yes, but . . .” Susan didn’t want to go over this again, but she still didn’t know what she should do. “If I keep the baby, how am I going to be able to go to school and get a degree? And if I let you and Jason adopt it, my parents will never forgive me.”

Susan ran her hand along the edge of the cold granite countertop. “You know my dad. He still refuses to talk to me.”

“He’ll come around.” Kelly walked back into the kitchen. The scent of onions filled the room when she stirred them in the pan. “You have to give him a little time, and try to see it from his point of view. Not only does he feel like he’s losing you, but he thinks he’s losing his grandchild too.”

“But why can’t he see this as a decision I have to make for myself? I want to get an education so I can make a good living, but I can’t if I’m trying to take care of a baby.”

Kelly picked up the knife and started chopping the peppers again. “He knows that. But he’s hurting, and he can’t see past his own desire to help, which is blinding him to what you want.”

Susan shook her head. Her father didn’t care about her. He was too busy worrying about himself. “I think you’re being too kind to him. He only wants to control my life and keep me forever locked under his thumb. Mom says he still hasn’t figured out how to do his customer billing since I left.”

The rumble of the garage door opening echoed through the room.

Kelly smiled. “You could call and try to explain to him how to do it.”

“No way. He’d only start in on how I shouldn’t be living with strangers.” Susan deepened her voice and mocked her father’s tone. “Sissy, you know it’s time you come home to your family. We’re the only ones who can take care of you.”

Jason stepped through the back door. He smiled at Susan and walked over to Kelly. “Hey, guys.”

The light in his eyes when he looked at his wife made Susan envious of the love they shared. In the two months she’d lived with them, she hadn’t once seen them argue or heard yell at each other.

“Jason.” Kelly walked into his arms. “You’re late.”

Susan glanced at the large bay window located on the other side of the breakfast table. Dark shadows played behind the glass.

“I know. I got a call from Susan’s dad right as I was leaving.” Jason kissed his wife.

Anger surged through Susan. She crossed her arms over her stomach, clutching her hands into her sweater. Her father just couldn’t leave her alone. “What did he want?”

“He was, uh, a little upset,” Jason started.

“You mean he was drunk?” Susan asked Jason for the truth.

He nodded.

“Your dad has really been missing you, though he doesn’t want to admit it. He called to see if I could talk you into going home for Thanksgiving.”

“But that’s over a month away.” Susan didn’t want to think about the holiday, much less going home to celebrate the day. Her parents hadn’t shown any signs of changing their opinions since she’d moved out. She didn’t need any more advice from them.

“Yes, but you haven’t been home since you moved to Dallas. Your dad thought, maybe since you had a long weekend, you might be more willing to travel.”

“Why? Gladewater is only two hours away.” Susan shoved back from the bar. “I could go home any weekend I wanted.”

Jason walked over and yanked out a barstool. “I know you’re not ready to deal with him yet. But by Thanksgiving, you might want to see your mother and brother.”

He sat down and put his hand on the back of her chair, trying to offer her comfort without invading her space. She appreciated the concern, but she wasn’t sure she could handle a long weekend at her parents’. Her father’s views wouldn’t have changed by then, if they ever did change.

“You don’t have to decide right now. Give yourself some time to think about it.” Jason looked over at Kelly, his eyes glowing with love. “So what’s for dinner? I’m starving.”

* * * *

Her earlier discussion with Susan played over and over in Kelly’s head. She didn’t notice the soft fabric of her favorite satin sheets or see the chocolates on her nightstand. Staring at the book in her hand, she didn’t see the words. Had she given Susan the right advice?

The bed dipped with Jason’s weight. He arranged the accent pillows of pink and white against the oak headboard. The silver down comforter he shoved off the end of the bed.

Kelly caught a brief glimpse of his black boxers before he slipped between the sheets. “I think I may have messed up.”

“Why? What did you do?” He settled down on his side of the bed.

“I told Susan she should help a guy in her class.”

“So?”

“It sounds like he’s interested in more than just getting help in English Lit.” Kelly saw Jason’s eyes narrow. “I only wanted her to find a friend, someone she could talk to, but I’m not sure this guy is really going to be helpful.”

“And what’s wrong with her talking with us?”

“Come on, Jason, the girl hasn’t been out of the house except to go to school for the last month. She’s almost like a prisoner in our home. She needs to socialize with other people her age.”

“Then why can’t she find a girlfriend?”

“I’ve asked her why she hasn’t tried to make some friends. She says she’s not interested. With her attending the community college for only one semester, she doesn’t want to invest too much time with people there. After all, she’s going to be transferring to University of Texas at Dallas in January.” Kelly laid her book back on her nightstand.

“He might really only need help with the class,” Jason said when she turned back to him. “After all, if he knows she’s pregnant . . .” He paused. “He does know she’s pregnant?”

Kelly nodded and watched while Jason leaned back on his pillows. The dark hair dusting his chest ran a line down over his flat stomach. Her body heated with longing.

His warm hand covered hers. “Then what else could he want?”

“Come on, Jason. How do you spell encyclopedia?” Kelly questioned, not believing how dense her husband could be at times.

“What?”

“Are you crazy? Just look at Susan. She’s as cute as a button. You can’t even tell she’s pregnant. Any guy with half a brain would want to know her and want to take her to bed.”

“But she’s pregnant.”

The stunned look on her husband’s face amazed Kelly. She shook her head and leaned closer. “Susan’s not dead. And she’s not our daughter. We can’t keep her from doing anything she wants to do.”

“Just tell her not to see this guy alone.” His brown, bedroom eyes lit a fire inside Kelly. “Have Susan study here when we’re home. I’ll make sure this guy doesn’t try anything.” The serious tone of his voice made her wonder what type of dad he would be.

“You don’t get it. We don’t have a say in what she does. She’s only our maid.” The fresh, clean smell of Jason’s skin enticed Kelly into snuggling closer.

He slipped his arms around her waist. “But I don’t want Susan to get hurt. She has enough problems already.”

“I know. That’s why we have to remember to be her friends.” Kelly buried her head in her husband’s shoulder.

“We may not be her parents, but we still have a right to be concerned about her.” Jason’s hand ran up under her hair and massaged her neck. “Talk to her in the morning. Tell her if she doesn’t feel comfortable being alone with this guy, she can meet with him here.”

Kelly lifted her head and ran her hands over his bare chest. “You just want to check him out.”

Jason grinned and nodded. “It never hurts to let the guy know we’re not going to tolerate him hurting Susan.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I’ll show him my muscles.” He flexed his biceps.

“You’re not her father.” She slid her hands over his firm flesh. He might be ripped, but she didn’t think he’d hurt a fly. “Though I must say I like this protective side you’ve developed. It reminds me of your brother, Derek.”

“Yeah, just because I’ve never been in the military doesn’t mean I don’t protect what is mine.” He drew Kelly down on the bed. “When Susan moved in with us, she became a part of our family. I’m not going to stand by and let her get hurt.”

Kelly wrapped her arms over her husband’s shoulders. “Yes, and since you have me pinned against the bed, I guess I have something you want.”

The twinkle in his eyes told her exactly what he had in mind. His arms tightened.

“I thought a little wrestling might tire us out. That way, we can get a better night’s sleep.”

Her giggle turned into a moan when his lips covered hers.

* * * *

“So have you decided to come to my rescue?”

Susan recognized the voice behind her. Colt put his arm around her shoulders. His warmth surrounded her, neutralizing the chill of the wind. He matched her shorter stride on their trip across campus.

Lying in bed last night, Susan had decided to give Colt a try. She needed someone else to talk to other than Jason and Kelly. And he already knew she was pregnant, so what harm could she do by getting to know him better? She could use a friend.

“I might, if you agree to my terms.” She stepped away from him when they neared the entrance of the building. Colt opened the door and held it for her.

“I should have known.” He stepped inside and placed his arm back around her shoulders.

Susan stopped and forced him against the wall. “First, you need to learn to keep your hands to yourself.”

His hands shifted to her waist. He drew her to him and leaned back. Her coat shielded her from his touch. The crisp scent of his wintergreen breath mint brushed across her face when he breathed.

She saw the spark of desire in his green eyes. It lit the dry kindling that had lain barren within her for the last six months. Need sparked. Her breasts tingled, her palms grew sweaty, and her heart raced. To stop herself from moving deeper into his arms, she put her hands on his chest.

“That’ll never work.” He drew her closer. “I like having you in my arms.”

“It’ll have to. Or I won’t agree to help you.” Susan had to stand firm on this point, or before long, she’d end up in bed with him.

“Is that the only obstacle to your agreeing to help me?”

“No.” Susan shifted back to get out of his embrace. “We can only study in public places or at Jason and Kelly’s house. No more trips to your apartment.”

“Are you afraid to be alone with me?”

The twinkle in his eyes told her he suspected the truth, but she decided not to comment. “Those are my terms,” she stated. A hard glint formed in his eyes, like he wanted to argue. After a few seconds, a wicked grin passed over his lips.

“Okay then, I’ll accept your terms as soon as we seal the deal with a kiss.”

His words registered in her head just before his lips covered hers.

People shuffled past. A cool breeze blew in from the entrance to the building. The end of class filled the hall with other students. Her mind recorded the data while the rest of her responded to Colt.

She put her arms around his neck so the hard wall of his chest could caress her breasts. His hot lips ran over hers, demanding she give him access to her mouth. She couldn’t deny him, or herself, the pleasure.

A flame of desire rushed through her with the long stroke of his tongue. A deep moan escaped from her throat. The melting sensation in her bones forced her to tighten her grip to keep from sliding to the floor in a puddle of lust. He drew her even closer into his strong arms.

He drank from her mouth. His thirst for her built a need inside her. The heavenly taste of him ignited a longing to give him everything he wanted. His body swelled, and the hard evidence of his desire caressed her thigh.

Someone bumped her backpack and jolted her back to the present. Colt lifted his head and opened his eyes, which locked onto hers. Desire beckoned like a warm emerald sea. She wanted to take another plunge into him and experience again the hot, sweet taste of his tongue.

“Colt, I think,” she said, stepping back, “we’d better get to class.”

Holding her a moment longer, he looked deep into her eyes to drive home his point. “Right. Then after class, we’ll set up our first study session.”

* * * *

Not wanting to, but knowing she needed to study, Susan stared at her English book. Her notes lay spread across the polished surface of the long dining room table. In the center sat a crystal vase, glowing from the light of the chandelier above. Color danced off the vase into every corner of the room.

Easily distracted, Susan glanced up when Kelly walked in from the kitchen. She carried several plates to the table and set them down.

“Are you sure this isn’t a bad time?” Susan asked.

“Not for us. Jason’s best friend, Michael Wilson, and his girlfriend, Karen Ann, had to cancel. But if you want to tell Colt you can’t study tonight, go for it.” Kelly placed the gold-rimmed plate back on the glass shelf in the china cabinet.

“But I don’t understand,” she said, turning back to Susan, “why you would want to cancel. You told me you enjoyed his company, and that Colt has been behaving himself. I haven’t even caught him so much as holding your hand.”

Susan looked back down at her book. It depressed her to know Colt no longer found her appealing. Over the last week, she’d met with him outside of class several times. “He’s been the perfect gentleman.”

Picking up the last plate, Kelly placed it in the cabinet. “And that’s got you down?”

“Yes. I know it shouldn’t, but I can’t help feeling he’s lost interest in me.” Susan had tried reasoning with herself. A man would only create more trouble in her world. She should just leave him alone.

“Does he sit beside you in class?”

“Yes.”

“And from what you said, he still walks you out to your car, right?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t put his arm around me anymore.”

Kelly shook her head. “I thought you told him not to touch you.”

“I did, but that doesn’t mean I thought he would really do it. I just meant I didn’t want to have sex with him. I thought he knew that.” Susan picked up her pen, trying her best to find an answer to her dilemma.

“You’ve seen him. He’s gorgeous, but that’s not what I find so hard to resist.” Susan didn’t like to think she was only falling for a pretty face. She looked down and drew a face on the blank sheet of her notebook.

“So what is it about him you can’t resist?” Kelly put her hand on the back of one of the chairs.

“He’s nice.” Susan spit out the words like they burned her tongue. No guy had every treated her like she was the most precious object in his world. She wasn’t sure she liked it.

“And that’s bad?”

“Yes. If I tell him I’m tired, he wants to call it a night. If I say my feet hurt, he offers to rub them. I don’t know how to handle him.” Susan liked him being concerned about her, but there was a limit. She wasn’t his elderly grandmother. “He’s only treating me this way because I’m pregnant.”

The doorbell rang.

“Why don’t you tell him how you feel?” Kelly worked her way down the table. “He won’t know unless you tell him.” She walked out the doorway leading to the front hallway.

How exactly do you tell a guy you want to be treated like every other girl he’s ever dated?

The problem was they weren’t dating.

Susan pushed back her chair. There was no point in studying tonight. She wouldn’t be able to keep her mind from straying to what it would feel like to have Colt’s kisses and touch. Ideas flashed through her mind and lit on other things they could do too. She quickly closed her book and gathered her stuff into a pile.

“Hey, whatcha doing?” He entered the room and set his book bag on the table.

Susan saw the green spark in his eyes, and her insides melted. She couldn’t take another evening with him treating her like an invalid. “I don’t want to study.”

“Why not?” His gruff voice drove home the point he wasn’t happy about her changing their plans.

“It’s Saturday, and I’m tired of being locked up in the house. I’ve decided to go out instead.” Susan stood up and faced him across the table. No matter what he thought, she couldn’t be with him tonight without losing control. She wanted him to hold her, kiss her, and make love to her. He’d already shown her one level of Dante’s hell with the sickly smell of his cologne. She didn’t want to visit another level by not being able to satisfy her desires.

“Who are you going with?”

“No one. I’m perfectly capable of going out by myself,” Susan said.

“Then I can’t go with you?”

“Do you want to go with me?”

Colt grinned. “I might if you ask me.”

“And if I don’t ask you?”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to follow you.” Colt walked around the table. “I’m not going to let you go out on a Saturday night without me.”

“Why? Because you don’t think I can take care of myself?”

“No. I just want to spend time with you.”

Susan studied his face. *What about him makes me long for his touch?*

His sincere look, the deep green of his bedroom eyes, his relaxed stance—he excited her senses into wanting things she couldn’t have.

“Well, you can’t.” She put her hands on her hips, which kept her from stepping forward and stroking the soft flannel of his shirt. “I don’t feel like being good tonight. I have plans to break the chains I’ve been under and dive into some sinful delights.”

Colt stepped closer. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

Anger ignited. Susan let loose some of her frustration. “Tough, I’ll do whatever the hell I want.” The man was not going to control her. She didn’t need another father.

He laid his hand on her arm when she started to turn away.

“Susan, I can’t let you go without me.” He drew her into his arms. “I’m not going to let you get into trouble.”

She leveraged her hands against his chest to keep her distance. The warm flannel caressed her palms. “Don’t be silly, you know I’m pregnant. How much more trouble can I get into?”

“Plenty. So I’m not going to let you get rid of me.”

“Fine,” she barked. “Then quit treating me like a piece of glass. I’m not going to break.”

“What are you talking about?” His confused expression added to her frustration. She didn’t want to explain how she needed his touch. Instead, she decided to show him exactly what she wanted.

She gripped his shirt and jerked him back into her arms. Her lips missed his by a few millimeters, but she glided her mouth across his in her quest to win her prize.

Catching him off guard, he stumbled against her. His arms circled her waist. His legs danced between hers. With his balance wobbling, Susan held on. She would not let him escape her with his clumsy movement.

She didn't care if they both landed in a heap on the floor. She just wanted to have his lips on hers, the hard line of his chest caressing her breasts. Her back hit the dining room wall. The stabilizing force gave him the support he needed, and he stepped closer.

With her secure against the wall, his mouth took control of hers. Playful kisses ignited a fire, and then he plundered her mouth. Robbing her of the ability to breathe or think or move, her head spun in dizzy, tight circles. On overload, she melted like warm butter over toast. Her arms tightened, and she nuzzled closer. Her enlarged belly felt the outline of his metal belt buckle. Her full breasts lay squashed against his chest.

When he drew away, she took several quick breaths and opened her eyes. The dark desire in his eyes echoed through her bloodstream. Her heart kicked into overdrive.

"Excuse me." Jason's voice rang from behind Colt. "Are you okay, Susan?"

She looked over Colt's shoulder and blinked at the image of Jason standing in the kitchen doorway. He stepped into the room. She could tell he was ready to attack with just one word from her.

He reminded her of her father. But unlike her father, he was waiting for her to give him the word before he turned violent.

"I'm fine." Susan shifted her hands to Colt's chest and rocked back on her heels.

"Are you sure? It sounded like you were being thrown against the wall." Jason stepped farther into the room. "I don't want anyone knocking you around."

Colt loosened his hold and turned to Jason. "And you are?"

"I'm Jason Harris, and you?" His voice, which usually had a friendly tone, held a warning.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jason." Susan rushed in to ease the testosterone levels in the room. "I forgot you haven't met Colt yet. With you working late all this week, Colt was always gone by the time you got home."

Susan stepped back to introduce them. "Jason, this is Colt Lefevour."

The two men sized each other up and shook hands.

Jason, ten years older, had a few more pounds than Colt, but they shared the same athletic build. Yet, size was the only real similarity between the two. Jason, with his dark, curly brown hair, deep brown eyes, and picture-perfect face, was a direct contrast to Colt's sandy blond hair and sea-green eyes. Both men looked ready to do battle.

After shaking Jason's hand, Colt turned back to Susan. "Tell me again why you are living here?"

He looked upset, but she couldn't come up with a reason why. Before she could answer, Jason did.

"She's living here because she's part of our family."

Colt gripped her arm. "Right. And is he also the guy who got you pregnant?"

Chapter Three

Doubt rumbled through Colt's stomach when he saw the shocked look on Susan's face. He realized his error. Her sleeping with her boss hadn't seemed so far-fetched after Colt got a look at Jason. After all, Susan had been singing his praises all week. What did she expect?

Colt released her when she jerked her arm.

"Oh, of all the stupid things to say," she yelled and backed away. "Where did you get such a crazy idea?"

"Well, you said you thought the baby would have brown hair and brown eyes because you and the baby's father both had the same traits." Colt scrambled to come up with a plausible excuse for his mistake. The absence of Susan beside him sent a chill down his spine. How could he have been so stupid?

A thunder of footsteps sounded from the front hallway.

Susan backed away from Colt. "Yes, and millions of people have brown hair and brown eyes."

Kelly walked into the room from the hallway. "Hey, guys, what's going on in here? I could hear you yelling from upstairs."

"Oh, nothing much. Colt just accused me of sleeping with Jason." Susan walked over to Kelly.

A shocked look passed over Kelly's face, but she quickly hid her feelings. "Well, I'm sure he, uh . . ."

"Is an idiot?" Susan supplied and took Kelly's hand.

The two stood hugging while Colt struggled to think of some way to salvage the situation. Confused, he wondered why he would accuse Susan of such a thing. He liked her. Turning to Jason, he said, "She never told me who the father was. How was I supposed to know it wasn't you?"

"Well, you might have looked at my wife. Kelly isn't someone any guy would be foolish enough to cheat on." Jason smiled at his wife.

"But Susan told me Kelly can't have children. How was I to know this wasn't some kind of funky setup where you got Susan pregnant so you could give Kelly a baby?"

Jason shook his head. "I think you've been watching too many reality talk shows. I wouldn't take advantage of Susan that way."

"Then tell me again why Susan is living with you?" Colt knew there was more to the story than Susan just being their live-in maid. "I know you guys are not related to her in any way. Yet, you're helping her. Why?"

Jason glanced at the women. Colt let himself look at them, too.

"I don't think that's any of your business." Susan wiped the tears from her eyes and stepped out of Kelly's arms. "I've already told you I'm working as their maid to pay for my room and board. They're helping me with school, too. That's all you need to know."

"But that's not all of it, is it?" Colt wanted to know what was going on. "You refuse to give me an answer every time I ask about your baby's future. Why?"

"Tell him." Kelly put her hand on Susan's shoulder.

She looked back at Kelly. He could see some type of silent argument being waged between them. His chest tightened with unease.

Susan was the first one to speak. "I haven't made my decision yet."

"Yes, but he might want to know the problems you're facing." Kelly turned to her husband and held out her hand. "Why don't we go upstairs? I don't think these two need us to chaperone."

Jason walked forward and drew his wife to his side. "Just call if you need us," he said to Susan before they walked out of the room.

Susan's grip on the top of a dining room chair turned her knuckles white. She stared at the vase in the middle of the table. He waited for her to look up.

"Colt, this is one of the reasons I didn't want to get involved with you." Her eyes met his. "I have to decide *alone* what I want to do with my baby." He could see her determination not to let anyone interfere with her decision-making process.

"You know Kelly can't have a baby. What you don't know is if I decide to give my baby up for adoption, Kelly and Jason will be my baby's parents." Susan released the chair and stepped back.

A pain shot through Colt's heart at the thought of her having to give up her child.

Susan clenched her hands at her side and continued. "They know I'm torn as to what to do. My parents are trying to pressure me into raising the baby myself, but I'm not sure. I want to get an education, and I don't think I can do both. A newborn takes a lot of time and school requires a certain amount of devotion. I don't want to sacrifice one for the other."

Colt could see her dilemma. He'd been working on a way to solve her problem, but she would probably not appreciate his suggestion. He'd have to wait. "And who's the father?" He needed to know if the guy was still in the picture. An unseen adversary in the wings would ruin Colt's plan.

Susan smiled. "A guy from high school. He doesn't care what I do. He's in Arkansas, playing football for the Razorbacks."

"And when are you going to make your decision?" He had to know how much time he had to convince her to choose his option.

“I don’t know. I have until the baby is born to decide.” She stepped into the doorway leading into the hall. “I think you’d better leave. I want to be alone, if you don’t mind.”

Colt followed until she stopped beside the front door. He paused, not wanting to leave. “Are you still going out for some sinful delights?”

She looked at him for a moment, a confused expression on her face, and then nodded. “Yes, I still think that’s a good idea.”

“And are you going to let me go with you?” He stepped forward, crowding her against the door.

“No. I don’t want you to share the responsibility of me breaking the rules.” Her hands landed on his chest.

“I think you better tell me what you’re going to do.” He ran his fingers over her arms. He could smell the sweet scent of her shampoo.

“And I think you’d better back off.” Her eyes held a warning.

Caught between making her mad and keeping her safe, Colt decided to divert the blame. He yelled up the stairs, “Kelly, Jason, Susan’s not playing fair!”

Susan shoved him away. “You sound like my brother.”

Colt stumbled backward and groped for the oak railing. “Yes, but if I can’t keep you from doing something stupid, maybe they can.”

Footsteps sounded on the landing above.

“What’s going on?” Kelly looked over the banister.

“Nothing,” Susan said. “Colt is just being silly.”

He turned and spoke to Kelly and Jason. “I’m not the one going out for sinful delights.”

“Oh no, you’re not thinking about going off your diet, are you?” Kelly, with Jason behind her, started down the stairs.

Colt looked over at Susan, surprised by the idea of her watching her weight. He thought most women considered pregnancy an excuse to eat whatever they wanted.

“I was just going to get a scoop of fudge ripple ice cream.” Susan sent him an evil glare. “I wasn’t going to buy a half gallon like last time.”

Jason paused on the last step next to Colt. “The girl has good intentions, but once she enters the ice cream shop, she has no willpower.”

“Why don’t you get Colt to go with you?” Kelly offered as a solution.

“No, I think Colt has decided he needs to go home.” Susan crossed her arms over her chest. She looked peeved.

“Well, I might be willing to take you.” He grinned, knowing he was only going to make her angrier. “If you ask me nicely.”

“When hell freezes over.” She started down the hall.

Colt stepped in front of her to keep her from moving past him. “I might even be willing to buy you a drink, burger, and some fries.” He slipped his hands around her waist and tugged her into his arms.

She shook her head. “I’m stretching it by having the ice cream.”

“Then I’ll have to find something else you might want to do. Maybe we can go to the movies or shopping, something that doesn’t tempt us to eat.” Her eyes lit up. He wondered when she’d last been out on a date.

“I don’t know.” She turned to look at Kelly and Jason. “You guys sure you don’t mind if I go out?”

“No, it would do you good to get out,” Kelly answered. “You just need a coat.”

“And Colt needs to get his books.” Susan walked down the hall. The sound of her heels clicked against the wooden floor as she beat a fast retreat. Kelly smiled and followed Susan, leaving Colt alone with Jason.

Colt glanced at him.

Jason grinned. “As much as I’d like to tell you I have a gun, I don’t.” After a short pause, Jason’s face grew serious. “But I do have a brother that does, so make sure you handle her with care.”

Colt couldn’t swallow past the lump in his throat. He had no doubt Jason would carry through with his threat if he did anything to hurt Susan. “Gotcha. I’ll give you no reason to worry.”

* * * *

“Are you sure we should have let her leave the house with that guy?” Jason turned from closing the front door.

“As I’ve told you before, we don’t really have a say in the matter. She seems to like him.” Kelly took her husband’s hand and led him back up the stairs. They still needed to finish cleaning out the baby’s room.

“But I don’t think I like him. He thought I was the father of Susan’s baby.” Jason shook his head. “How could he think such a thing?”

“Well, maybe he thought you were a surrogate father.” Kelly paused in the doorway of the guest bedroom. “If you think about it, our setup is a little strange. Most girls don’t live with the family who want to adopt their babies. They usually live in a halfway house or with their parents.”

“Susan is better off not living with her parents. And we still don’t know if she’s going to let us adopt her baby.”

Jason’s reminder hit Kelly in the heart. She turned and looked at the room designed for the baby. Was it all for nothing?

She struggled for a moment to recall her sister-in-law’s advice. “*Give Susan a chance to get to know you. She’ll love you as much as I do.*”

Jason slid his hands over her stomach and pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry, but we both know there’s no guarantee Susan will let us have her baby.”

“I know.” Kelly choked out the words. “I’ve tried so hard to be her friend and not influence her either way. But it’s hard.”

She leaned back into him and stared at the baby’s room. “When Susan first came to live with us, I could barely look at her. I could see the baby growing inside her. I fought with myself not to give in to the anger I was feeling at not being able to conceive.”

“You were wonderful,” Jason whispered in her ear.

She shook her head. “No, I wasn’t. You caught me several times crying my eyes out after she left for school. I couldn’t understand why she could have what I couldn’t. Then after a few weeks, she said something to me that rocked my world.”

“What?” He turned her in the circle of his arms. “Why didn’t you tell me? Did she upset you?”

Kelly bit her lip to keep the tears in check. “I couldn’t tell you. I felt too guilty.”

“What did she say?”

The concern on his face added to her guilt. “She said I was the most amazing woman she ever met.”

“Well, that’s true.” His matter-of-fact answer made her pause.

“Yes, but she meant it.” Kelly gripped his arms. “You know how she looks at me. You’d think I was her hero. It makes me feel like such a fraud.”

“But it shouldn’t.” He rubbed his hands over her back. “You’re probably the first woman Susan has ever met who has a master’s degree, a successful career, and all the things she’s ever wanted.” He drew Kelly closer. “Not counting a gorgeous husband. You’ve also been very nice to her. You’re everything she wants to be.”

“But, Jason, I want her baby.” Tears fell from her eyes.

He gathered her into his arms. She released her pent-up emotions, unable to stop the flood. How could she not hate herself for wanting something so badly when it belonged to someone else?

“Oh, honey.” Jason soothed her broken heart. “There’s no crime in wanting her baby. Susan told us she doesn’t think she’s ready to raise a child.” He shifted back a few inches and looked down into Kelly’s face. “We’re not forcing Susan. Right now, we’re only trying to help her.”

The gentle kindness in his brown eyes mocked her. How could he be so sweet to her when she felt like such a bitch?

“I know Susan is a great girl, but I’m battling with my own inadequacies. I can’t give you a child.” The thought tore all of Kelly’s other accomplishments to shreds.

“Maybe not, but you give me a lot of other things.” He tugged her closer and ran his hands down over her hips.

“Like what?” She didn’t want to think she was only a sex object.

“Well, you put up with my friends. You had planned a nice dinner for Michael and Karen Ann to celebrate their engagement. When they called and canceled, you didn’t even get upset.” Jason brushed his lips against her cheek, mopping up her tears.

“It wasn’t their fault someone hit Karen Ann’s car.”

“Maybe, but what about all the other little things you do for me? Like take my shirts to the cleaners, fix dinner every night, call just to say ‘I love you’ in the middle of the day? You spoil me with kindness.” Jason turned and led her back down the hall to their bedroom.

“Anyone could do those things.” Kelly didn’t think of herself as special. Most wives did those things for their husbands.

“Wrong. You’re the one I look forward to seeing after a hard day at work. You alone get my blood pumping.” He swept her into his arms and carried her over to the bed. “Whether Susan gives us her baby or not, you’re the one I want.”

His lips took hers. Her heart melted, mending slowly under the gentle fire of his love.

* * * *

“Colt, why don’t you take me home?” Susan worked her way to the edge of Colt’s loveseat. Using the sofa’s arm to help steady herself, she stood.

“Why?”

“Because you’ve been staring off into space for the last ten minutes. You’re not even watching the football game.” Susan looked at the score. The Longhorns were blowing the other team away.

After getting ice cream, Susan had decided she didn't want him spending any more money on mindless entertainment. With the costs of his apartment and school, he probably had more expenses than he could afford already. She had no idea if his parents were helping him, but she didn't want to add to his burden.

When Colt had suggested they go to his apartment and watch TV, she had agreed. But he had been acting strangely ever since they'd gotten there.

He leaned forward in the recliner and sat up. "But it's early yet." After retrieving the remote, he turned off the TV. "We can do something else."

"No, Colt. I think you'd rather be alone." Susan picked up her water bottle from the coffee table. He would be better off if she just stayed away. He didn't need her problems.

He stood. "That's not true. I've just been trying to figure out why you won't let your family help you."

She shook her head, depressed by the idea of talking about her parents. "That's because you don't know my family."

"Maybe then you should explain it to me. How else can I help you?"

"I didn't ask you to help me."

"Right." He took her water bottle from her hand and threw the empty container into the kitchen. It crashed against the kitchen floor. "Then how can I understand what's going on, if you don't tell me?"

Susan leaned back on the arm of the couch and looked at his sexy body. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"No." He stepped over to her and drew her into his arms. "I know you think I'm butting into your life, but I really do care about you. And I want to know about the problems you're facing."

The concern in his eyes warmed her, but she really didn't want to explain the ins and outs of her family to him. Susan ran her hands over the edge of his shoulders and placed baby kisses along the line of his jaw. She enjoyed the smooth texture of his face against her lips.

"You know I'm not going to let a few kisses distract me from getting answers." His hands caressed her back.

She smiled and continued her assault. He could ask all the questions he wanted. She didn't have to answer them. The tender skin of his earlobe brushed against the end of her nose. She could smell the scent of his soap. Her body ached with need. She pressed her breasts into his chest. His arms tightened, and he shifted his head.

"I know just how to make you talk." His green eyes sparkled with desire before he covered her lips with his.

The warm, wet strokes of his mouth against hers ignited her desire, and she melted against his chest. She tried to capture his lips, but he didn't give her a chance. Instead, he deepened the kiss. Six months without a caress, her body was burning with need. The lightest touch of his fingers along her back sent a shiver down her spine. Her breasts tingled. She tightened her arms and lifted her heels off the ground to be in closer contact with his chest. No man could feel this good. This was a dream from which she didn't want to wake.

* * * *

She sighed when he lifted his mouth from hers.

He drank in the rapturous look on her face and backed out of her embrace. His hands skimmed down her back and over her hips. She shivered. His body ached.

He looked into the dark, lustful pools of her eyes. They left no doubt in his mind that she wanted him. He wanted her. All he had to do was pick her up and carry her into his bedroom, undress her, and spend the rest of the night discovering what it took to have her come apart in his arms. He took hold of her wrists, knowing she wasn't going anywhere, but he wanted to give her the option. "Do you still want to leave?"

"Leave?" She looked confused for a moment and then smiled. "Not at the moment."

"Good." He sat down on the loveseat and guided her down onto his lap. Her arms found their way back around his neck. "I still have a few questions I want to ask you."

She straightened her back, putting more space between them. "And if I don't answer, are you going to try to seduce the answers out of me?"

"Would it work?" He doubted she'd tell him anything she didn't want to, no matter what he did. He would need to put the questions about her family on hold.

"No, but it might be fun if you tried." She leaned back against the arm of the sofa while she played with the buttons of his shirt.

"What if I ask if I could make love to you?"

Her eyes widened, and she dropped her hands to her stomach. She lifted her top and showed him her belly. "I don't think it would be much fun for you."

He couldn't stop himself from touching her, running his hand over the smooth skin along the waistband of her jeans. The stretchy panel of her pants gave easily to his touch. He shoved the fabric out of the way until he uncovered most of her belly. "Why?"

The baby moved.

"Did you feel that?" Susan asked.

He nodded, amazed by the rippling movement showing through her skin.

“Well, imagine making love to me while the baby is wiggling between us. It sounds too gross for words,” she said and frowned.

Caught up by the miracle of the baby inside her, he caressed her skin. She jumped the first time his fingers brushed the underside of her breasts through her bra.

“Maybe, but I bet your breasts are much fuller now that you’re pregnant.” He toyed with the edge of her bra.

She laughed. “True, but sometimes they’re so sensitive, I feel as if I can’t move without them hurting.”

“Maybe they are just crying for some attention.” He slid a finger under her bra and tugged her forward. He unhooked her bra with his other hand, but her blouse hid her from his view.

“Colt.” She sighed when he cupped her breast.

His thumb played across her nipple. It hardened with need. He wanted to take the stiff tip into his mouth and stroke the tight berry with his tongue. He looked at her face to get her reaction. Her eyes closed. She bit her lip, and her white knuckles gripped her blouse, which lay scrunched up under her breasts.

“Why don’t you take off your shirt?”

She opened her eyes. He could see desire buried in their dark, velvety depths, along with a spark of doubt.

He waited, not sure for a moment what she’d do. Then she yanked the fabric over her head, taking off her bra along with her shirt.

The sight of her full, rich breasts stunned him. He leaned forward, taking one of the tight pink tips into his mouth and cupped her other breast with his hand. She sighed and slid her hands over his shoulders.

The silky smooth texture of her skin played against his tongue. The strong punch of need forced him to feast on the fragrant swell. Sucking, tasting, he ravished her with his mouth. Her fingers dug into the muscles of his shoulders. She choked back a scream, which turned into a long, throaty moan. She tugged on his shoulders, and her breast slid away from his greedy mouth. He lifted his head and blew a stream of air over her wet nipple.

She took several quick breaths. “Colt, you have to stop.”

He looked into her dark eyes, almost black with desire. “Why?”

“Because if you don’t, I’m going to come right here, right now, and I can’t give you the same satisfaction.”

Colt smiled and lowered his head.

* * * *

“Hey, Susan, you want to come over and study at my place today?” Colt’s voice caused goose bumps to form on her skin. “I don’t have to work.”

Susan turned to see the broad smile on his face. She didn’t understand why he was still talking to her. After taking her over the edge the other night, he hadn’t demanded she give him the same type of release. Instead, he had been avoiding her every day after school by claiming to be busy with work. She didn’t know what he wanted anymore.

Now he thought she should drop everything and go study with him. Well, he could think again. “Can’t.”

“Why?” He slipped his arm around her shoulders and whispered in her ear, “Because you don’t want to come apart in my arms again?”

Heat marked her face. She didn’t think anyone would notice, not with the chilly winds of early November blowing across campus. She kept walking.

“No,” she hissed in a low voice after looking around. “I think both parties should enjoy certain pleasures. And I’m not ready to make that type of commitment. And . . .”

“I’m not asking for anything other than help with my English Lit homework.” The twinkle in his eyes when she looked at him told her he was enjoying teasing her.

She stepped away from him and walked to her car. “Well, then you should probably catch up on all your assignments first. You said earlier you were behind because of all the additional hours you were putting in at work this week.” Susan stopped by the trunk of her car. “Let me know when you catch up, and then we can get together.”

“But I study better when you’re close by.”

“No, you don’t. The other night . . .”

“We weren’t studying.”

He was right. They had been on a date. They hadn’t even talked about school. He had wanted to know about her family.

She still didn’t want to answer his questions, but if they studied now, right after class, everything would still be fresh in their minds.

But could she trust him? Or better still, could she trust herself?

She didn't have the answer, and at the moment, she didn't care. He was the only friend she had. They would just have to find a way past her raging hormones.

"Okay, but I can only spare an hour." She dug in her purse for her keys. "Kelly is getting off work early so we can go shopping."

"Great, it shouldn't take longer than that to understand the gist of *The Canterbury Tales*." Colt smiled and strolled off toward his truck.

Chapter Four

Susan turned the knob of the back door and hit the button to close the garage door. Kelly stood, leaning over the kitchen sink.

“Hey, I’m sorry I’m late. I went over to Colt’s for a few minutes.” Susan set her book bag and purse down on the counter. She shouldn’t have let him talk her into studying today.

When Kelly looked up, Susan saw the tears running down her face. Surprise, then shock, raced through her system, robbing her of air. Kelly didn’t cry at the drop of a hat. Something really bad must have happened.

“What’s wrong?” Susan croaked out and fought to catch her breath.

“Nothing,” Kelly said, wiping a hand across her face. “I’m just a little shaken up.” Her watery smile didn’t hide the miserable look in her eyes.

“Why?” Unable to move, Susan waited for the bad news. “Tell me what happened.”

Kelly tore a paper towel off of the roll, which hung under the oak cabinets. The baby blue flowers on the cloth soaked up her tears. “Your father called.”

“Oh, shit.” The bitter taste of anger turned Susan’s stomach. She knotted her hands into fists at her sides.

When was her father going to get it through his thick skull that she didn’t want to deal with him? She didn’t want him calling Kelly and Jason either. They didn’t need her father pestering them about what *he* wanted Susan to do. “What did he say?”

“He was angry because Jason hadn’t gotten back to him with your answer about Thanksgiving.” Kelly stepped around the island bar and walked into the den. “He said some cruel things, but maybe, in a way, he was right.”

“What?” Susan walked around the red plaid couch and stood in front of the fireplace. “He’s never been right about anything in his life. Why should he start now?”

“He said the only reason we’re letting you live here with us is because we want your baby.” Kelly sat down on the couch, clasping her hands in her lap. “That was true in the beginning, but once we got to know you, we, uh . . .” Tears fell from her eyes.

Susan didn’t want her father to hurt Kelly. He didn’t even know her, and yet he was passing judgment against her. “Don’t pay any attention to him. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“We really do care about you, Susan. I know I’ve told you how much I want a baby, and it hurts to be a . . .” Kelly choked out the last three words, “a *dried-up prune*.” She twisted the ripped paper towel in her hands.

The ugly name spiked Susan's rage against her father. She stepped over to Kelly. "My father is such a jerk. He called you that, didn't he?"

"It doesn't matter." Kelly took Susan's hand and pulled her down onto the couch. "I don't want you to suffer just to ease my pain."

Susan shook her head. "You don't understand. If it weren't for you and Jason, I'd still be stuck in Gladewater. My dad would never have let me come to Dallas and live in the dorms in my condition."

Unable to ease the despair on Kelly's face, Susan felt her eyes swelled with tears. "It's not you. It's him. He's the one who cut me off. He said he never wanted to see me again. The only reason I have my car is because he registered it in my name when he gave it to me on my birthday. Otherwise, he would have taken that away from me, too."

"Yes, but sometimes I feel so guilty. I want something that rightfully belongs to you. Then, I can't help but get angry, because we've both been put in this position." Kelly covered her face with her hands.

The sound of her heart-wrenching sobs broke Susan's heart. "Please don't cry. This is not your fault." She threw her arms around Kelly. Their tears mixed as they sat huddled together.

Susan shared Kelly's pain. To have a dream unfulfilled ripped at a person's heart. Kelly wanted a baby, while Susan wanted a career. Why was it so hard for them both to have what they wanted without hurting other people in the process?

Kelly was the first to recover. "Hey, what are we doing?" She tore the paper towel in half and handed one part to Susan. "We're wasting precious time sitting here crying. We're supposed to be out shopping for the baby's room."

Rising to her feet, Kelly helped Susan to hers. "Come on, I think we're going to have to splurge on new outfits for ourselves, too. It will make us feel better."

Susan looked down at her top. She'd worn it several times already this week. "I don't know. I'm beginning to think this blouse is painted on."

"Then you really need something new to wear." Kelly laid her arm around Susan's shoulders and guided her back through the kitchen.

A warm glow settled over Susan when she stopped to pick up her purse. She looked at Kelly, who stood waiting by the back door. Susan smiled, enjoying the special connection she had with Kelly. "Do you think we might find something sexy? I have a date with Colt tomorrow night."

"Well, we can sure try." Kelly grinned and opened the door.

* * * *

"So, what's your father's problem?" Colt handed her the green beans.

Susan delayed by spooning some onto her plate. The evening was not starting out like she wanted.

Colt had gone to a great deal of trouble. He'd covered his old gray card table with a light pink tablecloth. Candles and flowers adorned the center, and they had glass goblets for their water.

"Colt, I didn't come over here to talk about my father. Let's just enjoy this nice meal you cooked." Susan reached for a dinner roll. The pleasing aroma fed her appetite. She tore the roll in half, spreading a dab of butter on each side. She didn't need it but scooped more butter on her potato anyway.

"I know, but you said he upset Kelly. I just wondered what he did." Colt cut his steak and took a bite.

For the last few weeks, Colt had been asking her to tell him about her family. Though she had dodged most of his questions, she thought she should divulge a little bit of what her parents were like.

"My dad called to see if I was going home for Thanksgiving. When Kelly answered the phone and told him I wasn't home, he got rather ugly." Susan stabbed a piece of meat with her fork. "He thought Kelly wasn't letting him talk to me."

"Is he normally easily upset?" Colt asked before she could take a bite.

"At times." She didn't want to tell him about her father's drinking problems or how he didn't understand her desire for an education. "Mom called back later, and we worked out a time for me to go home over the holidays. Jason and Kelly are driving to Gladewater to visit Jason's brother, so I'm going to ride along with them."

"The one with the gun?" Colt asked.

"What?" Susan wasn't sure she'd heard him right. "What gun?"

"Nothing. How long are you going to be gone?" Colt looked back down at his plate and avoided her eyes. She wondered what he was thinking.

"Probably no longer than the day." Susan put down her fork, not sure if she was hungry anymore. "Jason's sister-in-law, Jillian, is pregnant, too. She's the one who introduced me to Jason and Kelly. Her baby is due in December, so they won't want to be a burden by staying overnight."

If things worked out right, she wouldn't have to spend more than a few hours with her family on Thanksgiving. Her mother and brother, she missed, but her father? She really didn't want to deal with his attitude. He'd made it perfectly clear he wasn't happy with her decision when she left home to come to Dallas. He wasn't going to be overjoyed to see her walk back through his door.

"When is your baby due?" Colt asked before taking the last bite of his steak.

“Middle of January,” she said, nudging her potato to the side of her plate. The white cotton of her baked potato didn’t tempt her taste buds any longer.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t notice how quiet Colt was being until he stood. “Would you like me to take your plate?”

“Sure.” She handed it to him and shoved back her chair. His hand cupped her elbow when she started to stand. She looked at him and smiled to take the edge off her words. “You know, I know how to stand up on my own. It’s only your panther skin couch that I have trouble with. It wants to eat me alive.”

“Yes, well, I have a surprise for you.” His eyes glittered with a hunger that told her he might want a piece of her too. His fingers ran down her arm with an almost tender caress. He took her hand.

She walked with him through the living room and into his bedroom. “Are you planning to show me your six-shooter, Colt?”

“Oh please, don’t start with the gun jokes.” He led her over to the side of the bed.

“Ah, come on, don’t you want to meet at the O.K. Corral at high noon and have it out?”

Susan took in the different pieces of furniture in the room. Like the other rooms in his apartment, he had only the essentials—a bed with no headboard, a dresser, and a large desk with a computer sitting on it. No picture hung on the wall over his bed, and no personal items lay on his dresser. The blinds on the window were closed.

“Not unless I get to ride off into the sunset with the girl.” He released her hand. “Now, if the lady will sit down, I’ll take off her shoes.”

Susan looked down at the navy blue bedspread covering his bed. She didn’t know what he had planned, but she wasn’t going to argue. The loveseat in the other room hated her, and the recliner Colt reserved for himself, so she was glad for another place to sit.

“What does the gentleman have in mind?” Susan smiled when he loosened her laces and eased off her shoes. The soft texture of his hair lay mere inches from her fingertips.

“I thought you might be more comfortable in here.” He stood and stacked several pillows against the wall. “All you have to do is lean back and relax.”

She scooted back on the bed and put up her feet. His easy stride took him to the end of the bed. He picked up a remote. Only then did Susan see the wide-screen television hanging over his dresser. “Wow, this is great. Where did you get that TV?”

He walked to the other side of the bed and handed her the remote. “My family went in together to get it for me a few years back.”

“That reminds me, you—”

The weight of him sitting down on the bed threw her off balance, and she dropped the remote. She gripped his thigh to keep from landing in his lap.

His hand ran down her back. The thin fabric of her silk blouse caressed her spine, causing goose bumps to break out over her skin. She dropped her eyes to the crotch of his pants only a few inches from her hand. The large bulge enticed her. She wondered if he was struggling with his feelings as much as she was.

Not willing to take the first step, Susan settled back on the pillows which lay against the wall. "I, uh, don't think you've told me anything about your family."

"There's not much to tell." He adjusted his pillow against the wall. "I have two older brothers, JJ and Dalton. They are both married. JJ has a two-year-old son named Trevor. My parents and my brothers all live within twenty minutes of here, and we get along okay for the most part."

He leaned back and picked up the remote. "I have a grandmother who lives in Austin. My father's parents live in Denton." He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. "As you can see, we're really pretty boring."

There had to be more to it. But like her, he might want to keep the facts about his family to himself. Not wanting to pry, she watched the different pictures flashing on the screen.

"How about this one?" He pointed the remote at the set.

John Wayne stood in a bar, talking to some other men. He was talking with a bad Irish accent. She couldn't remember the name of the movie, but it didn't really matter. She was tuned to Colt. Only *he* could give her the pleasure she wanted. "This is fine."

Her gaze fell to Colt's white socks. He had long feet.

What was she saying about men's feet?

The baby rolled onto her bladder. The sudden urge to go to the bathroom forced her to sit up, and she shifted her feet off the side of the bed. "I'll be right back."

She walked into the bathroom and shut the door. The picture of Colt lying in bed, waiting for her, made her rethink the plan to watch TV in bed. The guy was making her burn.

Her breasts ached with need. The last time he'd touched her she'd gone up in flames. His lips, his hands, the hunger he could generate drove her wild. Her body screamed with the desire for him to please her again. This time, though, she wanted to satisfy him, too.

But was she ready to do that?

He'd shown no sign of wanting anything other than a simple friendship. He might enjoy a little fun on the side, but no strings.

What did she want?

Washing her hands, she stared at the mirror over the sink. Who was she kidding? Her attempt at looking sexy had failed miserably. The tented bulge of her blouse wouldn't tempt anyone. With a row of pearl buttons down the front, the pink blouse was pretty. She had even left a number of them open to show off the curve of her breasts. But the length disgusted her. The shirt looked like a dress over her jeans.

She dried her hands on a thick towel. There wasn't any hope of her tempting him into making love. She might as well go home.

Colt looked over at her when she returned to the bedroom. "I've been thinking. I should probably introduce you to my family."

Susan blinked. What was he saying? Did he want more than to simply sleep with her?

"Why?"

"Because I want them to meet you." He turned and adjusted her pillows. "My mother has planned a family dinner next weekend. It would be the perfect time for you to meet everyone at once."

He offered his hand to help her back into bed. She backed away, her mind in turmoil. If they became more involved, then he would want to have a say in the solutions to her problems. She didn't want that.

Her unfocused eyes caught the action of his long legs scooting across the bed. Thick thighs led to a trim waist and a broad chest. His sandy blond hair, a little long, fell over his eyes. She wanted to brush the straight strands out of the way.

He stood. "Susan?"

She backed away again and ran into the wall. "I think I'd better go home." Her hands itched with the desire to touch him, to undo every button on his shirt. "I, uh . . ."

He stepped forward. The rich, masculine scent of him wiped her brain of every reason she had come up with for not making love to him. The top button of his shirt teased the end of her fingertips, and she unbuttoned the round disk with her trembling hands. Her eyes narrowed in on a few curly strands of blond chest hair, which peeked through the parted material.

"You should probably stop me." She undid the next button.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and let them glide down her back. "I'm not going to stop anything. You can do whatever you want."

She worked each button loose. Then she parted his shirt, gripping each side so she could look at the hard muscles of his chest and stomach. The sight of him sent a tidal wave of need down through the center of her body. Moisture seeped between her legs.

She wet her suddenly dry lips and her gaze rose to his face. A devilish smile played over his lips. “I think I’m overdressed.”

The spark that always melted her resistance lit his eyes. “Then it’s my turn to undo your blouse?”

“Ah . . .” She released her breath, not realizing until then she’d been holding it. “I guess.”

He covered her hands, which were holding onto his shirt. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get out of this first.”

She released her death grip. The material slid over his shoulders and down his arms. Her mouth went completely dry when his shirt hit the floor. The muscles playing over his chest and arms awed her. He put his hands on her waist and caressed the curve of her belly.

“I’m not as sure-handed as you are.” His fingers caressed the tips of her breasts, not anywhere close to the buttons of her blouse. Her nipples tightened into hard rocks. She moaned. Her knees threatened to collapse. He rolled each tip between his thumb and forefinger. Needing support, she leaned against the wall behind her.

“I like to take my time.” His caresses drove her closer to the edge. He knew just how to make her body beg for release.

“Feel my way around before I jump into a job.” He laid his palms on each side of her breasts and pushed them together. A swell of flesh emerged from the front of her blouse. The button over the juncture popped undone.

He smiled, and his hands relaxed their hold. “I don’t want to waste my time with these buttons.” He lifted the bottom of her shirt. With one quick movement, he jerked her blouse over her head.

The cool air chilled her skin, and she had a brief moment of clarity. There wasn’t another man alive she wanted more than him, but she didn’t want to hurt her baby in the process.

His hands didn’t pause. He unhooked her bra. His knuckles brushed over her nipples when he yanked the lacy material away from her skin. She gasped with need. “Colt, I’m . . .”

He grinned and cupped her breasts in his palms. “I can’t tell you how much I enjoy the way your body responds to me.” A dark green flame burned in the depths of his eyes. “You are incredible.”

“Colt.” She placed her shaky hands on his waistline. The warm, silky smoothness of his skin brought home her need to have him closer, to have him moving inside her. “I’m not sure how this is going to work.”

“I bet with a little ingenuity we can make it happen.”

Chapter Five

Lying naked in the middle of Colt's bed, Susan felt self-conscious about her round form. He stood in the doorway of his closet, taking off his socks. She wanted to ask him to turn off the overhead light, but then he dropped his jeans.

Moisture suddenly formed in her mouth. She swallowed and took in the sight of his muscular body. His thick thighs, dusted with golden hair, framed the long length of his desire. She couldn't help but shift restlessly on the bed. He could more than satisfy the ache she'd been denying for the last several weeks.

Not wanting to appear needy, she rose up onto her elbows when he neared the bed. He sat down beside her. "I know you don't want to rush me, Colt." She ran her hands down over his chest and combed the silky hair that lay around his sex. "But I don't want to wait."

He grabbed her wrist and lifted her hand to his lips. Baby kisses brushed her fingers. His eyes burned into hers while he teased her palm with his tongue. Her hand twitched at the shocked of the caress.

"You just need to relax." He continued moving his lips over her wrist, to the curve of her elbow and beyond. He paused when he got to her neck. "We have all night."

When he leaned down over her, she draped her arms over his shoulders. The hard wall of his chest caressed her breasts. "But I can't wait that long."

A smile broke across his mouth, and his hands slid over her rounded belly. "Don't tell me you're an impatient wench. *The Canterbury Tales* warned me about women like you."

She didn't want to think about their English class. "Maybe, but you're taking me through every one of Dante's levels of hell. This one must be to make me wait for your touch."

"Are you sure we haven't reached heaven yet?" He stroked her thigh, gliding one of his hands between her legs and nudged them apart.

A rush of need surged deep inside her. She gasped for air. His hand played along the inside of her thigh. She lifted her hips. Her body was so close, so ready to explode.

"Damn it." Her patience snapped.

Roaming her hands through his silky hair, she drew his head down for a kiss. He tasted like her favorite intoxicating beverage, white zinfandel, sweet and crisp with a kick to make her hunger for more.

She wanted to eat him alive, to consume every inch of him until she didn't hunger for his touch. He ran his finger over her sex, fueling the flame burning inside her body. She arched her back, hoping to convince him to satisfy her needs. The man had to know she was dying here.

Drawing back, he ended the kiss. She wanted to fly apart when he sent a butterfly stroke over her sensitive skin. She couldn't help but groan at the incredible sensations racing through her body.

The heated gaze he sent at her breasts ignited a flame. With just a few kisses, he could easily have her screaming with need.

He ran his finger along her sex again and found the unique spot that gave her most pleasure. His lips covered her breast. The heavy sound of her breathing echoed through the room. Her heart raced in her chest and followed the wild sucking pace of his mouth. His thumb applied more pressure to the sensitive bud between her legs.

"Yes!" With urgent little cries, she urged him to take her over the edge.

Her release washed over her flushed skin. She gulped in air. She stroked Colt's head, and her fingertips caressed his soft hair.

He had ruined her. The certainty of the fact rang through her soul. With just a few kisses and a touch, he could make her erupt into a million pieces. No other man would ever be able to match his skill. Her baby's father hadn't given her anything close to this kind of pleasure. How would she survive if Colt ever truly made love to her?

He lifted his head. The dark fire in his eyes lit something in her, marked her as his, and placed a brand on her soul.

What a dumb thought.

Who said he was even serious? He might not want to get married, not after one time in his bed. There was a lot more she needed to know about him before she'd make any type of commitment, especially one that locked them together for a lifetime.

* * * *

He shifted and rolled her onto her side.

"Colt?"

"I think it might be better if we make love with me behind you. That way, we won't press on the baby." He aligned his back along hers. Her lying in front of him left her hands free and she ran them over the bed. He guided one of her legs over his, and he slid into her. A deep rumble erupted from his chest at the sheer bliss of being connected to her. "I think this just might work."

Susan's breathing accelerated and her hands gripped the quilt. He drove deeper.

"Oh my," he whispered in reverence to the tight heaven he'd entered. His body rushed into overdrive, wanting the release he'd denied it for so long. He clenched his jaw and pumped his hips.

She moaned. He stopped instantly. "Are you okay?"

Her head bobbed next to his. She adjusted her legs. He ran his hand over her hipbone and held her in place. This time, he set a slow, easy rhythm, building a fire. His blood heated to an inferno.

He wouldn't have imagined making love to a pregnant woman would be the best sex of his life. He didn't want it to end, yet he couldn't hold out much longer.

"More." Susan gripped his bicep, and her nails marked his skin.

Her demands destroyed the last thread of his control. He increased his pace. Her body convulsed, forcing him into an abyss, where she was his, he was hers, and only the two of them mattered. He couldn't hold back the long bellow of satisfaction. It rang from his throat. With one last plunge, he let go of everything he had.

He fell back on the pillows, gasping for air, his head spinning. She covered him like a warm blanket, one he wanted to hold on to for the next millennium. He may have had different reasons for asking her out initially, but right now, he didn't think he'd want to ever let her go.

The idea shocked him for a moment. He wasn't looking for a commitment. The grief he'd felt over his ex-girlfriend aborting his baby had prompted him into helping Susan. He'd only wanted to make sure she was being taken care of and someone was seeing to her needs. He didn't want to feel this way, as if he couldn't live without her.

She rolled out of his arms to the side of the bed.

"Are you okay?" He couldn't see her face, couldn't tell if she was upset.

When she turned, the light in her eyes reassured him. "I'm doing more than okay. I'm doing great, but if I don't get out of this bed, I'm not going to want to go home tonight."

* * * *

"I thought you were supposed to go to Colt's parents' last weekend." Kelly poured herself a cup of coffee.

The rich aroma filled Susan's senses with longing. Being pregnant, she reminded herself she couldn't have caffeine. She glanced at her glass of orange juice with disgust. "He got the dates mixed up. His mother likes to have their dinner the weekend before Thanksgiving. It's no big deal. It just means he's free to go with us to Gladewater." Susan studied Kelly's face to make sure it was all right for Colt to tag along. "You did say it was okay."

"It's all right with me, but you'll have to let your parents know you're bringing along a guest." Kelly pulled a bar stool away from the counter and sat down next to Susan. "They may have wanted to spend time alone with you."

"Mom said it was okay. And . . ." Susan didn't really care what her father thought, and she didn't want to start another discussion on how best to handle her father. "Maybe with Colt there, we'll all get along better."

“Did you warn Colt that your father might be difficult?”

“Yes. I think that’s why he wants to tag along.” Susan toyed with the toast on her plate. Her stomach wasn’t feeling the best this morning. “He said since I’m meeting his family, he should meet mine.”

“Does this mean you two are getting serious?” Kelly leaned back and studied Susan with a frown. “Does he think you want to get married so you can give your baby a father?”

“I can’t imagine why he would. He knows about you guys wanting to adopt my baby.” Susan shoved away her half-eaten breakfast. “He might want to help, but he’s a poor college student. He doesn’t have the means to solve all of my problems. And I won’t marry a guy just so my baby will have a man in the house.”

“But if he loves you?”

“I don’t think we’ve been dating long enough for it to be a problem.” Susan didn’t think any man would fall in love that fast. She rose to her feet and picked up her plate. “But if he does want something more, he’ll have to stand in line to gain my attention. I have other, more pressing, issues to deal with at the moment.”

“Come on now, don’t you want him to fix all of your problems?” Kelly’s tone was teasing.

“No thanks. If he’s anything like the other men in my life, he’d only add to them.” Susan’s father wanted to control her. A husband would be even worse.

After putting her plate in the dishwasher, Susan wanted to lighten the mood in the room. She changed her voice to sound like an English countess. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, my lady, I’m off to get dressed. I’m meeting the king and queen of my prince, so I have to look divine.”

Kelly giggled. “And what are you going to do when they offer you the family jewels to marry their son?”

Strutting up next to Kelly, Susan, waving her hand in front of her face like a fan, said in a low tone, “Oh, my dear lady, let me tell you. I’ve seen the family jewels, and they are spectacular.” A roar of laughter erupted from Kelly. “Oh, you are terrible.”

Susan grinned.

* * * *

“How long until we get there?” Susan glanced at the houses they were passing. Most of them looked like they would sell for several million dollars. She couldn’t believe they could be close to his parents’ home.

“It’s just around the corner here,” Colt said and took the turn.

He drove into a curved driveway and stopped his rusty old truck behind an expensive sports car. Susan glanced at the white fortress. The house took up half the block.

“Here we are.” He cut the engine.

“You have to be joking. You didn’t say anything about your parents being rich.” Susan glanced at the house and felt as if he’d punched her in the gut. Her mind struggled to fit the pieces together.

He had an apartment filled with cheap furniture. He drove a rusty old truck. Afternoons and weekends, he spent at work. He couldn’t be the son of a rich man.

“Does it matter?” He acted like his parents’ wealth wasn’t any big deal.

“Yes.” Susan frowned and looked down at her clothes. “I’m not prepared for this, Colt. I come from a working-class family. We live from paycheck to paycheck. I won’t know how to act, and I’m not dressed appropriately.”

He reached across the seat and unlatched her seatbelt. “They’re no different from anyone else. Mom and Dad both were once poor, struggling college students, too. They don’t expect you to dress up to meet them.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” Susan stared at him, uncertain as to why he’d pull such a stunt.

“Because I didn’t want you judging me by their wealth.” He took her hand. “I’m still the guy you met at school. Other than getting help with my tuition, I pay my own way.”

“It’s not the same.” She shook her head, shocked by her change in perception of who he really was. He had a job, an old truck, and a wide-screen television. She should have suspected something after seeing his TV.

What else had he failed to tell her?

She shifted toward the passenger door. He followed her across the seat and put his arm around her shoulders. The rich, masculine scent of his soap tempted her with the memory of how it felt to lie naked in his arms. “I really didn’t think this was going to upset you so much. Most people are glad to find out their boyfriend has wealthy parents.”

“I feel like you lied to me.” Susan glanced at his face to see the wrinkles in his forehead and the grimace on his lips.

“I haven’t. I just didn’t think it was important.” Colt lifted the long braid of her hair off of her chest. “I wanted our relationship to be about us. Where my family lives or how much money my father has in the bank didn’t matter. I wanted you to like me.”

Susan felt as if he’d slapped her across the face. Was he saying she was a money-hungry bimbo who would only like him for his money? Or was she judging him unfairly? “I . . .” She couldn’t think of a way to explain how she felt.

“You think I’ve deceived you.”

She nodded.

“Yes, and in the beginning, you thought I only wanted sex.” Colt brushed the end of her braid against her breasts. “I hope over the last few weeks I’ve proven I care about you.”

The serious look in his eyes made her want to trust him, to give him whatever he wanted.

“I brought you here to meet my family, nothing more, nothing less.” His intense green eyes met hers. “If you want to leave, we can head over to my apartment. I’d much rather have you to myself.”

He glanced down to where her blouse gapped open over her breasts. She cupped his face in her hands. “No more surprises, Colt. I’m trying my best to trust how I feel about you, but don’t spring things on me without warning.”

“I . . .”

She didn’t want to talk about it any more, so to shut him up, she covered his lips with hers.

It didn’t take much persuasion to get his lips to part. Her hands slid into the soft, silky length of his hair. The warm sweet heat of his mouth pumped a fire into her blood. She wanted to forget about meeting his parents. He was right. Going to his apartment would be much more fun.

She moaned when he ended the kiss. Her eyes met the sober green light in his. She wondered what he was thinking.

“I think . . .” he started.

A loud thumping sound caused Susan to jump and turn quickly. The man on the other side of the door looked liked Colt’s twin.

“Are you guys going to come in? Or stay out here and neck?” His amusement sounded in his muffled voice.

After Colt unlocked the passenger door, it sprang open.

“Well, it’s about time. Mom has been waiting all morning for you to arrive.” The man held out his hand to help Susan.

She glanced at Colt.

“Susan, this is my older brother, Dalton.” Colt glared at his sibling and got out of the truck. “You could have waited.”

Dalton grinned. “No way. If I’d done that, you guys would have never made it inside.”

Susan walked a few steps forward with Dalton, and then turned to see Colt shut the door and lock the truck. He smiled at her, took a few hurried steps to catch up, and placed his arm over her shoulders.

“I told Mom we wouldn’t be here until one thirty. She said she wasn’t planning on eating until two.” Colt led Susan to the front door.

Her fears tightened into a knot. Her stomach rolled, and the baby moved. His kick to her spine caused her foot to falter.

Colt paused. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She smiled and picked up her pace.

Dalton didn’t pause when he got to the door. He threw it open and walked into the grand foyer. His long stride took him past the rich maple staircase on his way down the hall. She noticed he didn’t even glance at the elegant paintings on the wall on his way to the back of the house.

“Go on, I’ll be right behind you,” Colt said, ushering her into the house.

The elaborate trimmings on the dining room table greeted her sight. At the same time, her senses caught the smell of roasting meat. She gasped in reaction to the sudden upheaval of her stomach. Turning quickly, she put her hand over her mouth. Colt shut the door and blocked her escape.

“Colt, I . . .”

His eyes met hers. Footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Either the color of her face or the pleading tone of her voice must have alerted him to the problem. He scooped her up into his arms and started for the staircase.

“Where are you going?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

Susan couldn’t raise her head from Colt’s shoulders. Her stomach was giving her a small reprieve, but the break wouldn’t last for long.

Colt didn’t pause. “We’ll be right back. We’re just taking a slight detour.”

“But, son, you just got here.” A soft, feminine voice floated up the stairs. Susan could just imagine what his parents thought they were doing.

“I’ll be back in a second to explain.”

Susan wondered which was worse, to throw up on his mom’s Oriental rug, or to have his parents think they’d come upstairs to have sex. Neither mattered when her stomach began churning again.

“Colt, please.”

He dropped her feet and held her erect as he lifted the lid of the toilet.

“Get out.” She caught the edge of the marble vanity and stepped away from Colt. Her stomach threw back her breakfast with a violence that left her gasping for breath and bent over the toilet. Tears slid down her cheeks. She closed her eyes, wishing she could just melt through the granite floor and disappear. Then she wouldn’t have to face Colt or his parents. She hit the lever to flush, ridding the room of the rancid smell. The awful taste made her lock her knees. She wanted to find a sink to wash out her mouth. Slowly, she pushed herself erect.

“Easy.” Colt put a wet washcloth in her hand and offered support by putting his arm around her waist. “You’ll be okay in a minute.”

Susan wiped her mouth with the soft piece of cloth. Colt’s breath caressed her cheek. His strength kept her upright. She closed her eyes and leaned back in his embrace.

Why hadn’t she left when she had had the chance?

* * * *

“Colt, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to face your parents.” Susan whispered.

He shifted her in his arms. Her white face was now flushed with color. Tears swam in her eyes. He could tell she was embarrassed for getting sick in front of him, even though she had no control over her stomach.

“I think they’ll understand.” He bent and slipped his arm under her legs. Lifting her, he carried her back into his old bedroom. The twin bed against the wall didn’t have room for him to lay her across the surface.

“I would lay you down on the bed, but my nephew has it covered with his toys.” Colt paused. He wondered if he should take her into one of the guest rooms.

“That’s all right. Just put me down. Once I get my legs back under me, we can leave.”

Colt set her down gently, afraid if he dropped her feet, the jolt might upset her stomach again. He wanted her to lie down.

Once she was standing on her own, he shoved the stuffed animals off the bed and put his hands on her shoulders. “Here, let me take your coat.” He tugged her coat down her arms, threw it over the toy box, and then added his on top of hers. He sat down on the bed and eased her down beside him. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes. I’m afraid the smell of meat cooking sometimes sets off my stomach.”

Colt frowned. “But I cooked steaks the other night. You didn’t say anything about the smell bothering you.”

“But you did them outside on your grill. Remember, I stayed inside.” Susan looked around the room at the different items on the walls.

“Is that you when you were younger?” She pointed to a picture of him when he played Little League baseball.

“Yes.” He didn’t want to talk about the room’s décor. His mother had filled the room with things from his youth.

“Are you going to be able to stand the smell downstairs?” Colt wanted her to meet his parents. He had told them she was pregnant and had wanted to use today’s visit as an introduction. His parents belonged to a number of groups that could help Susan pay for her education.

With the corners of her mouth turned down, she shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe I should just leave. I can call Kelly or Jason. One of them would come get me. I don’t want to ruin your family’s Thanksgiving dinner.”

“You’re not going to ruin it. They haven’t even eaten yet.” Colt didn’t want her leaving without him. He had promised his mother they would have lunch with the family. “I tell you what, why don’t you lay down and rest a minute? I’ll go downstairs and explain what’s going on.” He stood up. “If you don’t get to feeling better, we can leave.”

“Colt, I’m sorry. I guess I should never have agreed to do this.” Her eyes told him she was talking about more than just having dinner with his family. His earlier mistake of not telling her his family was wealthy was going to come back and bite him.

Colt paused for a moment, wondering if he should tell her about his ex-girlfriend. If Dalton hadn’t interrupted him, he would have told her earlier when they were still in his truck. Now he’d have to wait until later, when he had her alone in his apartment.

He bent down in front of her and took off her shoes. “Just take it easy. I’ll be right back.”

She gave him a watery smile and leaned back on the pillow. He left, afraid if he stayed one second more, he wouldn’t be able to leave her at all. Instead, he’d be climbing into bed with her.

* * * *

Looking at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, Susan wondered why Colt put up with her. Her stomach was going to ruin her day. She’d wanted so much to impress his parents.

He’d said he didn’t mind missing his family’s Thanksgiving dinner, but she knew he wanted to stay. And worse, without even meaning to, he was getting under her skin. She could easily fall in love with Colt.

“When are we going to eat?” A feminine voice floated in from the bedroom.

“I don’t know. Colt has to get here with his girlfriend,” a second woman’s voice answered.

Susan started to reveal herself to the two women. A high-pitched squeal deafened her, and she stopped in her tracks.

“Trevor, you don’t need to yell.” The sound ceased.

“Colt said he’d be here around one thirty.” Small, childish giggles and the rustling sounds of small feet lay over the conversation. “Who knows, maybe his pregnant girlfriend held him up?”

“Pregnant?”

“Yes, you know Colt. He’s always picking up strays.”

Susan put her hand over her stomach and opened her mouth.

Did Colt really feel that way about her?

“No, I bet this has something to do with Dee. He’s still not over her aborting his baby.”

The room began to spin. Susan grabbed the vanity. Her knees threatened to collapse. She worked her way slowly to the toilet and eased herself down onto the lid. Her head fell forward. The cold pink marble chilled her skin where she rested her forehead.

What the hell were they talking about?

And who was Dee?

Chapter Six

“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong or do you expect me to guess?” Colt’s patience with Susan was wearing thin.

When he’d gotten back upstairs after talking to his parents, she’d been sitting in the bathroom, staring off into space. She’d barely said more than two words to him since.

She had accepted his mother’s offer of ginger ale and crackers. The color in her face had even returned to normal. But when he asked her about staying for lunch, she insisted it would be much better if she just left. She had even tried to call Jason and Kelly on her cell phone.

The only reason he had her in his truck, driving her home, was because she didn’t know how to give Kelly the directions to his parents’ house. When Susan had given her phone to him to explain how to get to his parents’, he had told Kelly he’d take Susan home. Now, her cell phone was in his pocket. He wasn’t going to let her call Kelly again.

Something about her attitude told him there was more to her silence than not feeling well. He glanced at her when she didn’t respond. Her shoulders turned away from him, she ignored him by staring out the window.

“Does this have to do with my parents’ wealth?”

“No,” she said without looking at him.

He drove past the turn for Kelly and Jason’s house. “I’m not taking you home until you tell me what’s wrong.”

She shrugged and shoved her hands into the pocket of her coat. “I’ll ask Kelly to meet me at your apartment.”

At a red light, she searched for her cell.

“Are you looking for this?” He took her phone from his shirt.

The light turned green, and he stepped on the gas. “Remember? You gave it to me to tell Kelly how to get to my parents’ house.”

“And you told her you’d take me home.” She sent him an accusing glare. “You should call her and let her know you’ve kidnapped me.”

“I think she knows I’ll take you home eventually. Right now, I want to know what’s got you so upset.” The entrance for his apartment lay up ahead.

She turned back to the window. “I just want to go home, Colt. I need time to think.”

Her sad tone lit his determination to find out exactly what was wrong.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll give you back your cell phone and let you call Kelly if you'll give me a hint as to what happened at my parents' to upset you." He parked his truck in front of his building.

"Great, give me my phone." Susan held out her hand.

"After we get upstairs." He opened his door.

Susan didn't wait for him to help her but was out of the truck by the time he rounded the hood.

"Let's go." She ignored his hand and took hold of the railing.

His gaze marked each of her steps. He took the stairs behind her, ready in case she needed any help. When they got to the top, he unlocked his door and held it open for her to go in first.

"Okay, let me have my phone." She put out her hand again.

"After you give me my clue." He took the cell from his pocket.

"Fine. Your pregnant ex-girlfriend aborted your baby. Now I'm your current charity case." Susan grabbed for her phone.

"Holy shit." Colt clutched her wrist with one hand while she took the cell from his other. "Who told you about Dee?"

"It doesn't matter." She wrestled with him for the device.

Afraid he'd accidentally hurt her, he let her have the phone. With a quick move, he captured her hands and pulled them behind her back. He held her against his chest. The dark glint in her eyes told him he'd pushed her over the limit.

"Look, Colt, I know I'm being unreasonable by not wanting to talk about this. But right now, I'm dealing with more problems than I can handle, so back off." Her tone brittle, she didn't yell or scream. In the circle of his arm, she trembled. "I gave you the clue you wanted, now hold up your end of the bargain and let me go."

"No. If I let you go, you'll never let me explain what happened." He knew if she left, she'd never walk through his door again. He tightened his grip.

"Colt." She twisted her hands, trying to get loose. "If you don't let me go, I'm going to have to use other methods to gain my freedom. And you could get hurt." She shifted onto one leg and nudged his inner thigh with her knee.

He wanted to laugh and tell her nothing could hurt more than her walking away. But he didn't. She wasn't ready to hear how much he cared about her. With her angry and upset, she'd only end up hurting herself or the baby. He couldn't let that happen.

"You're right." He released her hands and stepped back, blocking the front door. "Go ahead. Call her if you want. But don't you want to hear my side of the story?"

* * * *

Blinded by doubt, Susan walked to his recliner and sat down. The red leather squeaked out a cold warning.

Why should she listen to him? Much less believe what he had to say? She'd been a fool. For a while, she'd even thought he cared. But just like everyone else in her world, he only wanted her baby.

She buried her head in her hands. Her elbows rested on her knees. She searched for a reason to listen to his side of the story. What lies would he tell her now?

"I asked you if you knew anyone who was pregnant." She spoke to the coffee table.

There was a long pause. She wondered if he was going to answer. The dark fabric of his pants brushing against the edge of the coffee table told her he'd come closer.

"Dee had an abortion without even letting me know she was pregnant." Colt walked around the coffee table. "I found out about six months ago. It's been almost a year since we broke up."

"What does she have to do with me?"

"Nothing."

Susan looked up.

"Believe it or not, that's true. I told you I liked you from the moment I saw you the first day of class. I think you're a cute girl with an intelligent mind. The don't-touch-me attitude made me want to get to know you better." He leaned against the arm of the sofa.

"Yes, and when you found out I was pregnant, did it turn you on even more?" Susan remembered thinking he'd been excited by the fact she was pregnant.

He nodded. "I told you I was curious. Dee didn't want me or our child. She ended our two-year relationship without a backward glance so she could go date an all-star running back."

The sound of grief in his voice over his ex-girlfriend's actions sparked an interest in Susan. Her ex-boyfriend wanted no part of their baby. What special quality did Colt have to make him think differently? What made Colt care about his baby?

His eyes showed his lack of understanding of his ex-girlfriend's choices. "I wanted to know why you were going through with having your baby when she threw it all away."

"I don't have that answer."

"I know. Neither do I."

The baby kicked, not happy with Susan's position. She leaned back in the recliner. "Look, Colt, I don't know what your original intentions were, but I don't want to be anyone's charity case. I may be pregnant and not have a lot of money, but I do have options. I don't need your help."

The cell phone still in her hand, Susan flipped up the cover.

"Wait." Colt squatted down on his knees and shoved the coffee table away so he could kneel in front of her. "I know I blew it. I should have told you about Dee before now. But that doesn't mean I don't still care about you." He took the phone from her hand and laid it on the table. "I don't want you to leave."

The tender look in his eyes melted Susan's resistance.

"Colt," she said, cupping his cheeks in her hands, "I know you're only trying to help, but I'm not your responsibility. If you want to be my friend, that's great, but I won't let you come in and sweep all my problems away. I have to work them out myself."

He ran his hands over her thighs and under the hem of her blouse. "I want to be more than just your friend."

Susan giggled when the baby kicked at his hand. Her stomach growled, and she laid her hands on his shoulders. "An excellent idea. I need a waiter who can get me a burger and fries with a thick chocolate shake."

"I thought they weren't on your diet," he said and grinned.

"They aren't. Neither is a lover, but I'm thinking I might want one of those, too."

* * * *

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kelly stood beside the couch.

Susan shifted her sight from the warm glow of the fire to Kelly's perfect body and gleaming blonde hair. The lady appeared to have everything she wanted, but Susan knew it wasn't true. Her eyes would fill with tears at times when she looked at Susan's growing stomach.

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm too confused to know what to think." Susan hugged the pillow in her hands closer to her chest.

After talking to Colt yesterday, she had thought she'd worked out this issue. But today, she wasn't so sure. What did he really want from her?

"Why don't you start with what happened at Colt's parents' house?" Kelly walked past the couch and sat down in the recliner. She leaned back like she had nothing better to do than listen to Susan's problems.

As the only real friend she'd had for the past several months, she was confident Kelly would help.

“Which part do you want me to start with? The fact that Colt’s parents are richer than sin or that Colt’s ex-girlfriend aborted his baby? I was blown away by both.”

Shock passed over Kelly’s face. “Uh, there is probably a good reason why Colt didn’t tell you about both.”

“Yes, but it adds a whole ’nother level to him that I can’t come to terms with. He’s not a poor, struggling college student like me. He grew up having anything he ever wanted. What’s he going to think when he meets my family?” Her parents’ three-bedroom, wood-frame house didn’t compare with his family’s home. She wasn’t ashamed of where she’d grown up, but she didn’t come from a wealthy family like he did either.

“What do we have in common?”

“Well, you’re both going to school,” Kelly reasoned, “which means he’s trying to improve his mind so he can get a good job and not live off his family. He sounds like he is just as independent as you are.”

“He did say he didn’t want me to judge him by his family’s wealth, but I can’t get over their house.” Susan sat up from her relaxed position on the couch. “It was huge. They had a four-car garage, a tennis court, and a pool in their backyard. There must have been more than six bedrooms upstairs, and Oriental rugs lay on all the floors. I almost ruined the one in the front hallway.”

Kelly leaned forward in her chair. “How?”

“Oh, that was the worst part. The minute I walked in the door, I smelled prime rib.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, Colt saw I was about to throw up and carried me upstairs to his bathroom.” Susan smiled when she recalled how sweet he’d been to her yesterday.

“You can just imagine what his parents probably thought. The moment we arrive, he carts me off upstairs, but his mother was great. His nephew even offered me his teddy bear when he found out I was sick. They were all very kind to me, which made me feel even worse for ruining their family dinner. But I couldn’t stay.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was crushed by the news Colt’s ex-girlfriend had aborted his baby. Suddenly everything made sense to me.” Susan looked over at the fire, which crackled and popped, sending flames up into the air. “I thought Colt only wanted to be with me because of the guilt he felt over losing his own child. I was a substitute for her.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No, he said he’d always been attracted to me. But it’s hard to believe. He stepped up his pursuit after I told him I was pregnant.” Susan hugged the pillow tighter in her arms. Did he want her or

just her baby? “I hate to say it, but I feel as if the only reason anyone wants to have anything to do with me is because I’m having a baby.” Susan didn’t turn. She didn’t want to see the hurt look on Kelly’s face.

“I think that’s a valid assessment, but it’s not the whole truth. If you weren’t the strong, giving person that you are, people wouldn’t want to help you.” Kelly stood and stepped over to the couch.

“Look at our situation. It would have been easy for you to take advantage of Jason and me. You know how much we want a child. You could have refused to do your part around the house and been a pain to live with.” Kelly placed her arm around Susan. “You’ve honored your word and pulled your weight. I love *you* no matter what you decide to do about your baby.”

“Kelly.” Susan turned, and tears overflowed from her eyes. “You guys have been great. I just want to know for sure Colt likes me for me and not as a replacement for someone else.”

* * * *

Setting her drink in the cup holder, Susan covered Colt’s hand, which lay on the seat between them. The drive to Gladewater from Dallas hadn’t been bad. Jason had stopped several times so she could go to the bathroom.

Nostalgia rushed over her when they stopped at the main stoplight in town. Her home for eighteen years, she glanced around to see if anything had changed. The trees bare, the road empty, the hollow shell of the town she’d once loved stood waiting. Her life was headed in a new direction.

She shifted on the seat to relieve the tight muscles in her shoulders and back. How would her family greet her?

Colt squeezed her hand.

“What time did you tell your mom you would be there?” Kelly asked from the front seat.

“Around noon, but she won’t care if we get there early.” Susan looked at the clock on the dashboard. The drive hadn’t taken as long as they had expected. “What time are Jillian and Derek expecting you guys?”

“Whenever. My best friend, Jillian’s brother, Michael, is coming in with his girlfriend. Then there are a number of folks from here in town who are also coming. The house will be full of people. It’s a come and go as you please party.” Jason steered the car into Susan’s neighborhood.

“Jason’s brother lives right down there,” Susan told Colt as they passed the street. “My family only lives a few blocks away.”

Jason turned onto her parents’ street. “Which house?”

“Last one on the left.” Susan eyed the gray house. What would Colt think of her family’s home? They didn’t have the wealth his family had. Maybe she shouldn’t have let him come.

“What time do you want us to pick you up?” Kelly turned and looked over her shoulder when the car stopped in front of the house.

Colt opened his door. A cold November wind blew the rich smell of dry logs burning in a fireplace into the car. The dark memories of prior holidays warned Susan there was little hope of a warm welcome.

“I’ll just call you.” She touched Kelly’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. Dad isn’t going to get out of control. He knows if I leave this time, I’ll never come back.”

Susan took Colt’s hand and let him help her out of the car. “We’ll see you guys later.”

Colt slammed the car door. Susan turned to look at the house she’d grown up in. The black shutters on the second floor sat crooked against the wood siding of the house. The gray paint, chipped in several places, gave the house a gloomy look. The windows were all dark except for the large one which looked out over the front porch. The curtains fluttered.

A feeling of dread warred with the joy of coming home. She had missed her room and things, her mom, and her brother. The fights with her father, she had not missed, nor did she want to repeat them.

Colt touched her shoulder. “That’s a great tree.”

“I used to climb it all the time.” Susan looked up at the large oak’s bare limbs. Brown dead leaves lay scattered across the lawn.

She turned to look at Colt. His golden hair blew in the wind. Young and carefree, he warmed the ice which had formed around her heart with his smile. She was suddenly glad he had come with her. “I was a regular tomboy, or as my dad put it, an independent little cuss.”

“I don’t see how you’ve changed that much,” Colt teased, sliding his arm around her shoulders. She punched him lightly in the stomach. “Luckily, I like independent women,” he said with a grin.

“Well, you’re about to meet someone more stubborn than me.” Susan noticed the worn Thanksgiving wreath on the door. The tail of the turkey only had a few feathers left. Her mom put out the same trimmings every year.

A wave of sadness tightened the muscles in her chest. Her mom didn’t do anything without the approval of her dad. Susan had heard them argue many times over petty change. Her father didn’t trust anyone with his money.

“Are we talking about your dad?” Colt helped her up the steps to the front porch.

“Yes, he likes things to go his way, and he’s not very tolerant when they don’t.” Susan took a fortifying breath and rang the doorbell. She needed to get this show on the road.

“Just let me know if you decide you want to leave early. I’ll be right behind you.”

The door opened.

Chapter Seven

“As owner of a small plumbing business, I think it’s important for a man to be able to support his family.” Mr. York rattled on about his job. “I’m curious . . .”

Mr. York’s constant chattering was beginning to get on Colt’s nerves. He tuned him out and glanced around the dinner table. Susan’s brother, John Paul, sat staring at his food. The tall, lanky teenager hadn’t said more than two words since they had entered the house.

Mrs. York glared at her husband from the other end of the table. Her brown hair was escaping the confines of her hairclip. Long wisps drooped around her face. She’d tried to be friendly at first, even when Mr. York interrupted her with snide remarks.

A few candles flickered in the center of table, which created eerie shadows that stalked along the walls of the small, dark dining room. Colt pictured a scene from his favorite video game, a black scene where evil lay suspended in time, ready to pounce. The wicked breath of monsters sent the flame of each candle dancing through the air. A keg of dynamite stood nearby, set to blow with one false move.

This wasn’t a game.

Colt turned back to Mr. York.

“Do you have a good job?” the man asked.

“Dad, there’s no need to be rude.” Susan laid her fork next to her plate. “Colt is a friend. You don’t need to question him about his ability to take care of me. We’re not engaged.”

“Honey, I just think your father is concerned about your welfare,” Mrs. York said in a soft voice.

Colt glanced at her but suspected her feeble attempt to smooth things over was not going to work. Susan and her father had been sporting for a fight since she’d walked into the house.

“Right, Mom.” Susan looked back down at her plate, but she didn’t eat.

“Well,” Mr. York spouted off, “if you’re sleeping with the man, I should—”

“Oh of all the . . .” She shoved back her chair. Colt notice her hands shaking, the anger vibrating off her like a bass line being pumped through woofers on high.

Colt couldn’t believe the man could be so crass. He wanted Susan to calm down, so Colt laid his hand on her arm. “I can understand how your father might feel.” He turned to Mr. York. “As a concerned father, you want to make sure I’m capable of taking care of your daughter. But like you, she’s rather an independent cuss.”

“And I don’t need a man to make me happy.” Susan jerked her arm out of Colt’s grip.

“True, but even with that small flaw, I find her appealing. And I’m more than willing to take care of her, Mr. York, whenever she’ll let me.” Colt placed his arm on the back of her chair. He stroked the long braid down the center of her back.

Glaring at him, Susan moved away from his touch to the front of her chair.

“Right, and are you willing to take care of another man’s child?” Mr. York persisted.

That did it.

Colt caught a brief glimpse of Susan’s face before she turned to her father. She balled her hands into fists in her lap. She was ready to fight. No amount of talking was going to save this situation.

“Dad, we’ve been over this. I’m not asking you, Colt, or any other man to take care of my child. I can do it myself.” Susan spit out her words in a rough tone but didn’t raise her voice.

“Right.” Mr. York forced back his chair and rose to his feet. “Your plan is to sell your child to the highest bidder.”

Susan bolted to her feet and started for her father. Colt jumped up, knocking over his chair, and grabbed her by the shoulders. He couldn’t let her pass, because he didn’t want her getting hurt or harming the baby.

“I can’t believe how vicious you can be. When you’re drinking, you are the most despicable person I know. You don’t give a damn about anything but your job and your bottle. Well, you can have them both, because I’m not going to stick around any longer.” She half-turned to her mother.

Colt let go of Susan’s shoulders and stepped back to pick up his chair.

“If you’re wise, you’ll get out before he drags you down into the gutter with him,” Susan added by way of warning to the others at the table. John Paul sent a worried look at his father.

Colt turned to see Mr. York’s arm come up, as if to strike. Stepping between him and Susan, Colt put out his hand to block the blow. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“And who’s going to stop me?” Mr. York puffed out his chest.

“Me.” Colt stepped forward and tugged Susan behind his back.

“Now, dear, I thought we were going to keep this dinner friendly.” Mrs. York rushed to her husband. “Remember? You promised me, no matter what, you were going to be nice.”

“I’m trying, but Susan is testing my patience.” Mr. York glared at his daughter.

Susan stepped forward, but Colt blocked her progress with his body. “I haven’t done anything. You’re the one that’s been accusing me of sleeping with Colt and selling my baby to the highest bidder.”

“So name your price.” Mr. York bit back. “I’ll pay you if I have to so I can raise my grandchild.”

“No way. You can’t even pay the mortgage on this house, which is falling down around you!” Susan’s fingers dug into Colt’s arm as she yelled at her father. “You’re not getting anywhere near my child!” She let go of Colt’s arm, turned, and stalked out of the room. “You can drop dead as far as I’m concerned!”

“Susan!” The cry from her father rang through the house. Mr. York dropped into his seat in defeat.

Colt turned and took off after Susan. He ran over the worn carpet and caught up with her seconds before she walked out the front door.

“Don’t bother to say good-bye. We’re out of here.”

She shoved open the torn screen door and walked out without a backward glance.

Picking up his coat from an aging recliner, Colt followed her out the door.

* * * *

With the cold wind blowing against Susan’s red cheeks, Colt couldn’t tell if her anger had receded. He grabbed her arm to slow down her pace. “I know he upset you.”

“Hell no, the man infuriates me. I really thought he was going to try, but the more he drinks, the more vicious he becomes.”

“But he only had a few glasses of wine.” Colt had taken notice of every sip Mr. York took.

“Wrong. Every time he went into the kitchen, he guzzled down some whiskey. Didn’t you smell it on his breath?” Susan stopped in the middle of the quiet street. “I’m sorry, Colt. Now you know all the dirt on Susan York. She’s an unwed, pregnant bimbo who has a lush for a father and will sell her baby to the highest bidder.”

“Hey, watch it. I take exception to you talking about my lady that way. I don’t see her in that light at all.” Colt stepped back and put up his fists in a fighter’s stance. Moving his hands through the air, he pretended to get ready for a match.

He danced a fighter’s shuffle and circled behind her. “She’s smart.” He dodged into her, kissed the side of her neck, and tasted her sweet skin. “And strong and cute.” His light punches barely brushed the arms of her coat.

“And fat and stubborn.” Susan turned, trying to catch his quick hands.

“And sexy and beautiful.” He dropped his hands to his waist. “And a thief.”

“A thief?” The smile on Susan’s face turned to a frown. “I didn’t steal anything.”

“Wrong.” He wrapped his arms around her. “You stole my heart.”

“Oh, that’s a bad pickup line.” Susan slid her hands under his open coat and over his chest. “You’re just trying to distract me from my fight with my father.”

Colt drew her closer. “No, I think we might be standing under some mistletoe. You know, Christmas not far away.”

Susan looked up. “I don’t see any mistletoe.”

He followed her gaze. The crisscross limbs overhead showed a little sun peeking through the clouds. Burning wood scented the air. Thinking about a fire, a crisp winter chill, people getting together, all the trimmings of the season, Colt wished he could make her holiday brighter.

“Are you sure?” He kissed the curve of her neck.

She giggled. The light, carefree sound thrilled Colt. He wanted to hear her laugh for the rest of his life.

“I think you’re dreaming,” she said and shifted in his arms. “You just want a kiss.”

He lifted his head. “I want a lot more than a kiss.”

Her dark eyes met his. He wanted to drown in the sweet chocolate depths. “But seeing as we are standing in the middle of the street, I’ll settle for a kiss for the moment.”

Her hands caressed his neck. “I always said you were a smart guy.”

He covered her lips with his in a long exploration of her mouth. He wasn’t going to rush it, or her, by letting his desire demand more than she was willing to give.

Like fine wine, he wanted to savor every drop, the soft, wet slide of her tongue, the low moan that whispered in her throat, all the little things he found appealing. Her arms tightened, and her body melted against his. He wanted to pick her up and carry her to the nearest bed. Then he could enjoy a true Thanksgiving Day treat.

A horn honked.

A car swished passed them. He reluctantly released her lips. “Where are we headed, by the way?”

“Jillian’s.” Susan shifted away from him.

“Then I think it’s going to be a while before we can resume this activity.” He snatched another quick kiss before releasing her.

* * * *

“What happened? You both look like you’ve been through a war.” Jason drew Colt back into the corner of the hallway when he started to follow Susan into the living room.

“Not much, but I could have used your brother’s gun.” Colt glanced at the man standing next to Jason.

Derek Harris was linebacker big. Any man with half a brain would back off before starting a fight with him.

“Did Martin get violent?” Derek cut to the chase. “He has a bad temper. And when he’s drinking, it gets even worse.”

“Yes, and if you want help beating the man to a pulp, I’m in.” Another man joined their group. Colt eyed the man, who looked to be about the same age as Jason.

“Michael, this is Colt.” Jason made the introduction quick.

“I still owe the man for a little dispute he had with my sister Jillian,” Michael added. A telling glance passed between the men, but Colt didn’t question them.

“Yes, well . . .” Colt toyed with the idea. “I was okay until he started to take a swing at Susan.” Anger still pumped through his blood. He didn’t need a gun when Mr. York tried to hit her. Colt could have killed the man with his bare hands.

“After I stepped in, he backed off.” Colt looked at the other men, judging their response. “The man was vicious. He said some cruel things to Susan.”

Colt didn’t want to repeat anything her father had said. “She took all she could stand, and then we left.”

Jason glanced at the crowd in the other room. He lowered his voice. “Do you think he’ll continue to bother her?”

Colt shook his head. “I don’t know, but the man didn’t let up the whole time we were there. I can’t see him backing off now.”

“Jason?” Kelly stepped up behind Colt. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Jason’s face changed from concern to a smile. “I was just telling Colt that Derek might know his father.”

Derek spoke up. “Yeah, I worked with a John Lefevour in the Middle East. He was an executive for a small oil company. I think the name is Airon Oil.”

“Yes, that’s my dad. He’s worked for them for years. I’ll have to tell him I met you.” Colt shook Derek’s hand and turned to look around the room. “Where did Susan go?”

“She and Jillian are in the kitchen.” Kelly slid her arm around Jason’s waist. “When were you planning on leaving? It’s been rather a long day, and I think Susan may be getting a little tired.”

Colt looked over at Kelly. He wondered what Susan had told her about their visit with her family. Having to deal with the constant strain wore him out. He could just imagine how she felt. He glanced around at all the people milling around the living room. The warm sight of everyone enjoying themselves and the appealing sound of laughter didn't change his dislike of socializing with a bunch of strangers. He wanted to go home.

"It's a long trip back to Dallas," Colt added.

"I guess, then, we better head back," Jason said and turned to Derek. "Let us know when Jillian goes into labor."

A knife of doubt sliced through Colt. In less than two months, Susan's baby would be arriving. He still didn't have a clue as to what she was going to do.

* * * *

"Why don't you have a seat, Susan? Then you can tell me how you're doing." Jillian walked into the kitchen and paused by the breakfast table.

"I'm fine." Susan glanced around.

The warm kitchen smelled of cooked turkey and sweet spices. Dirty dishes sat near the sink. The coffee machine gurgled as it worked through the brewing process. Cakes and pies covered the counter.

"Kelly and Jason have been wonderful. I can't thank you enough for introducing them to me."

"No problem." Jillian shoved out a chair and eased down onto it.

Susan couldn't help but wonder if she would be as big as Jillian in a month.

"Here, why don't you sit down?" Jillian pushed out a chair with her foot. "Kelly says you're struggling with everyone appearing to care more about the baby than they do about you. Believe me, I know how you feel."

Susan couldn't stop her heated blush. "It's just that every time I see anyone who knows I'm pregnant, they ask 'How's the baby?' Don't they care what's going on with me?"

Jillian patted Susan's hand, which lay on the table. "Tell me about it. Derek makes me so mad sometimes I turn up the stereo and blast Toby Keith's song through the house."

"Which song?"

Jillian sang the first few words. "I wanna talk about *me*."

Susan joined in, letting go of some of her tension. "I wanna talk about *I*. I wanna talk about number one . . ."

They both broke off and started laughing.

“See, you’re not alone,” Jillian said and patted her belly. “I want this baby more than anything in the world. But I must admit I’ll be glad not to have to go to the bathroom every twenty minutes. Oh, and I’ll really be in heaven when I can sleep on my stomach again.”

“And to be able to eat more than two tablespoons of food without feeling full,” Susan added.

Jillian nodded. “That reminds me, how did lunch go with your parents?”

Susan knew some of her father’s problems were known around town. Jillian had a run-in with him several months ago. “It could have gone better, but I expected worse.”

If Colt hadn’t been there, her father would probably have hit her, which would have started a free-for-all. Susan had decided when she left town she wasn’t going to stand by and take his abuse again. She wasn’t her mother’s daughter in that respect.

Jillian patted her hand again. “He can’t seem to come to terms with your leaving.”

“I know, but he’s the one who forced the issue. I don’t plan on ever seeing him again.” Susan absorbed the shock of her own words. There was no going back.

“I can make a life without him, thanks to you, Kelly, and Jason. I have a future, and I’m not going to let him drag me down into the gutter with him.” Her convictions strengthened. She needed to write off that part of her life.

“You . . .”

“Hey, guys, what are you doing?” Kelly walked through the kitchen door with Jason, Colt, and Derek on her heels.

Jillian turned to speak to them. “We were just talking about the joys of motherhood.”

Derek put his hands on his wife’s shoulder. “And did you tell her how much you enjoy the flavor of decaffeinated coffee?”

Jillian shook her head and whispered to Susan, “He’s dreaming.”

Smiling at the innocent teasing between the two, Susan looked up to see the concern on Colt’s face. The encounter with her family upset him. She wondered if he still wanted to have anything to do with her.

“Are you ready to go?” He stepped over to her chair. “We thought we might head back so we can get home before it gets dark.”

She started to rise. His hand landed under her elbow. She glanced at Jillian, who smiled.

“Remember, if it gets too bad, turn up the music.” Jillian rose to her feet, her husband assisting her. “They do catch on eventually.”

* * * *

“Do you feel like coming over to my apartment for a while?” Colt followed Kelly and Jason through their back door. In the car with them on the trip back to Dallas, there hadn’t been an opportunity to talk to Susan alone. Now, he wanted to spend time with just her.

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she walked into the den and looked longingly at the couch.

“I’ll understand if you don’t want to.” He stepped past her to the doorway, which led to the front door. She tracked his movements with weary eyes. She’d slept some in the car, but apparently, she was still tired.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“Nothing much, I just thought we could watch some television and relax.”

She glanced back at Kelly and Jason. “You guys won’t mind if I go over to Colt’s for a while, will you?” Susan took Colt’s arm. “I won’t be gone more than a few hours.”

“No problem,” Jason answered and opened the refrigerator door. “We’re not planning on doing much here.”

“Thanks for driving.” Colt turned and ushered Susan down the hall and out the front door. He didn’t want to take a chance she’d change her mind.

“Are we in a hurry?” Susan questioned him when he stopped next to his truck.

“No, why?” He felt like they were moving in slow motion.

“Well, you didn’t want to linger at Jason and Kelly’s, and you’re rushing me into your truck. I think you have more on your mind than just watching TV.” Susan shifted to the center of the bench seat. Colt climbed into the cab. “I’m not the one who had roaming hands in the back seat of Jason’s car.”

Susan smiled. During their trip back to Dallas, she’d tried to distract him from his morose mood by sliding her hand along his inner thigh. He’d stopped her several times from stroking her target. “Whatever do you mean, sir?”

He leaned across her and grabbed her seatbelt. “I’ll show you exactly what I mean when we get to my apartment. Right now, I have to get us there.”

“Does that mean I have to behave?” Susan put her hand on top of his thigh.

“I know there’s no way I can make you.” He started the engine and put the truck into gear. A love song played on the radio, adding to the mood.

He pulled away from the curb. "I will warn you, though. Anything you do now, I'll get back when we get to my place."

"Ooooh, is that a dare?" Susan nudged closer and let her hand glide between his legs.

He shifted in his seat. "No, it's a promise."

A wicked glint lit up Susan's eyes. She tugged her left hand away from him and shifted it along his shoulders.

"It's not that far to your place." She pressed her breasts into his arm. Her right hand landed on his thigh again.

"It would be closer if I can just make this light." The truck accelerated for a quick moment, and then Colt stepped on the brake. "Damn."

Susan glanced at the signal. It turned red. Her hand ran along the inseam of his jeans. "You just need to have a little patience, Colt. We'll get there." She lightly ran her fingers over his zipper, teasing the hard bulge underneath.

He grabbed her hand with one of his. His dark green eyes glared into hers. "Give me five minutes, and I'll show you how hard it is to be patient when your body is screaming for release."

She snuggled closer. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

The car behind them honked. Colt released her and stepped on the gas but didn't answer.

"Let's see, if it was my choice . . ." she said, pondering the thought out loud. Her hand toyed with the inseam of his jeans. "You could pull over and ravish me on the side of road."

She paused. "But there are too many people around and not enough room in this truck to get comfortable. How about you do the romantic lover thing?"

"What's that?" Colt hoped if he kept her talking they could get home before she sent him over the edge. Her hand dropped closer to where he wanted it to be.

"Oh, you know. You could sweep me up into your arms and carry me up the stairs to your apartment. Every romantic lover in the world has done that maneuver at least once. It's predictable. You should go for the unexpected." Susan paused, her fingers dancing again over the zipper of his jeans. "I've got it. We should try a new position."

"Which one?" Colt could think of several he'd like to try, had been thinking about them since the last time they'd made love.

"Well, I know which one I've always wanted to try. But I don't think you have the right equipment."

"Excuse me?" Colt's words sounded harsher than he intended. "What exactly is it you need?"

Susan giggled. “A chair. The only ones you have are the folding chairs in your dining room. I don’t think one of them would hold both of us.”

“Does that mean you want to give me a lap dance?” Colt’s body strained against the confines of his jeans.

He turned into his apartment’s parking lot and searched for a space. With everything full, he had to park in the overflow area, which was a long way from his door.

“See, that wasn’t so bad. We’re here already.” Susan turned and reached for her purse, which was sitting on the seat beside her.

Unable to wait a second more, Colt caught her shoulders and yanked her close. “It’s been an eternity.”

His lips claimed hers.

Chapter Eight

“I have another chair that might work.” Colt carried her into his bedroom.

“What?” Susan’s head was still spinning from the trip out of his truck and up the stairs. Her feet hadn’t touched the ground yet. He excited her in ways she couldn’t explain, but the way he wanted to protect her from her father today is what convinced her she’d fall in love with him.

“You know, for my lap dance.” He set her down on the end of the bed.

He took off her shoes, his sandy blond hair at just the right level for her to run her fingers through the silky strands. “And what chair were you planning on using?”

He stood and walked over to his desk. A metal chair sat in the corner, the back and seat covered with a blue plaid material.

“Does it have rollers?” The idea of giving him a real lap dance thrilled her.

“Yes, but they don’t roll well on this carpet.” He set the back of the chair against the wall and sat down. “Come here, and let’s see if it will hold both of us.”

Susan walked over and let him guide her down onto his lap. No squeak or groan sounded from the chair with her additional weight.

“It might work.” Susan laid her hands on Colt’s shoulders. He circled her waist with his arms, gliding them under her jacket.

“We just have one problem. I want you out of these clothes.”

Once free of her coat, she gripped his shoulders and backed off his lap. “We’re both a little overdressed.”

To help steady her, Colt kept his hands on her waist. Then he stood up and stripped out of his clothes.

The thick girth of his desire excited her, and she licked her lips in anticipation of him moving between her legs. A wicked grin passed over his face. He tossed his jeans onto the bed. “I think it’s your turn now.”

She gripped the hem of her shirt and teased the material slowly up over her belly. The idea of him seeing the size of her stomach didn’t thrill her, and she paused. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather the lights be off? I’m not getting any smaller.”

“No, I want to see every inch of you.” He stepped closer, pushed her blouse higher, and slid his hands around her to undo her bra. Once her pants and underwear were down around her ankles, he helped her step out of them. “Now, I think we’re ready for that lap dance.” Taking a few steps back, he sat down and guided her back over his legs.

Susan ran her hands over his shoulders until her arms lay around his neck. The soft swell of her full breasts rubbed invitingly against the hard wall of his chest.

He licked his lips, and his hands cupped the warm, creamy flesh of her rear. "You have the most incredible body."

"Right, I have a Santa Claus belly, and I move no faster than a sloth." She shifted on his lap. The smooth skin of her stomach brushed against his.

"Maybe, but your jolly belly holds up two succulent breasts that are just begging for my attention." He put his words into action, and his hands caressed her breasts. The rough pads of his thumbs toyed with the dark rose areolas until they peaked with need. "And with you moving slower, I can catch you easier now."

He dipped his head and licked each tip of her breasts with his tongue. He played a teasing game to make her hot and in need of his touch, and she couldn't hold back the moan which whispered past her lips.

He took a nipple between his lips and sucked gently.

"Ooh."

Releasing one nipple, he ventured over to the other and flicked his tongue over the tight peak, then drew back. His gaze met hers. "Do you like that?"

She nodded. "But you're teasing me."

"Me?" He didn't wait for an answer. He surrounded her breast with his wicked lips and pulled her breast into his mouth.

Gasping for air, she panted for breath.

Each roll of her nipple against the roof of his mouth increased the desire building in her blood. Heat seeped between her legs. She didn't hold back the pleasure he gave but voiced her encouragement with small cries of need. "Oh, Colt!" The suction of his mouth increased. "Please Colt, you have . . ."

The wet folds of her sex rubbed against him, searching for relief. Tremors raced along her inner thighs. She gripped his biceps as shudders rippled through her body. The overwhelming strength of her release weighed down her head, and it fell forward onto his shoulder. She melted down over his chest.

Colt shifted her on his lap and positioned his thick rod against her wet heat. She lifted her head when he started to enter the warm haven of her body. Eyes wide, she stopped her downward movement. "Wait a minute. I'm supposed to be giving you a lap dance."

His hands landed on her waist, holding her in place. "You are."

“I don’t think so. I thought part of the fun was that I was supposed to tease you first.”

“Honey, if you tease me much more, I’m going to explode.”

She bent her knees and sank down over his shaft. His hips drove forward, forcing him deeper. Their eyes met. He ran his hands down over her hips and cupped her bottom. She rocked gently, starting a sweet rhythm which curled her toes with desire.

Colt’s white teeth sank into the soft flesh of his lips. A groan escaped his mouth. The wet spot on his mouth drew her, demanding she soothe the ache. She dipped her head and kissed him.

The rich taste of his mouth reminded her of the sweet and creamy filling of a doughnut. She wanted to gobble him up. The friction of his tongue against hers sent shivers down her spine. She increased her pace and rode him.

The added activity robbed her lungs of air. She forced her lips away from his. “I can’t breathe.” He nuzzled her ear and shifted beneath her. “Come on, Susan, come for me.”

The huskiness of his voice told her he was near the brink himself. She wanted to give him a climax to rock his world, to tell him without words how she much she cared about him.

“I’m close,” she groaned.

Her body, ready to explode, lost the will to move. She stood suspended on the edge of heaven, with only the action of his hips keeping up the steady pace. Her muscles flexed, sending energy ricocheting through her.

* * * *

“Yes!” He lifted his hips off the chair and plunged deep. Her climax surged through him like a shot to his loins. The pulsating spasms of his orgasm shook him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and snuggled next to her, then laid his head on her shoulder.

He contemplated for a moment the feelings he had developed for her over the last few weeks. If she’d believe him, he’d gladly tell her he was in love. But she wouldn’t. In her mind, he only wanted to date her because she was pregnant.

Maybe, initially, she might have been right. But the more he found out about her, the more he fell for the strong, independent woman she was becoming. He wanted to be a part of her future. He lifted his head and looked into her face.

“You know, after I have my baby, we’re going to have to try this again.” She leaned back farther in his embrace and ran her hands over his shoulders and down onto his chest. “I think I could have a lot of fun teasing you, because, Colt, you have no patience.”

“Me?” He glanced down at the swell of her breasts. “Who was it that came first?”

She shook her head. “And who carried me up the stairs and into the bedroom before I could even catch my breath?”

“And who provoked me?” His arms held her in place when she started to rise off his lap. “I think we can both say we’re short on patience when it comes to wanting each other.”

Susan nodded and looked down at the hair on his chest. She toyed with a curl with her fingers. “You may not want to know me after I have my baby.”

“Not a chance. You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.” The doubt in her eyes when she looked back up at him cut through his heart. “I have every intention of knowing you for a long time. In fact, if I didn’t think you’d turn me down, I’d ask you to move in with me.”

A skeptical look entered her eyes. “Why?”

He rubbed his hands over the smooth skin of her back, drawing her closer with each stroke. “Well, I could spend more time with you, if you lived here. Not counting the additional chances we’d have to make love. If I asked, what would you do?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“Who said you would be a burden?” Colt didn’t understand her resistance. His family had money. If they needed help with the baby’s expenses, they could ask them.

“No one, but I have to deal with one set of problems at a time. Right now, I need to decide what I want to do about Junior here.” She patted her stomach. “After I know what I want to do, then I can decide who I want to live with.”

“You know I’d be glad to take care of you and the baby.” Colt wanted her to let him help.

She smiled and shifted out of his arms. “Yes.”

He decided to let it go for the moment, but he wasn’t giving up on his plan to get her to move in with him. Once she was steady on her feet, he released her. She bent down to pick up her clothes.

In his mind, he ran over the available options. She could live with him, or Kelly and Jason, or . . . “You’re not thinking about going back and living with your parents, are you?”

She stood up, her jeans in her hands. “No, that’s part of the reason I’m thinking of giving my baby to Kelly and Jason. I won’t be able to afford to live on my own without getting a better job.” She stepped over to the dresser and picked up her blouse. “And with the cost of an apartment, day care, and school, I can’t figure out how I can swing all the expenses. Not counting the medical expenses I’ll have from the delivery.”

“Don’t you have insurance?” Colt hadn’t figured in the cost of those bills.

“No, my dad took me off his policy once I graduated high school. He didn’t want me to go to college and thought by removing me from his insurance, he could force me to find a job there in town.” Susan laid her clothes down on the bed.

Colt couldn’t believe how unfeeling the man could be to his own daughter. “Is today the first time your father has tried to hit you?”

A hurt expression fell over her face. She quickly regrouped and looked at Colt. “I’m not his favorite punching bag, but I’ve taken my share of hits. That’s another reason why I won’t be moving back home.”

Making a silent promise, Colt decided neither she nor her baby would ever be under her father’s care. He stood up and grabbed her clothes off the bed. “You don’t need these.” He threw the pile in the general direction of his closet. They landed on the floor. He needed to reassure himself she would be safe. “I’m not ready to take you home, and I don’t want to wrestle them off you again.”

“But, Colt . . .”

He swung her up into his arms. “I’m impatient, remember.” He carried her over to the head of the bed and sat down with her in his arms.

“But, Colt, it’s a little chilly in here.”

Her eyes told him she was going to argue the point of spending the rest of the evening in bed naked. “Then I guess we’ll have to find something to do to keep us warm.”

* * * *

“I think Susan has found herself a good guy.” Jason slid his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“Why do you say that?” Kelly shifted on the couch to look at her husband’s face. He hadn’t been thrilled when Colt and Susan had started dating. Yet now, he was saying he liked Colt.

“Well, he was not happy when he got back from Susan’s parents’. He was upset by the way they treated her. I think if Derek would have let Colt borrow a gun, the boy would have taken it to use against Martin York. The man was very ugly to his daughter.”

“What did Colt say? Susan didn’t say a word to me, even though I knew something had happened by the hurt look in her eyes. You know her. She tried to act as if everything went okay.” Kelly gripped her hands in her lap, trying not to let her anger get out of control. “Sometimes I just want to deck her parents. They don’t seem to realize how wonderful a kid they’ve got.”

“They just don’t want her to make a mistake. They’re struggling with this, too.” Jason repeated the words Kelly wanted to believe since the day Susan had come to live with them. “Give them the benefit of the doubt.”

Kelly was finding the mantra harder and harder to believe. She couldn’t believe the Yorks truly cared about their daughter, not with the way they were acting.

“Why do they have to be so cruel?”

Jason’s hand covered both of hers. “I don’t know, but it’s not worth getting upset about.”

The noise from the show they were watching drew her attention. She glanced at the clock on the mantel. Susan wouldn’t be home for a while yet. “Are you interested in this movie?”

“Not really. Do you want to watch something else?” Jason picked up the remote from the coffee table and flipped through the channels. “I don’t think there’s anything better on.”

“No. Why don’t we go upstairs?” She pushed away from him and stood. “I thought maybe I’d tell you some of the ideas I have after seeing Jillian’s nursery. I’m thinking a circus theme might be fun.” Kelly tugged on Jason’s hand to get him to come with her. He didn’t look thrilled with the plan. “Susan and I agreed we wanted something with bold colors.”

“Yes, but what difference does it make? The baby isn’t going to care what color things are.” Jason turned off the TV and turned for the hallway.

Kelly smiled. He might be feeling left out of the whole process, but she wanted him to be as excited about the baby as she was. “What if I let you put together the crib this weekend? It’s been in the box ever since we brought it home. You could get Colt to come over and help you.”

A spark lit his eyes. He blinked, the excitement stifled, and he shook his head. “Susan said she didn’t want to put up the baby’s bed until after Christmas.” He placed his hand on Kelly’s arm to stop her from going up the stairs. “What if she decides not to let us adopt?”

Kelly turned on the first step. She’d thought about this a great deal over the past few weeks. Did it matter? Susan was a vital part of their life. They were not going to lose anything by helping her with her baby.

“Then we have a grandchild we’ll need to take care of. Susan is a part of us now, and I won’t let her go. She’s not going to be able to take care of this child alone.” Drawing him to her, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “And as far as I can tell, we’re all Susan has. Whether she chooses to make us the parents of her child or not, we are going to have a new baby in this house.”

“I don’t think she’d like the idea of us adopting her.” Jason’s hands found their way under Kelly’s blouse. His warm touch caressed her skin. “Half the time, I can’t get Susan to take the salary we agreed to pay her for working for us.”

“Yes, well, I think she’s rather like you, her adoptive father. Once Susan gets an idea in her mind, she just can’t seem to let it go.” Kelly brushed her hands through her husband’s dark wavy hair. He could turn her on with just one look. “A one-track mind can only go one place. And I know where yours is right now.”

He grinned and brushed his fingers along the sides of her breasts. “Well, we are going upstairs.”

“And the house is empty.” She toyed with the first button on his shirt.

“It would be a shame to waste such a good opportunity.” He slid his arms under her legs and scooped her up into his arms. “While the children are out, all parents should play.”

Kelly laughed, and he quickly rushed up the stairs.

* * * *

“So how’s studying for the finals going?” Kelly walked into the dining room. A number of large bags filled her hands.

Susan looked up from her stack of notes. “Fine. I took my history and math test today. I have my biology tomorrow and my English Lit Wednesday.” Susan eyed the bag Kelly set on the table. “I was going to go over to Colt’s tonight to study with him, but he has to work.”

“How are you two getting along?”

Susan wondered what signal she’d been giving off to let Kelly know there was a problem. “Why?”

“I don’t know. The last week or so, since Thanksgiving, you seem to be irritated with him a lot. I thought maybe you two had a fight or something.” Kelly spoke almost too casually, like she knew something was wrong.

Susan couldn’t help but think about Colt and the progress they’d made on their relationship. “I’m not mad at him. It’s just . . .” She couldn’t put her finger on what exactly it was about his attitude that wasn’t right. “I feel as if he wants to take control of my life, tell me what I should do, and then make me follow his orders.”

“And you don’t want to let him do that.”

Kelly appeared to read Susan’s mind. “Right, but, he tries so hard to please me, I find I bend to his will without him even trying to persuade me.” Susan loved him, and she didn’t want to take the risk of losing him. “I’ve tried to explain to him that I want to go to college, get a degree, and have a career. He agrees like he understands, but . . .”

She shook her head, confused by his mixed signals. “Then he starts talking about names for the baby, where I should live, and people I might get to keep the baby. He acts as if I can have it all.”

“Well, you can.” Kelly fumbled with the paper bags. “You know you can live here as long as you want to. Financial aid will help you with school, and Jason and I will loan you the money for any other expenses you might have.”

“But that means I’ll be racking up bills. How will I ever get out from under the debt?” Weighed down by the need to make the right choices, Susan was struggling with what she really wanted to do. She wasn’t sure she could live with the option of giving her child away.

“You don’t have to pay us back all at once. You can do it over time after you get your degree.” Kelly dug around in one of the bags.

“Does that mean you don’t want to adopt my baby anymore?”

“No, I just don’t want you to feel pressured into making a decision you’re not ready to make.” Kelly put a box on the table. “Come on, you need a change of scenery. Now that you’ve let Jason assemble the crib, why don’t you help me put this mobile up?”

The picture on the side of the box, different animals playing in a circle over a laughing baby’s head, tempted Susan. “Wow, how cute. It fits perfectly with the circus theme we have for the nursery.”

“You haven’t seen the best yet.” Kelly pulled a large package from a different bag. “Look at this. It has the blanket, curtains, and a crib ruffle all together.”

Bold colors of red, blue, and green jumped out at Susan. The bright pattern had clowns dancing and playing with animals and large balls.

“That’s just what we were looking for.” Susan pushed back her chair and stood up. She picked up the mobile’s box. “Where did you find all this? I thought we’d looked everywhere.”

“I went shopping over my lunch hour. There’s a little shop just down from my office.” Kelly put the collection back in the sack. “Let’s go see what it looks like in the room.”

“You know, Jason is going to be shocked when he gets home. He said we’d never find a circus theme for the baby’s room.”

Susan left her homework on the table and met Kelly by the doorway to the hall. “You’re the best. For a while there, I thought he was going to be right.”

“No way. Even if I had to find someone to make everything for us, I would not have let him be right.” Kelly wrapped her arm around Susan’s shoulders. They started up the stairs. “He would have become way too cocky. The only way to keep a man in line is to show him you can be right, too.”

Chapter Nine

Rushing for the door to get to school on time, Susan heard a ring. She didn't want to answer the phone, but knew whoever it was would just call her cell.

Susan grabbed the phone on the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

"Oh good, Susan, I'm glad I caught you." Her mom's voice on the other end of the line made Susan wish she'd ignored the call.

"What's up, Mom? I'm in kind of a hurry. I have a final in an hour or so, and I want some extra time to study." Susan set her book bag on the counter by her purse.

"Just wanted to know what time you'd be home tonight. We're looking forward to seeing you."

Susan stared at the brown grass outside the bay window and studied the backyard. "What?" Her mother must be crazy. Susan had no intention of going back to Gladewater, today or anytime in the future.

"Well, you told me last week when I talked to you school would be over today. So I figured you would be coming home."

Her mom said this like it was a forgone conclusion. "No, I told you and Daddy when I left on Thanksgiving I wouldn't be back. And I don't see any reason to change my mind now."

"But your baby is due soon. You need to come home so we can take care of you. You're not going to be able to take care of your child alone."

Susan wanted to scream. When were they going to get it? She'd been living in Dallas for the past three months, taking care of herself. Didn't they see she belonged with Jason and Kelly now?

"Well, I plan on staying where I am." Susan clenched her hands around the receiver, trying to keep her voice calm. "Depending on when exactly the baby is born, I'm hoping to start back to school for the spring term in January."

"I don't think that's wise. Your father and I think you should come home. It won't look good if you stay in Dallas."

"Why? So you can have your grandchild and look like heroes, while you shame me in front of everyone else in town? No thanks." With her blood pressure rising, Susan didn't wait for an answer. "Look, Mom, I've got to go. I'll talk to you later."

"Susan . . ."

She placed the phone back on the base and stared at the receiver. When were they going to learn she had other options and could take care of herself?

* * * *

“So how do you think you did on the final?” Colt asked after giving Susan a quick kiss. He shut his apartment door behind her.

“Okay, it wasn’t as bad as I expected.” She walked into the kitchen. “Do you mind if I get myself water?”

He shook his head. She walked over to the refrigerator. His hands sweating, he thought about how to approach the subject on his mind. “You know, now that finals are over, we should have more time to spend together.”

She took out a bottle, opened it, and placed the lid on the counter. Her lips lay over the opening, and she gulped down the liquid. He drank in the sight of her. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a long, braided rope, and wisps of hair danced around her cheeks. Her dark brown eyes closed in enjoyment of the cold water sliding down her throat. Her elegant neck led his eyes to the full curve of her breasts and onto her round, pregnant belly, which screamed with femininity.

He wanted her, right now, right here. He had no patience when it came to her. His body would go hard just looking at her. The well-constructed speech he had practiced slipped from his mind.

“Maybe, but with the holiday, you’re probably going to be required to work more hours.” She walked back over to him and set her water on his card table. “A computer nerd’s job is never done.”

“Yes, well . . .” He caught her hands when she started to undo the top button of his shirt. If she got his shirt off, he wouldn’t be able to follow through with his plan, not with her hands running over his chest. “I was thinking if you lived here, it wouldn’t be so hard to arrange time together.”

He released her and yanked out a folding chair from the table. “Why don’t you sit down? Then we can talk.”

A frown formed on her face. “What is there to talk about? You’ve asked me before to move in with you. You know I’m not going to until after the baby is born.”

“Yes, I know what you were thinking.” He guided her into a chair. “But I think I may have an idea to eliminate the delay.”

He dropped to his knees beside her.

Now or never.

Shock filled her face when he took her hand. The ring in his pocket felt like a ten-pound lead weight. “I know you haven’t known me very long, but I really believe you love me.”

She smiled. He could see her eyes shining with the same love he felt.

“Colt, I do love you, but . . .”

He put up his hand to stop her. "Don't say anything. I want to marry you, Susan. I can take care of you and your baby, and you won't have to worry about anything. I'll take care of everything."

* * * *

Susan stared at him. Did he really say what she just heard? He wanted to take care of her like she was some dimwit without a brain?

Didn't he know her any better than that? His words reminded her of her mother's call. Why did everyone think she was so helpless?

"We can get married before Christmas. I've been looking at larger apartments, or we can move in with my parents. We can be all settled by the time the baby arrives in January."

He dug his hand into his pocket.

She circled the bottle of water with her hand. The cold plastic brought the insanity to an end. Control was in her hands, and she didn't want to give it to anyone else.

Susan smiled. No one was going to take away her power to decide her own future.

Cold water rushed out of the bottle. The steady stream hit the top of Colt's head.

"What the . . ." He grabbed for her hand.

Water splattered off of Colt and dripped onto her. She laughed at the shocked expression on his face. The open end of the bottle upside down, she'd soaked him with her drink.

"Susan, what the hell are you doing?" He wrestled the bottle from her grip and set it on the table beside them.

"I'm saying no." Her hands were on his biceps, and she pushed away from him and tried to stand. He blocked her exit. "Let me up." Her chair tipped back on its back legs. The unsteady motion had her gripping his arms tighter. He placed his hands on her thighs, and the chair landed back on all four legs.

The heat from his hands sparked the wrong type of reaction. A sizzle of longing ran through her like an electric shock. She put her hands up in the air to escape the allure of his warm skin. Instead of wanting to shake him with anger, she wanted to strip him out of his wet shirt and make love to him. It wasn't the kind of plan that would convince him she could take care of herself.

He brushed back the wet hair hanging down over his forehead. Extra drops hit his shirt. "You didn't have to pour water all over me."

"Yes, I did." She shifted, trying to remove his hand from her thigh. "You've known me for weeks, and yet you haven't listened to a single word I've said. I can't believe you don't know me any better than that."

He rolled back on his feet and stood. “You’re right. I don’t understand you at all.”

The angry look on his face sparked a buzz of fear to rush through her. Would he strike her?

The thought lost purchase when he took another step back. He turned and stepped over to the doorway of the kitchen. Susan stared at his retreating back. What could she say that she hadn’t already told him?

She didn’t want to fight or argue the way her parents always did. He’d met her father and knew she didn’t want a man to run her life. Maybe if he had approached the subject differently, then they could have worked something out. She wanted a partner, someone to share her life with, not a sugar daddy to pay her bills and order her around.

Picking up her purse from the table, she walked to the front door. Her unsteady hand hovered over the doorknob.

“Are you leaving?” Colt’s voice said right as her fingers turned the handle.

She nodded, unwilling to turn and let him see the tears gathering in her eyes.

“Yes, I’m tired. I really think it would be better if we talked about this later.” She lied, hoping to make a hasty retreat. “I’ll call you.”

She walked out the door.

“Susan, wait, I . . .”

Her heart ached. The one man she’d thought understood her didn’t have a clue. She gritted her teeth and forced one foot in front of the other. As much as she wanted to turn around and bury herself in his arms, she exerted all her energy to step away. She wouldn’t send him mixed signals. He had to know she had a brain and the right to decide the course of her own life.

His door clicked shut. She walked down the steps to her car. After getting in, she sat staring through the windshield. The hard fact hit her in the face. This was her fault. By delaying her decision as to what she wanted to do about her child, she’d opened the door to getting advice from every person who cared about her.

The keys in her hand rattled when she started the engine of her car. Eyes full of tears, she checked behind her for any traffic. She put the car into gear and backed out of her parking space.

Her father loved her. The fact whispered through her head. He really did, but she had denied it.

Suddenly, she could see why he had struggled with her over the past several months. He needed a decision. In his head, her inability to make a choice proved she was still a child. So he’d reacted the way he’d always done in the past, he tried to take control.

He never considered the idea that she might like to review her options. He liked to take action. Granted, it usually was the wrong action, but he did make a choice quickly and stuck to it, right or wrong.

On automatic pilot, Susan checked the light to make sure the color was green and drove out of the parking lot.

Colt, of course, was doing the same thing as her father. He knew she wanted to make her own decision, but again, she hadn't told him what her decision was.

Tires screeched. The steering wheel ripped from her hands, and her world spun out of control. The G-force of the blow to the car threw her to the side. Her head hit the window beside her, her shoulder the door panel. The cracking of her skull vibrated through her. A nauseating feeling rumbled through her stomach.

Silence fell, a reprieve from the sudden storm that had attacked her. All her senses on alert, she gathered information. Someone yelled. Her baby kicked and shifted in her belly. She laid her hand over her stomach. "We're going to be okay. Just give me a second."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Something dripped down her face. She unconsciously wiped it away and shut her eyes again. The crooked position of her body made her struggle to sit upright. Pain seared through her left shoulder with her movements.

"Easy, honey, we'll have someone here to help you in a minute." The woman's voice beside Susan reassured her and the soft tone coaxed her to rest a minute. Darkness surrounded her.

"Susan." Colt's voice broke through the haze a few moments later. "You'll be okay. The ambulance is on its way."

"Colt." *Colt*. She had something she wanted to tell him. What was it?

"Something's wrong. I can't seem to focus." Her mind was fuzzy, and her body ached in strange places. "I need to talk to Kelly."

"I've already called her. She'll meet us at the hospital." Colt's voice sounded weird, like he was in a well.

Did he say hospital?

It must be a bad connection. They were on their way to the church.

Susan forced her eyes open. Colt's face floated in front of her for a few seconds then cleared. Tears ran down his cheeks.

She cupped his face in her right hand. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He smiled and then kissed the palm of her hand.

“You told Kelly.” Susan licked her dry lips. The words felt like cotton in her mouth. “She’ll take care of the baby, right?” Susan waited for him to nod before she closed her eyes again.

Good, it’s a lovely day for a wedding.

* * * *

“Colt?” The voice sounded from the doorway of the waiting room.

He looked up from the blue vinyl chair. The hushed silence of the room had made it easy for him to stay focused on the soothing color for the last twenty minutes. Now he had to blink several times in order to zero in on the woman walking toward him.

The concern on Kelly’s face stabbed at the pain he already felt. She hugged him the minute he got to his feet. Her body shook with her tears. He absorbed her sobs, but he couldn’t offer any comfort. His mind was numb.

“What happened?”

He shook his head. The emptiness inside blocked his thought process. “I, uh,” he stumbled over the words. “We, uh. It happened right outside my apartment window after she left. A guy ran a red light and hit her car. I stood and watched the whole thing.”

He could still see her car spinning when he closed his eyes. The other car had collided with her back quarter panel, sending her spiraling out of control. He’d not been able to do a thing to help her. His heart had frozen. A bleak future lay ahead of him without her in his life. “I called 911 and ran out to see if I could help.”

Tears welled up into his eyes, and his throat tightened, cutting off his breath. He tried to swallow back the fear he’d experienced when he’d seen her lying there in her car, not moving, blood oozing down her face. He still worried she wasn’t going to live.

“I stayed with her until the paramedics arrived. They rushed her right into surgery as soon as we arrived. They’re doing an emergency C-section.”

“Did they give you any clue as to what is wrong?” Kelly held on to his arms. She tugged him back down into his chair when she sat down.

“No, they said something about internal bleeding, but they didn’t tell me exactly what the problems are. The nurse said the doctor will come out after the surgery is over.” Colt went back to staring at the blue vinyl chair across from him.

The color sent a thought through his head, and he wondered if Susan was going to have a boy like she wanted. “Did she decide on a name?”

“What?”

“For the baby?”

“Oh, for a boy, we decided on Calvin Jay and for a girl, Samantha Kay.” Kelly answered as if it all seemed unimportant now. Her voice didn’t hold the usual excitement it had when she talked about the baby.

“Susan, uh . . .” Colt closed his eyes and tried to remember Susan’s exact words. “She wants you to take care of her baby.”

“What?”

Kelly sounded like a parrot, repeating the same word over and over. He turned and looked at her. She was staring at him like he’d gone insane.

“Susan said, ‘Tell Kelly to take care of the baby.’ Those were her exact words.” The pain in his chest forced him to clench his hands into fists. First, she had told him she loved him, and then she’d turned down his proposal and given her child to someone else.

Why did no one trust him with a baby?

“We’ll wait and see what she says when she wakes up.” Kelly laid her hand on his arms. “Have you called your parents?”

Colt blinked. “What?”

Now he was the parrot. “I didn’t think about calling them. They barely know Susan.”

“Yes, but I think they’d want to be here for you.” She offered a smile.

He shook his head and considered the idea.

“Why don’t you give them a call?” Kelly suggested.

“Kelly.” Jason drew his wife’s attention away from Colt. They embraced.

Colt turned and dug in his pocket for his cell phone. The call to Kelly had been hard enough. What should he say to his parents? He punched in their number and waited for the ringing to stop.

“Hi, Colt. How did the finals go?” His mom’s voice sounded in his ear.

Guilt over not going after Susan when she left his apartment, their fight, and the wreck all hit him at once. “As usual, Mom, I’ve screwed up. And now, Susan is in the hospital.”

* * * *

“Mr. Lefevour?” The voice jerked Colt out of the fog he’d fallen into. The blue vinyl wavered. He turned to look at the nurse in the light green scrubs. “You have a new baby boy.”

“What?” Kelly said and jumped to her feet. Jason stood up too.

Colt pushed to his feet. “What about Susan?”

“She’s still in surgery. The doctor should be out in a while to tell you how she’s doing. In the meantime, you can see your baby through the nursery window.”

The nurse’s words scraped against Colt’s nerves. The baby in the nursery wasn’t his. If he had to choose between Susan and the baby, he wanted Susan to be all right.

“Is he okay?” Kelly questioned the nurse. “He doesn’t have any problems because he came early, does he?”

The nurse turned to Kelly. “He seems to be in good condition, with strong lungs. He only weighs five pounds, two ounces, so we’ll need to watch him for a while.”

“When will Susan be out of surgery?” Colt didn’t want to look at her baby without knowing she was okay.

“I don’t know.” The nurse turned away and left the room.

Colt had to use all his willpower to hold himself back from running after her and demanding answers. Why was it taking so long?

“Come on, Colt.” Kelly put her hand on his arm. “Why don’t we go see the baby?”

He shook his head. “I can’t, but you guys go ahead.”

Jason slipped his arm around his wife’s shoulders. “Are you sure, Colt?”

“Yes.” He sat back down in his seat. All his thoughts centered on Susan. She loved him, and he loved her. So why in the hell had she poured cold water over his head when he asked her to marry him? The question slammed through him again and again. Hadn’t he offered her everything he had?

“Colt?” A soft female voice drew his focus away from the empty chair. This time, he looked up to see Susan’s parents. Both stood over him as if ready to attack.

He rose and gathered what strength he had left to be cordial to the pair. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs.—”

“What have you done to my daughter?” Martin York’s verbal attack hit Colt like a sucker punch to the gut.

He gasped. “Me?”

“Yes, I should have told her to dump you. You can’t take care of her anywhere near as well as I can. You should never have let her drive when she’s this close to . . .” Mr. York’s blaring tirade rang off the walls. People turned to stare.

The man’s words turned on the light. Colt realized his mistake and tuned Mr. York out.

That's what it was, the reason Susan had turned me down flat.

He'd blown his proposal when he'd said he'd take care of her. She didn't want another man like her father. How could he have been so stupid?

"And where's the couple who wants her baby? She's always telling her mother they care about her." Mr. York glanced around the room. "If that's true, where are they?"

Furious with the obnoxious man and disheartened by the way he had mishandled his marriage proposal, Colt wanted to extract some revenge. With pleasure, he twisted a knife in the man's ego. "They went down to the nursery to see their new son."

Chapter Ten

“Colt.” His mother’s voice rang through his ears, but he didn’t shift his focus from the man in front of him. Martin York was an alley cat. He’d use any advantage he could to pounce.

“Those people are not getting my grandson.” Mr. York raised his hands, fists knotted.

Colt wanted to fight, would have loved the chance to smash Mr. York’s face into a bloody pulp. The man was a bully who had upset Susan more times than Colt could remember.

The quiet setting might be wrong for an altercation, but the reward would outweigh the cost. He shifted his stance to prepare for the first blow. “Susan told me she wanted Kelly and Jason to have her baby. So you don’t have jack to say about it.”

Her father lunged forward, right hook flying. Colt stepped back to block the punch, but the older man’s fist landed short of its target.

“What the . . .” He tried to turn in the strong arms that circled his chest. Colt looked up to see his brother. Dalton smiled, but didn’t loosen his grip.

Mr. York struggled to free himself. “Let me go. You have no right to hold me.”

“I don’t think fighting is allowed in the hospital. Stop this nonsense or you’ll be thrown out,” Colt’s dad said in a stern tone, his message clear. He nodded at Dalton to release Susan’s father. At six-foot-three, Colt’s dad looked like a linebacker with the Cowboys. A smart man wouldn’t argue with John Lefevour.

Colt stepped back and lowered his fists. He waited for half a second for Mr. York to mouth off again. “Mom, Dad, this is Susan’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. York.”

He slumped down in his chair and went back to his task of staring at the blue vinyl in front of him.

* * * *

Kelly stared at the tiny bundle enclosed in an incubator. He looked so small and helpless, with his eyes closed and a sock hat on his small head. His little hands, curled up into miniature boxer’s fists, lay over his chest. She wished she could hear him breathe. That way, she would know he was all right.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” Kelly whispered, amazed by the tiny life. They had waited for so long for him to arrive. Now, she worried he would have health problems by coming a few weeks early.

“He is kind of cute. Though you can’t see much of him, not with the way they’ve got him wrapped up in the blanket.” Jason put his hand on her shoulder. “Susan is going to be very proud of him.”

Kelly folded her arm around Jason’s waist to draw comfort from him. His unique scent sparked a familiar glow in her chest. She looked up to see excitement dancing in his eyes. “Susan told Colt she wanted us to take care of her baby.”

Jason darted his eyes from the baby behind the glass to Kelly. “What?”

“That’s what I said when Colt told me.” She snuggled closer to her husband and looked back at the baby. “I told him we would wait for Susan to tell us before we’d make any claims on her baby.”

“Do you think she was serious?” Jason’s words had a wondrous tone to them.

“I don’t know,” Kelly said and shook her head. All her dreams lay bundled up in that small body. She had wished for a boy, a son for Jason. He’d been so understanding after she’d told him she couldn’t have a baby. She thought he would dump her. But Jillian had introduced them to Susan, and they had found the hope to believe they might have a child one day.

Their quick wedding, the closing on their new home, and Susan moving in with them had happened all within days of each other. Yet, over the past few months, their love had grown to be stronger than she’d ever thought possible.

He had dealt with her periods of despair over not being able to conceive. And he treated Susan like his daughter. They both loved the girl like she was theirs. How could they take her child away from her?

Worried about Susan, Kelly worked her way out of his arms and took his hand. “Let’s go back to the waiting room. I want to check with Colt. He may have heard something about Susan.”

* * * *

“Kelly, have you met my family, my mother Iris, my dad John, and my brother Dalton?”

As they introduced themselves, their words and comments floated around him. His mother’s hand stroked his back. “Are you okay, son?”

Colt nodded, not wanting to talk to anyone, even his family. They didn’t know Susan, didn’t know what she meant to him. He just wanted to hear she was going to be all right.

The hours crawled by with no news since they’d gotten to the hospital. He glanced at his watch. Their final had started at ten, and she’d arrived at his apartment around noon. He calculated in his head that she’d been in surgery about four hours already.

“Mr. Lefevour?”

Colt glanced up when he heard the unfamiliar male voice and saw a man dressed in surgical attire. “Yes.”

The man stepped forward. “I’m Dr. Lewis. I just got out of surgery with your fiancée.”

Colt stood. The strong smell of antiseptic clung to the doctor’s clothes.

“He’s not going to marry Susan.” Martin York jumped out of his chair and walked over from his place next to the waiting room door. He stood next to the doctor.

Ignoring the people gathering around them, Colt asked the doctor, “How is she?”

“She’s in recovery right now and should be out in the next hour or so. After her water broke and we found she was hemorrhaging, we decided to perform the emergency C-section. The baby is early, but he has a nice set of lungs. He should be fine.” The doctor smiled.

“And Susan?” Colt asked, wanting to know everything she’d gone through.

“She had several tears in her uterus and bladder. We had to repair those. That’s why she was in surgery so long. We wanted to make sure we had everything covered.”

“What about her head?” Colt couldn’t forget the blood running down her face from the cut on her head. The sight had turned his stomach. He thought at the time that he was going to be physically ill.

“A small cut, it required a few stitches. She may also have a slight concussion, which means she might not remember anything that happened right before the accident. But there’s no need to worry, she’ll be fine,” Dr. Lewis said.

“And her shoulder?” Colt had seen her wince when a medic had touched it.

“She broke her arm. We set it, and she’ll be in a cast for a few weeks.” Dr. Lewis looked at the group around Colt. “We will be moving her into her room in the next hour or so. Then you should be able to see her, but only one visitor at a time. She needs her rest.”

“Thank you.” Colt’s legs couldn’t support his weight any longer. He fumbled for the arms of his chair and lowered himself back into his seat.

The doctor turned to leave. Mr. and Mrs. York followed him, asking more questions.

Kelly sat down beside Colt and laid her hand on his arm. “When was the last time you ate?”

He stared at her, trying to think of the answer. The plan had been to take Susan out after their final. But that hadn’t happened. “Maybe breakfast.”

“Colt! Why didn’t you say something before now?” His mother, standing over him, looked at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think about it.” Colt wondered what the big deal was. He’d gone without eating before.

“Come on, we’ll go get something to eat now.” His mother took hold of his hand.

“No, Mom.” He pulled away. “I’m not going anywhere until I see Susan.”

“And exactly when were you going to tell us you’re engaged to our daughter?” Mr. York pushed his way forward.

Colt glanced at him. He wished for the millionth time the man would simply fall off the face of the earth. Mr. York might love his daughter in his own way, but he was a royal pain in the ass to deal with.

“Our wedding.”

Mr. York’s chest puffed out. “Don’t get smart with me, young man.”

“Then leave me alone.” Colt narrowed his eyes. Every muscle in his body begged him to strike the man. “I’m not the one who’s been making my daughter’s life pure hell for the past eight months. Susan is a wonderful girl, and you treated her like shit.” Colt tightened his hands into fists. “Now, get out of my sight before I forget we’re in a hospital.”

“Well, I’ve . . .”

“Son.” His father’s voice echoed from the other seat next to Colt. “Why don’t we go for a walk? You’ve been stuck in this room for hours. I think you could use a change of scenery.”

“I can’t, Dad. As Susan’s fiancé, I have to be here for her.”

“Sure, you can. She won’t mind if we just walk down the hall.” His father stood. “Your mom will come get us if she hears anything.”

Colt looked at the concern on the faces of the people around him. Kelly, Dalton, his mother, his father, they were all waiting for his answer. Jason had directed Mr. York farther down the aisle of seats and was talking to him and Susan’s mother.

“All right, but only down the hall. We’ll be right back.” Colt stood.

His mother hugged him briefly before pushing him in the direction of the door. “I’ll let you know if anybody comes with any news.”

* * * *

“Hey, Colt, did I tell you? We may be able to ski the slopes over Christmas. Ashley’s parents have a house in . . .” Dalton put his arm around Colt’s shoulders.

Kelly watched, along with Iris, as Colt, his father, and brother walked out into the hall. The doors of the waiting room whispered shut.

“I’ve never seen him like this.” Iris sat down beside Kelly, still staring at the doors. “He usually can handle a crisis with ease. I’ve never seen him so rattled.”

Putting a hand on Iris’s arm, Kelly shared his mother’s concern. “It might be because he saw the whole thing happen from his apartment window. Susan . . .”

“Don’t patronize me.” Mr. York’s tone rose.

Kelly turned toward the scene taking place a few seats down.

“I know why you’re being nice to Susan. You only wanted to bribe her into letting you adopt her baby.” Mr. York shoved Jason in the chest. Kelly jumped to her feet when he stumbled back a few steps. She rushed to her husband.

“Well, it’s not going to happen. I’ll take you to court before I’ll let you have my grandchild.” Mr. York turned and grabbed his wife’s arm. “Come on, let’s go down and see our new grandbaby.”

Kelly put her hand on Jason’s back. He turned and guided her back over to her seat.

“I don’t understand how that man can be Susan’s father.” Jason took a seat. “No matter how hard you try, you can’t reason with him.”

“Now you know why Colt wanted to punch the man’s lights out. Her father doesn’t believe we’re here because we care about Susan.” Kelly sat back down. She was glad to see Susan’s parents leave.

“Colt told me some of the things her father said during their visit over Thanksgiving. I was shocked,” Iris said.

“Yes, he can be very cruel when he wants to be. He’s also not happy about us wanting to adopt Susan’s baby.” Kelly laid her hand over Jason’s. “Her father wants to bully Susan into letting him have the child.”

Iris frowned and shook her head. “Wait, I’m confused. I thought part of the reason Colt wanted to marry Susan was to give her baby a father.”

“I hope he didn’t tell her that,” Jason muttered and placed his arm along the back of Kelly’s chair.

Kelly rushed in to clear up the picture for Colt’s mother. “Susan loves Colt, but she wants to be loved for herself, not because she needs someone to take care of her. She’s too independent for that.”

The concern on Iris’s face drew a question from Kelly. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, but something about this doesn’t make sense. I know my son. Why didn’t he tell me he was engaged to Susan?” Iris played with the strap of her purse, which was sitting on her lap.

“Maybe he was too worried about Susan to mention it,” Kelly offered.

“No, that doesn’t fit with what he said when he first called to tell me Susan was in the hospital.”

Iris took Kelly’s hand. “Did Susan tell you she and Colt were engaged?”

“No, I assumed Colt asked her today after their English final. Why?” A tight knot formed in the pit of Kelly’s stomach.

“Because if I’m reading my son right, there’s more to this than he’s telling.” Iris shifted her hand to pick up the leather strap from her purse. “Otherwise, why would he be watching her leave? Why didn’t they go out to lunch or celebrate in some way? The only thing I can figure is he blew his proposal and they had a fight or something.”

“But why would he lie?” Amazed by Iris’s deductive reasoning, Kelly couldn’t see why Colt would want to pretend he was engaged to Susan if she turned him down.

“I don’t know, but it explains his attitude and the reason why he didn’t tell us about becoming engaged. He thinks the wreck was his fault, and he’s riddled with guilt.” Iris shook her head. “If Susan can’t remember what happened right before the wreck, she won’t know if they’re really engaged or not.”

The idea of Colt lying about his engagement to Susan drew Kelly’s eyes to her husband’s. She could see the same doubt reflected in his.

Did Susan want them to have her baby? Or did Colt lie about that too?

* * * *

Anticipation and dread warred within Colt. He couldn’t wait to see Susan, but he couldn’t bear to see her hooked up to machines either. The silent, sterile hall stretched out in front of him like a walk through hell. The smell of cleaning fluid burned his nose. His sneakers squeaked on the highly polished floor. His guilt over telling everyone they were engaged stalked him like a killer.

Yet, he had to face this alone. Everyone else had to stay downstairs in the waiting room. Susan could have only one visitor at a time.

He found the number for her room. He let his hand hover for a moment before meeting the cold wood of her door. After taking a deep breath, he stepped inside.

Susan lay motionless in the middle of her hospital bed. His knees started to buckle, and he groped for the wall. His stomach heaved. The burger his parents had insisted he eat lay heavy in his stomach, disagreeing with his digestive system.

Black and blue, swollen and puffy, the whole left side of her face looked like she’d been in a fight, one she’d lost. A white bandage circled the top of her head like the sock hat her son had on his head. He could see several long strands of her brown hair lying across her pillow.

He took a deep breath and stepped forward, gripping the railing on the side of her bed. The desire to touch her overwhelmed him. He looked down at her hands. One had an IV tube running from it, and the other looked swollen and red. A pink cast encased her arm.

“Susan,” he whispered, not sure he should wake her. With the end of his finger, he brushed back the hair on her uninjured cheek. Her eyelids fluttered.

“Co . . .” She wet her lips with her tongue and tried again. “Colt, I . . .”

He could see her struggle to get her eyes open. “It’s okay, honey. I just wanted to let you know I’m here if you need me.”

She blinked several times. Her forehead crinkled up like she was trying hard to think. “What happened?”

His chest tightened, and he cupped her face in his hand. “A car hit you when you were pulling out of my apartment complex.”

Her hands covered her stomach. “My baby? Is he okay?”

“Yes.” Colt battled the tears that threatened to choke him. “He’s beautiful, just like his mother.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, the medicine dragging her back to sleep.

He knew he should leave, but he couldn’t. He’d come too close to losing her. The smooth texture of her skin enticed him, and he caressed her neck with his hand and glided it over her shoulder and down her uninjured arm. He avoided the IV and lifted her hand to kiss each one of her fingers.

He wanted to slip his engagement ring onto her finger. He glanced at her swollen left hand. She might have turned him down the first time he asked, but he was not going to let her slip away. They were going to get married. No matter how long it took him to convince her.

* * * *

“How are you feeling this morning?”

Susan’s answer hadn’t changed much since the last time someone had asked. She opened her eyes and looked at the nurse.

“I’m sore in a number of places, and my head kind of hurts.” She shifted her position in the bed.

“Well, you’ve been through a lot. It’s probably to be expected.” The nurse laid her fingers over Susan’s wrist. “We’ll get you some more pain medicine.”

“When am I going to get to see my baby again?” Susan had asked the same question to everyone who entered the room, receiving varying answers. The brief visit earlier hadn’t been for more than a few minutes. She hadn’t even gotten to hold her baby.

“Not sure. The nurses don’t like to let preemies out of the nursery for long. And you need your rest, too.” The nurse wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Susan’s arm.

“Then when can I get up and go see him?” Susan wanted to see her son. “You could take me down in a wheelchair.”

The nurse smiled the awful smile Susan had been getting all morning. She knew the answer was no before the nurse even spoke.

“Hey, how’s my girl this morning?” Her father’s loud voice drew Susan’s attention, and she glanced at the doorway. Her mother and father entered the room. Her father had a big teddy bear in his arms, her mother roses.

Damn.

Susan didn’t want to deal with them this morning. Why did they have to be her first visitors? Where was Colt? Or Kelly and Jason?

“I’m doing okay.”

“Great, I’ll just put your flowers over there on your bedside table.” Her mother walked around the end of the bed and up along the side while her father stood at the foot. The sweet fragrance of the roses filled the room. The nurse continued checking her vital signs.

“You gave us quite a scare yesterday.” Her dad laid his hand over her leg. “What were you thinking driving your car when you only had a month left until you delivered? You could have killed that sweet little boy of yours.”

Susan looked at her father. No matter whether the man was drunk or sober, he could make her angry by just opening his mouth. She glanced at the nurse and wondered if she could insist he not be allowed into her room. “Well, Dad, I was going home after my English final. I didn’t think a man would run a red light and hit me.”

A know-it-all grin flashed across his face. She cringed inside, knowing he was going to give her a lecture.

“That’s the problem, my girl, you just don’t think.” He placed the teddy bear, which was under his arm, on the end of the bed.

“Now, Martin, let’s not dig into the past.” Her mother fluffed Susan’s pillow and adjusted the covers. “We’re just glad both of you are all right.”

Susan wanted to yell at her mother to stop, but she held her tongue. “Yes, well, I didn’t mean to worry you. Where is John Paul?”

“He’s still at home. He had school today,” her mother said.

Susan glanced at the nurse when she touched her hand.

“I’ll find out what I can about your baby and be back in a few minutes with your pain medication. Don’t wear yourself out with your guests. You need to rest.” The nurse smiled and turned to leave.

Susan nodded and closed her eyes. Maybe her parents would have mercy on her and leave. “Mom, Dad, it was really nice of you to drive all this way to see me, but there’s really no reason for you to stick around. I’m fine.”

“Not from what we’ve heard.” Her father’s voice sounded rough like he was looking for a fight.

“Wait, Martin, we haven’t heard Susan’s side of the story.” Her mom tried again to waylay her father from jumping down her throat. Susan could tell it wasn’t going to stop her father.

“What exactly are you talking about?” She tried to think. What could they have heard that they didn’t already know?

“Well.” Her father puffed out his chest. “That boyfriend of yours said you two are engaged. And that you wanted the couple you’re living with to have custody of your child.”

Susan put her hand to her head. The sudden pounding in her skull sent a wave of nausea to her stomach. She hurt all over. Her eyes met her father’s. He was waiting for her answer. The smirk on his lips told her he knew how his words had sent her world into a tailspin. He loved to torture her.

“Dad, I think it’s time you leave. I need to rest.” Susan closed her eyes.

Chapter Eleven

“Susan, are you awake, honey?”

She forced her eyelids open through the grogginess caused by the painkillers. Colt’s face floated in front of her. “Colt?”

His lips brushed hers. She put her hand on his cheek so he couldn’t move away. He was the only solid object in the crazy world around her.

Light from the window filled the sterile room, blinding her with its glare. She closed her eyes. “Can you close the blinds some?”

“Sure.” He walked away. She tracked his progress by the sound of his footsteps.

When the light dimmed behind her lids, she opened her eyes. The sight of Colt’s face when he returned surprised her. The dark circles under his eyes told her he hadn’t sleep well.

He smiled at her like he thought she was beautiful. She couldn’t believe she looked very good. The image she’d seen earlier in the mirror reminded her of one of the creatures from Colt’s favorite video game.

“Have you seen my baby?” She wanted to know what he thought. The small bundle seemed like such a miracle when she had first seen him. His little fingers and toes were so cute. She’d asked the nurse to count all twenty, and they were intact.

“He’s beautiful.” Colt took her hand and kissed it. “Just like his mother.”

She shook her head. “You told me that last night. I know it’s not true. A nurse let me see myself in a mirror this morning. I look like I’ve been through a war.”

He released her hand and brushed his fingers over her injured cheek. His eyes told her he didn’t want her to suffer. “Does it hurt?”

“No, the cut on my head hurts more.” She shifted her arm onto the pillow and glanced down at her new cast. “And this thing is painful, too. I don’t know why they chose pink.”

“I think it’s pretty. You’ll have to let me write a note on it before I leave.” His fingers ran over her swollen hand and caressed her ring finger. “It’s a good thing I hadn’t given you the engagement ring, or they probably would have had to cut it off.”

“Engagement ring?”

Did he really ask her? The last thing she could recall was driving over to Colt’s apartment after her final.

“The doctor said you might not remember anything that happened right before the wreck, but I did ask you.” He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a gold chain.

She couldn't see a ring.

"But I don't mind asking you again." He looked into her eyes. The twinkle in his green eyes told her he knew she wouldn't be able to turn him down. "Susan York, if you haven't guessed by now, I love you. And I want you to be my wife."

"But, Colt," she said, her eyes filling with tears, "I have more problems than you should have to deal with."

He hit the railing lever, lowered the barrier, and sat down on the bed. "What problems?"

She placed her right hand on his thigh. "I have all the medical expenses for this wreck, and baby Calvin may have even more bills with him being a preemie."

"Covered by the insurance of the guy that hit you," Colt said. He covered her hand with one of his. "I checked with his insurance agent yesterday after the wreck. He said there shouldn't be any problem, because the other guy ran the red light."

Susan absorbed this news. The huge sum she'd expected to pay for Calvin's birth shrank. Maybe she could keep her baby.

"What about Calvin? My father said you told Kelly and Jason I wanted them to take care of him." Susan read the expression on Colt's face. She'd thought he wanted to be the father of her baby. But now, she wasn't sure.

He placed the chain and her engagement ring in his shirt pocket. Then he picked up her hand and placed it in his. "I know you don't remember, but after the wreck, when we were waiting for the ambulance, you asked me to tell Kelly to take care of your baby." The sad look in his eyes revealed how much her request had hurt him. "I told Kelly what you told me. I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted."

"I still don't know what I'm going to do. They have only let me see him for a few seconds. I'm beginning to think they're keeping him from me." Susan's tears overflowed from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart." He gathered her into his arms. "They just want to make sure you're both feeling up to a visit."

She wrapped her good arm around his waist. For the first time since she'd woken up from her wreck, she felt like someone cared that she was alive.

"I love you, Colt." She whispered the words against his chest and snuggled closer.

He drew away and looked down at her. "Does that mean the answer is yes?"

She couldn't hold back her smile. A pain she hadn't expected raced along her cheekbone. "Ouch, that hurt."

“Where?” He loosened his hold and laid her back against her pillow. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but don’t make me smile.”

He grinned and reached for the contents of his shirt pocket. “I guess now that you’ve said yes, I can show you your ring.”

“Did I say yes?”

The diamond ring sparkled on the chain in his hand.

She looked up. “Colt . . .”

“I know you love me, Susan. No matter what the problem, we’ll work it out. Please tell me you want to be my wife.” He begged her with his eyes.

“I think now that I’ve gotcha, Mr. Lefevour, I’m not going to be willing to let you go.” She touched the ring on the chain which dangled from his fingers.

“Good.” He leaned forward and kissed her gently. “I’ll arrange for us to get married right away.”

“Well, I have to get out of the hospital first.” A number of reasons why they should wait popped into her head. “And then there is Christmas and . . .”

Colt didn’t want to argue. He silenced her the best way he knew how.

* * * *

“Kelly, I know what Colt told you, but to be honest, I still don’t know what I want to do.” Susan looked down at the baby in her arms. His brown eyes followed her like he was waiting for an answer. The angelic face looked so sweet she wanted to cry. He was counting on her to make the right decision.

“It’s all right. I told Colt at the time that Jason and I were willing to wait. We want you to feel better first. Then you can decide what you want to do.” Kelly sat on the bed beside Susan, assisting her with the baby.

“I’m still not sure I can take care of him by myself. With one arm in a cast, I can barely hold him.” Susan shifted her arm. The cast, covered by a pillow, didn’t make a great spot for the baby to rest. He wiggled and started to cry.

“Oh, Calvin, I’m sorry.” She tried to use her other hand to calm him, but nothing she did helped. He became more agitated with her efforts. His cries grew louder.

Frustrated that he didn’t like her touching him, Susan asked Kelly to take him. “I don’t think he likes me.”

Kelly stood, gathered the baby close, and swayed with him in her arms. He quieted down instantly. “You’re doing fine. With the IV in your hand and your arm tied up in a sling, it’s hard to hold him close without feeling as if you’re smothering him. Just give yourself a little time.”

A look of rapture passed over Kelly’s face when she looked down at Calvin. He appeared equally impressed with her. He closed his eyes. The crying stopped. He settled down to sleep, happy to finally be in Kelly’s arms.

With the cast on Susan’s arm, her hair plastered to her head, and the bruise on the side of her face, she looked like a monster. No wonder her baby didn’t want her to hold him.

After holding the baby only a few minutes, she felt exhausted. She let her head fall back on her pillow. All day she had waited to see her child. And now, she couldn’t provide him the comfort he needed. Kelly settled down in the chair beside the bed.

“How long did the doctor say it would be before he’d release you to come home?” Kelly rocked Calvin gently while rubbing his back.

“A few days.” Susan wondered where she would go. Colt would want her to move into his apartment. Her hand covered the ring lying on her chest. She loved him, but she wanted to make her decision about Calvin before she moved in with Colt.

And her parents . . . She cut off the thought. That invitation would go in the trash. She wasn’t going anywhere near them.

The best option was to go back to Kelly and Jason’s. Their home had been Susan’s sanctuary for the last several months. Calvin’s room was waiting for him.

“Your parents called before I left the house. They wanted me to let you know they have gone back to Gladewater. Your mother said they would be back in a day or two to pick you up to take you home.” Kelly looked at Susan. “I tried to tell her I didn’t think you’d want to leave, but she won’t listen.”

“I know. They came by earlier this morning. Dad opened his mouth, and I wanted to explode. They just don’t want to hear anything I have to say.” Susan closed her eyes. She didn’t want to see them again. “I’m afraid they’re going to do nothing but cause me trouble.”

“They were very upset when they heard you had been in an accident. Your mother broke into tears when I called her.”

Susan glanced at Kelly, who was trying to cover for her parents again. “Yes, and they were a pain in the neck the whole time I was in surgery. Colt told me he and my father almost got into a fight several times.” Susan shook her head. “I think Colt’s still upset by what my father said to me over Thanksgiving.”

“Colt was very worried about you.” The concerned look on Kelly’s face made Susan wonder how Colt had reacted. “Did he tell you he saw the whole thing happen?”

“Yes,” Susan said and opened her hand to show Kelly the ring. The symbol of Colt’s love sparkled with a glow that ignited a joy in Susan’s heart. She was very glad she’d said yes. “Isn’t it beautiful? Colt said he proposed before the wreck, but I couldn’t remember. So he asked me again.”

“Did he say what your answer was the first time?” Kelly asked in an almost guarded manner.

“No.” Susan wondered if she would have told him no. “Do you think I might have turned him down?”

“I can’t say. I know you love Colt.” Kelly looked down at the baby in her arms and smiled. “But I also know that if he didn’t word his proposal right, you would have been furious. He could have indicated he wanted to take care of you and the baby without giving you the chance to make your own decision.”

Susan could hear Colt’s voice in her head. *“You don’t have to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of everything.”*

“I would have stormed out of there so fast, he wouldn’t have been able to stop me,” Susan said.

“Might be the reason you left so soon after he proposed.” Kelly looked up and added, “But it’s not his fault you had a wreck. You didn’t run a red light. The other guy did.”

“And you think Colt’s feeling guilty about my wreck because we might have fought about it.” Susan guessed Kelly’s thoughts.

She nodded.

“So what should I do?” Susan clutched her engagement ring. “Should I tell him I don’t want to marry him?”

“I can’t answer that. Only you know if you want to marry him or not.” Kelly shifted the baby in her arms. “But if you decide to go through with breaking your engagement, try to remember the man has been through a lot, too. He loves you, and he suffered a great deal at the thought of losing you.” Kelly turned when the door to Susan’s room opened.

A nurse walked in. “Sorry, ladies, but it’s time I get this young man back to the nursery.” She reached for Calvin. He whimpered when the nurse pulled him from Kelly’s arms.

Susan wanted to tell the nurse he was fine where he was. All of the nurses were like her father. They didn’t think her capable of doing anything.

* * * *

Colt stood on his parents’ front porch, waiting for them to come to the door. He hadn’t told Susan about his plan because he wanted to clear it with his parents first. He really didn’t think they would object. They’d probably enjoy having a new baby in the house.

With Susan's injuries, he had to protect both her and the baby. They needed a place to stay. He wanted to take them to his apartment, but he didn't want to leave them alone while he was at work.

The smell of apple pie hit him in the face when the door opened. His mother had been baking again. The sweet scent made his mouth water.

"Hey, Colt, what are you doing here? I thought you would be at the hospital with Susan." His mom greeted him with a hug and ushered him into the house. "How's Susan doing?"

"Fine." He took several steps down the main hall. The high polish of the table in the dining room reminded him of Susan's reaction to his parents' home. His eyes darted to the china cabinet, the crystal, and the paintings on the wall. The oriental rugs he rarely noticed jumped out at him.

The house screamed money. He hadn't noticed the costly items in his parents' house, but Susan did. She'd never feel at home living here with his parents. He had to rethink his plan.

"She's getting out of the hospital tomorrow. That's part of the reason why I'm here." Colt walked into the den. His dad lay in a black leather recliner, watching the plasma TV. "Hey, Dad, I was wondering if I could talk to you and Mom for a few minutes."

His dad sat up and used the remote to mute his nightly sci-fi program. "Sure, Son, what's up?"

"I know I didn't tell you guys I was planning to ask Susan to marry me. I'm sorry." Colt sat down on the couch. "But, well, I wasn't really sure what her answer would be. Then she had a wreck, and I got caught up in worrying about her. I didn't even think about our engagement until Mr. York made an issue of it."

His mother sat down on the couch next to him. "Anyway, she's being released tomorrow. And I want her to come and live with me. The problem is, I don't want her to be alone while I'm at work. She's still adjusting to being a mother."

"What do you mean?" his mom questioned.

"She gets upset every time the baby cries. She thinks she's doing something wrong. With her arm in a cast, she can't hold him like she wants to. He senses her frustration and begins to fuss. The two of them have not found a happy rhythm yet." Colt had seen Susan cry every time the baby was in the room. Guilt twisted in Colt's stomach. He was to blame for her not being able to hold her baby properly.

"I wanted to ask if we could stay here for a while, but I don't think Susan would like the idea." Colt glanced between his parents to get a feel as to what they were thinking. He really needed their help to make this work. "Instead, I was wondering if I could get one of you to come over to my apartment while I'm at work. Or, maybe, she might come over here and hang out for a while. Either way, she wouldn't have to be alone."

"Son, have you talked to Susan about this?" His mother frowned and glanced over at his father for support. "I don't think she's going to like either option. She doesn't know us. And she's not going to want to admit she isn't comfortable with her own child."

“It’s not that we would mind,” his dad offered. “But from what we learned about her at the hospital, from her parents and the couple she’s staying with, she’s rather an independent spirit. She is not going to want help from strangers.”

“But you’re my parents,” Colt argued. Just because her parents were hard to live with didn’t mean his were. He counted on them to help him out in difficult situations.

“True, but Susan is already going through a hard time. Once she gets to know us, it probably won’t be a problem. But for now, I don’t think she’s going to want to come here without you being with her.” His mother laid a hand on his thigh. “Have you talked to her about this?”

“I wanted to work it all out, and then tell her what I had planned.” Colt shook his head. “What should I do? I can’t leave her alone.”

“What about her parents or the couple she’s living with?” his dad asked.

“I don’t want her to have anything to do with her parents. You saw the way her dad acted.” Colt paused. “Kelly and Jason are great, but I don’t want to build up their expectations that Susan is going to let them adopt her baby. I already made that mistake once.”

Colt had seen the way Susan watched Kelly and Jason with Calvin. She was still considering giving her child to them. “I want Susan to keep her baby.” *And I am determined to see that she can*, Colt added to himself.

“I don’t think that’s a decision you can make for her.” His mother cupped her hands together in her lap.

“But there is no reason she has to give him up. I can take care of both of them,” Colt argued. He knew in his heart Susan would not want to hear that argument. The desire to make everything right for her and the baby meant he had to take over some control until she was back on her feet.

“That may be true, but what does Susan want? It’s her baby, and she has to decide. Has she told you why she might not want to keep him?” his father questioned in the aggravating way he did when he wanted to offer help.

“She says she wants to go to school.” Colt didn’t see her education as a valid reason. He had a job and went to school. How much more trouble could a baby be? “She doesn’t think she can handle doing both.”

“School does require a lot of time between studying and going to classes. And if she’s trying to pay for school too, then she’ll have to juggle a job as well.” His mom agreed with Susan’s assessment.

“Yes, but when I first met her, I thought you guys might be able to help her get some type of scholarship. You both have connections with charitable organizations. But if that doesn’t work out, we can always take out school loans.”

“Colt, she may be like you and doesn’t want to go into debt,” his father pointed out. “You have a job and support yourself. The only thing you’ll let us pay for is your tuition.”

“The girl sounds like she’s very independent.” His mother patted his leg and stood.

“I know, and it’s driving me crazy,” Colt grumbled, knotting his hands into fists.

His mother smiled and started for the kitchen.

“Don’t say it. I know I’ve been doing the same thing to you guys for years. But she has to think about Calvin. He deserves . . .” Colt’s words stalled.

Was that why Susan was considering giving her baby up? Did she think they would be bad parents? Colt wanted to disagree. But was she right?

“See, son, there’s not an easy answer.” His dad’s comment didn’t help clear Colt’s confused thoughts.

“How about a piece of apple pie?” his mother asked. “It might help you to remember Susan had this problem before she met you. She might not want your input as to the solution.”

“But I’m going to be her husband,” Colt argued. “I should be able to tell her what I want.”

His mother shrugged. “Yes, and she’ll want to hear what you have to say, but you can’t dictate to her what she should do. She’s an adult and has the right to make her own decision.”

“Then I guess I better ask her about the plans I’ve made for our wedding.” Colt’s mind raced with all the things he still needed to do for their wedding.

Chapter Twelve

“Are you telling me I might not be able to have another child?” The implications to Susan’s future with Colt had her head spinning. Would he marry her if she couldn’t have children?

“I can’t tell you for certain. It depends on the amount of scar tissue that forms in your uterus. You might have a difficult time getting pregnant again.” Dr. Lewis stood beside her bed, telling her what she needed to know for her release from the hospital.

“You need to make an appointment to see me in two weeks. You shouldn’t drive or have any sexual activity until after I’ve cleared you. I don’t want you to tear out the staples.” He handed her a prescription. “You might want to get this filled. They’re for pain if you need them.”

Susan took the slip of paper. Still a little confused by what he’d told her, she tried to think of everything she needed to ask him. “Is Calvin going to get to go home with me?”

“Yes, his doctor cleared him for release. He had a little problem at first with the formula we were using, but he’s doing fine now. The nurse will tell you what you need to know when she comes in to help you change.” He stepped away from the bed.

The door squeaked, and Colt entered the room. “Is everything okay for her to leave?” Colt asked when the doctor turned to him.

“She’s all clear,” the doctor said and left.

Colt walked over to where she sat on the side of the bed. The very sight of him accelerated her heartbeat, and it contracted with love. The playful grin on his face had her wondering about his thoughts.

“I know you’ve grown attached to these pajamas,” he said, tugging on her yellow cotton top, “but I think they’re going to be a little chilly to wear home.”

“Very funny,” she said and gave him a quick kiss. “I’m waiting for Kelly to bring me some clothes.”

“What was wrong with the ones I brought up here yesterday?” He sat down on the bed. The cool leather of his jacket brushed against her back when he put his hand down behind her.

“The sweater is okay, but the jeans are too tight.” Susan looked down at her stomach and wondered if it would ever be flat again. “I couldn’t get the zipper closed.”

“Why didn’t you call me? I could have gone by Kelly’s before coming up here.” The look on his face told her he suspected there was more to the story.

“I know, but well, Kelly called when I was changing, and she, uh . . .” Susan turned so she could look directly at him. He needed to understand how she was struggling to make the right decisions for Calvin. “We thought it might be better if the baby and I rode home with her.”

His eyes narrowed. She laid her hand on the side of his face. "I told you this morning I was going to go home with Kelly and Jason for a few days."

"But you said I could drive you over there." He put his hand around her wrist. His green eyes showed the hurt she'd inflicted.

"I know, but after talking to Kelly, I think her car might have more room for the baby." Torn between responsibility and desire, she felt tears gathering in her eyes. She could think of no way to make everyone happy. "We're still going to need your help. Jason has gone off to Gladewater to be with Derek. Jillian went into labor this morning."

His eyes drilled a hole right through the middle of her heart. Already unhappy because she wasn't going home with him, she let him down again by not letting him drive her over to Kelly's.

"I'm sorry, Colt. I've done nothing but ruin your plans." She started to pull her hand from his grip. "Maybe we should rethink the idea of getting married until I get my life back in order."

He let go of her wrist and grabbed her shoulder. "Are you telling me you want to call off our engagement?"

It seemed so final when he said the words. She shook her head and put her hand on his chest under his jacket. The steady beat of his heart called to her, sending a wild rhythm of desire singing through her blood.

"No, I'm just trying to think about what's best for Calvin right now." She could see his expression change. "I don't want to hurt you."

He placed his hand on her shoulder and urged her into his embrace. His arm behind her back found its way around her waist. She laid her head on his shoulder and breathed in his fresh, clean smell. Her injured arm, in its cast and sling, kept her from moving closer. Her body ached with need.

"It's okay, honey." He rubbed her back. "We'll work it all out."

At the moment, she didn't want to be comforted. She wanted her blood to race with excitement. His kisses could help her forget everything but him.

She lifted her head and slid her hand into his hair. His eyes were full of compassion when they met hers. She knew hers didn't reflect the same.

A twinkle sparked in the depths of his. Seconds passed before she covered his lips with hers. A jolt of coffee, vanilla latté, greeted her taste buds. She drank in the flavor of him with the warm caress of his tongue. Her body melted, and she used her weight to draw him backward onto the bed.

He shifted the bulk of his weight to his elbow. She couldn't release him, not after a week without holding him in her arms. The short butterfly kisses they had shared since she'd been in the hospital didn't qualify as kissing.

She wanted to devour his mouth. The warm caress of his hand ignited a fire in her blood. Her breasts ached, and the light squeeze he applied didn't even begin to satisfy her needs.

Once his hand reached her waistline, he didn't venture lower, but did a return trip back to her shoulder. His lips, as hungry as her, didn't pause or retreat from her demanding kiss.

She sighed when he pulled his lips from hers.

"Hey, guys, can you continue this when we get home?" Kelly's voice broke through the loving message Susan read in Colt's eyes. He rolled off her and sat up.

"Gotcha." He stood and helped Susan to her feet. "While you help Susan change, I'll tell the nurse we're ready to leave."

* * * *

"Mom, I don't know how many different ways I can say it. I am not going back home. I live in Dallas now." Susan wanted to keep her frustration out of her voice, but they had been debating the point for the last ten minutes. Her mom was just not listening.

"Your father and I think you should reconsider. Jillian and Derek just brought home their new baby boy, and we feel you and Calvin should be here with us." Her mom repeated the same argument, which fell flat against Susan's ear.

"It's not going to happen, so you might as well get over it." Susan took the receiver away from her ear and listened. Calvin started crying in the other room. "I'm sorry, Mom, but I've got to go. I'll call you on Christmas to let you know how we're doing."

She hung up the phone and stood to go into Calvin's room. The crying stopped, so she paused. Being off work to help, Kelly, of course, would have seen to his needs. Susan walked out of her bedroom just to make sure everything was all right. The door to his room stood ajar so Susan could see Calvin's crib. Empty. Her eyes scanned the room. She found Kelly seated in the new wooden rocker, holding him. Tears of love lay in her eyes. A look of enchantment glowed on her face.

Susan started to turn away, but Kelly looked up. "I can't get over how good of a baby he is."

That wasn't the truth. The child cried relentlessly when Susan held him in her arms. "He does enjoy being held. Between you, Jason, Colt, and me, I don't think he's spent any time in his crib or the bassinet."

Kelly stroked his cheek, her eyes shining with love. "He's just so tiny. He looks lost in that huge bed."

"I'm glad you were able to take off and help me with him. I don't know if I could have handled Calvin by myself." Susan walked over to the trash and tied up the bag. She wanted to get rid of the smelly diapers. The only way she could help out was by handling the small chores around the house. Kelly usually took care of the baby's needs. "Your company didn't get upset by the short notice, did they?"

“No, I had plenty of vacation time coming, so they didn’t mind. You really shouldn’t be doing that.” She stood up with the baby in her arms. “Come here and hold the baby while I take care of it.”

“It’s okay. He doesn’t like me to hold him anyway.” Susan backed up to the bedroom doorway with the full trash bag in her hand. “I’ll just take this downstairs and come back.”

“Susan, that’s not true. The cast on your arm just makes it difficult for him to get close to you,” Kelly said.

Having heard the argument a number of times, Susan didn’t know whether to believe it or not. She didn’t like the idea that her baby just didn’t like her, but he cried every time she touched him.

“It’s not a problem. I just don’t want to upset him now. He’s almost asleep in your arms.” Susan turned to leave.

“Wait a minute. Are you going to be okay alone with him tonight?” Kelly stood up and moved to the crib. “If you want, we can cancel going to Jason’s company Christmas party.” She laid Calvin down and covered him up with a blanket.

“No, you’ve been looking forward to this party for weeks. Colt said he was going to come over after work, so I won’t be alone with Calvin very long.” Susan waited at the doorway for Kelly. “I want you two to go. You both have been wonderful to me since I came home from the hospital a few days ago. It’s only right for you both to have a break.”

Kelly placed her arm around Susan’s shoulders. “You can always call us if you need us.”

“Right, if I know Colt, he’ll insist I go to bed early. That way, he can spend the evening playing with the baby. I don’t think I’ll have any problems.” Susan turned away. *Other than feeling completely ignored, things are going great.*

“Are you still feeling as if we care more about the baby than we do about you?”

Kelly’s quick insight shocked Susan, and she paused. “I’m not sure what I’m feeling anymore.” Susan dropped the trash bag in the hall. She turned to Kelly, hugging her because there was no one else to rely on.

Tears fell. Susan wanted to hold them back, but the more she tried to stifle them, the harder they fell. Her sobs hurt her throat. Her eyes already hurt like they were going to swell up. She pulled away and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, Kelly. I appreciate how much you and Jason have helped me, but I feel like my life is in limbo. I can’t decide one way or the other what I should do.”

Kelly led Susan down the hall to her room. “You’re putting yourself under too much undue stress. No one is expecting you to make a decision right now. You just got out of the hospital. Think about what you already know to be true.”

“Like what?” Susan sat down on her bed.

“Well, let’s see, you know you’re going back to school in January. With Calvin coming early, you won’t have to worry about missing any of your first few classes.” Kelly knelt down in front of Susan. “You have a great guy who wants to marry you and a wedding to plan. You have a wonderful future in front of you.”

“Yes, but . . .” Susan twisted her hands together. Doubts ran through her mind. She couldn’t help but see the tarnish on the glowing picture Kelly painted. “I’m not sure Colt wants me. He may just want to marry me because I have Calvin.”

Kelly placed her hands over Susan’s. “Wait . . .”

“He wants to be a father, but you’ve got to see how I am with Calvin. I’m not sure I’m the mothering type.” More tears fell onto Susan’s cheeks.

“You’re wrong. Colt loves you.” Kelly begged Susan to listen to reason. “You didn’t see Colt after the wreck. He wouldn’t even go see Calvin until the doctor said you were going to be okay. The man wants you, but I think he also can love your child.”

“Yes, but, that wouldn’t be fair to you guys. You and Jason have stood by my side for the last four months. You deserve a child, too.” Susan rolled her hands over and gripped on to Kelly’s. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Oh, honey, you don’t understand. No matter what you decide, I’m not going to lose anything. I’ll still have you and Calvin. Jason and I decided a long time ago we were going to adopt you both.”

“What?”

“I know you’re a little too old to be adopted. But you are a part of our family. We’re not going to let you or Calvin out of our lives. You can’t get rid of us now.” Kelly smiled and put her arms around Susan.

Their tears mixed.

* * * *

“Are you sure you don’t mind being home alone for a while?” Jason took his and Kelly’s coats out of the hall closet.

Susan stood in the hallway watching him. “I’ll be fine. Colt is coming over when he gets off work. It shouldn’t be long after you guys leave.”

“Okay, but—” he said before suddenly looking up the staircase. “Wow, who is that gorgeous woman? Susan, do you know her?”

She turned and stood in amazement as Kelly glided down the stairs. Dressed in high heels and a black satin dress, she had her blonde hair tied up in a French knot. Small, curly wisps of hair danced

beside her face. Diamonds sparkled from her ears and the pendant around her neck. She looked like a millionaire's wife.

"I think I remember seeing her on the cover of *Vogue*," Susan smiled.

Kelly brushed her hand through the air. "Oh, that's old news. I'm now on the cover of *Time* for my discovery of the handsomest man in Dallas." She walked right into Jason's arms. "He doesn't know how lucky he is to have me."

He kissed her. "Oh, I think I do."

"Really now?"

Susan loved to listen to their light banter. Just by looking into their eyes, she could see how much they truly loved each other. She silently wished she and Colt could be so happy.

"I think we'd better get going," Kelly turned in Jason's embrace. "If you have any problem, Susan, just call our cell phone. We can be home in less than twenty minutes."

She nodded. They slipped on their coats. "I'll be fine. You guys go and have a good time."

The phone rang while they were saying their good-byes.

"I'd better go see who that is," Susan waved and walked down the hall to pick up the phone in the den.

"Hello?" she said and sat down on the couch.

"Hi, Susan. I'm sorry but I'm going to have to work later than I expected," Colt said in a hurry. She could tell he was not happy about the change in plans.

"What time do you think you'll get off?" Susan knew the store where he worked closed at ten. The clock on the mantel showed it was six now.

"I don't know." The background noise drowned out his voice. "With the Christmas crowd, they have me working not only in repairs, but in sales too. I may not get out until after ten."

"Do you still want to come over?" Susan didn't see the point. Kelly and Jason had said they wouldn't be out much later than midnight.

"Yes. I'll use the key you gave me the other night. That way, if you and the baby are asleep, I won't—" Colt's words were cut off, and the line went dead.

"Colt?"

He didn't answer.

"Damn."

She wondered if she should call him back and tell him not to come. Kelly and Jason didn't know he had a key to their house.

Setting the phone back on the receiver, she picked up the remote. "Well, it looks like Calvin and I are going to have some time alone."

A few hours later, she tried to decide which of them had cried more tears, she or Calvin. The earsplitting noise added to the pain in her head.

"I know you don't like me, but I've done everything I can think of to do for you." Susan leaned back on pillows propped against her headboard. Calvin, still crying, lay on her chest.

"Okay, I know I'm not the best mother, and this cast on my arm is a real turn off for you, but come on, Calvin, give me a break." She rubbed her good hand gently over his back, trying to soothe his fussiness.

The arm in the cast, she kept tucked at her side on the bed. Her shoulder hurt from trying to hold him without wearing the sling. His cries decreased in volume. He rested his head between her breasts.

"I must say you've made being your mother a real bummer." Susan kept her voice low and continued trying to calm him with the gentle strokes of her hand. "I really thought I would be better at being a mother, though I don't know why. I never babysat for the neighborhood kids, nor did I have any cousins to learn on. So you see, I started out behind the gun."

His crying stopped.

She breathed in a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Looking down at him, she would have sworn only seconds ago he was a demon. Now, his face took on the innocent glow of an angel.

"You really are something else. I know you like being held, and believe me, I think you're pretty cute. But I think you're just a little bit spoiled."

He yawned like he was bored with the conversation.

"And I know it's our fault," Susan admitted. If he cried, someone in the house was more than willing to hold him. And yes, with her currently being the only person in the house, the job fell to her.

Yet . . .

"I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot. I kind of like being noticed too, especially when I'm not feeling good." Susan caressed the soft hair on top of his head. "And thanks to you, it's been a number of months since I've felt really good."

A grin passed quickly over his lips.

“Hey, don’t be smug. I’ll admit it. I’m spoiled too.”

Susan thought about all the things she’d done to make people notice her. At school, she worked extra hard to excel in her classes. She’d only dated Carl because he was an all-star football player. He’d wanted her to help him pass chemistry. Their few nights together usually happened after a fight with her father and a couple of beers.

“Okay, so I’ve made some mistakes. But I didn’t want to make another one when it came to you. So what do you want me to do now? You want to be my son? Or Kelly and Jason’s?”

He drew his hand up and sucked on his fist. His heavy eyelids closed.

“No comment?” She stared at him, looking for some sign as to what he wanted her to do. Pictures of Calvin with Kelly, Jason, and Colt flashed in her head.

Susan forced herself to make a decision and then closed her eyes.

Tomorrow was soon enough to let everyone know Calvin’s future.

Chapter Thirteen

The light was on in the bathroom when Colt walked up the stairs. He stepped into Calvin's room to check on him.

Finding the room empty, Colt walked down the hall to Susan's. In a fluffy robe, she lay on her bed with Calvin on her chest. Both of them had their eyes closed in sleep. It was the first time Colt had seen the two together without one of them crying.

Mom and child were at peace with each other at last. He debated for a moment whether he should put Calvin back into his own bed. She stirred, and he tried to lift the baby.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes slid open. She held tightly to Calvin and stared at Colt like he was a stranger.

"I was going to put Calvin in his crib so you could get some sleep." Colt gave her a quick kiss.

"Okay." She moved her hand, which gave him the chance to gather the baby up against his chest. His longing to be a father grew when the warm bundle snuggled closer in the curve of Colt's arm. He breathed in Calvin's sweet scent.

Susan sat up.

"When did he eat last?" Colt didn't want the baby waking up hungry in a few minutes.

"It was about nine. Do you think he's hungry again?"

"No, it's only eleven. He should be good for a few more hours. Let me put him to bed, and I'll be right back." Colt walked out of the room and put the baby in his crib.

By the time he returned, Susan had turned back the covers and slipped into bed. He stood by the doorway, watching her fluff her pillows. The exhausted look on her face hit him, and he decided it would be best if he headed home.

"I just stopped by to check on you. I'll let you get some rest, and I'll call you tomorrow." A puzzled look wrinkled her brow.

She settled back onto her pillows. "What? Where are you going?"

"Home." He didn't move to kiss her good night. Leaving her alone in a nice warm bed was more than he could do if he let himself touch her. He stood rooted to the spot by the door.

"But you can't." She lifted her head, but didn't sit up. "Kelly and Jason aren't due home until after midnight, and I don't want to stay here with Calvin by myself. You have to stay."

"Okay, then I'll wait downstairs." He started to turn when she said his name again.

"Colt." This time she sat up. "Look, I know I look like shit, but I don't want to be alone."

He forced himself to keep it light. For the past few days, since she'd gotten out of the hospital, he'd kept his distance. The doctor said they had to behave for the next few weeks. His body grew hard at just the thought of joining her in bed.

"Susan, I don't have that kind of willpower."

Her forehead crinkled up in a frown. "What are you talking about? I just said I look awful. I have a ten-pound weight on my arm with this cast. And I'm about as sexy as a grizzly after a feeding frenzy with a boat full of salmon. Except instead of dead fish, I smell like formula, but they both reek." She pushed back the blanket and stood up. "Calvin spit up on me, and the smell won't wash off."

The white cotton gown hit her legs just below her knees. He could see her curvy body through the thin material. Her hands started to undo the buttons covering her breasts.

Shooting across the room, he stopped her hands before she could undo more than one button. "Susan, I don't think you understand the problem."

Her tired eyes met his. He laid her hands on his chest and kept a short distance between them.

"If you're a female grizzly, then think of me as a male bear that's been in hibernation without my mate. You are the answer to every erotic dream I've had over the winter."

She grinned and slid her one good arm around his neck. "Colt, I think that's the nicest thing anyone has said to me in days. It makes me feel almost pretty."

"Honey, you're gorgeous."

She licked her lips, and then gently bit her bottom lip.

Desire lit, and his self-control snapped. He captured her mouth, finding what he'd longed for behind her moist lips. The sweet flavor of her robbed him of the need to be gentle, and he gripped her shoulders and yanked her closer.

She winced. Afraid he'd hurt her, he loosened his hold and lifted his head. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but my shoulder is a little sore. I've been holding Calvin without wearing my sling." She used her good hand to hold up her arm that was in the cast.

"See, this is why I should go downstairs and wait." He stepped backward.

She clutched his shirt. "I don't think so. This sexy grizzly bear is not going to let you out of her sight. Either you come lie down with me, or I'm going downstairs with you." She stepped backward, drawing him over to the bed. "I think we would be more comfortable in bed, but . . ."

She looked at him with innocent eyes, but her firm grip told him she was not going to let him go.

"The doctor said we can't make love." Colt stood firm against her attempt to nudge him closer.

“Yes, but he didn’t say we couldn’t sleep together.” Susan released him and sat down. Her eyes stared at his groin a moment before she looked back up. “But I will also understand if you don’t want to.”

“You know I want to.”

“Then what’s stopping you?”

He cupped her face in his hands. She covered his hands with hers. “The thought of hurting you.”

“Colt, you’re not going to do anything to hurt me.” She smiled and toyed with the button of his jeans.

“Susan?”

“Yes?”

“If I agree to stay with you until Kelly and Jason get home, will you behave?”

“Are you going to lie down in bed with me? Or are we going downstairs?” She worked the button free.

He coughed and sucked in his stomach. “I’ll lie down with you.”

Her fingers toyed with his zipper. “And are you going to take off your clothes and get under the covers?”

The idea of feeling her soft body next to his forced his eyes close. If he was under the blankets with her, in only his underwear, could *he* behave?

“I . . .”

She took the zipper down a few teeth.

“Susan,” he said and opened his eyes. He didn’t think he had any willpower at all.

Her velvet brown eyes met his. Pain would mark their beauty if he said no. He had no doubt that she needed more than just a lover at the moment. She needed a friend.

She dropped her hands into her lap. “Please, Colt, I just want to be held. I promise I’ll behave.” She drew a cross over her heart.

He stepped back. “Okay, but only until Kelly and Jason get home. Then I’m going to leave.”

* * * *

“What the hell is that noise?” Colt sat up beside her in the bed.

From a deep sleep, Susan groaned at the sound of the doorbell blaring and Calvin crying. Her brain took in Colt's angry words and processed them. She sprang up in the bed. "Someone's at the front door."

"Why would someone be laying on the door bell at this time of the morning?" He stood and slipped on his jeans. The window behind him showed a hazy glow of a new day.

Susan looked at the clock on her nightstand. It was after ten. The loud noise stopped, but Calvin didn't. His screams let their uninvited guest know he was not pleased with having his sleep disrupted.

"I better go see about Calvin." Susan swung her feet out of the bed.

"I'll get him." Colt walked to the door but stopped when Calvin quit crying. "Kelly's probably got him."

Susan struggled to get the arm of her robe over her cast. "I can never get this thing to cooperate."

"Hang on. I'll help." Colt stepped over to help her.

Once they had the belt tied, she walked to the door of her room. Angry voices echoed from the hallway below. A pain in her chest told her she might know who would show up at the Harris's front door on a Sunday morning without calling first.

"I want to see my daughter." Her father's voice confirmed Susan's guess.

Kelly walked out of Calvin's room. The baby, lying in her arms, was fussy and wiggling. He didn't like the loud ruckus going on downstairs.

"Why does your father have to scream at the top of his lungs when he opens his mouth?" Kelly rocked Calvin and talked to him softly. "It's okay, honey."

"I don't know." Susan led the way to the top of the stairs and yelled down, "Dad, can you please lower your voice?"

Her parents stood in the entryway. Both still had on their heavy winter coats. Her mom's coat was the same one she'd worn now for ten years. Their hair, tossed by the wind, looked wild around their heads. They looked like bums off the street.

Her father turned and looked up. His eyes narrowed, and he stepped to the bottom of the staircase. "Well, it's about time you showed up. We've been ringing the doorbell for the past ten minutes."

She noticed his voice lost some of its volume. "Yes, and you've managed to wake up everyone in the house." Susan started down the steps. "We do have a baby in this house who needs sleep. You could have called first."

"Yes, and you would have told me not to come," he answered in an angry growl.

“Why don’t we all step into the den and discuss this?” Jason directed her parents down the hall. Her father didn’t budge.

“No, I want Susan to go gather her . . .” Her father’s face turned red with anger. He pointed up the stairs. “What the hell is he doing here?”

Susan stopped a few steps from the bottom and looked over her shoulder. Kelly stood a few steps up from Susan. Colt stood at the top of the stairs.

“Colt?” Susan asked.

“Yes, haven’t you gotten in enough trouble? Why do you need to sleep with another man?” Her father glared at Colt like he wanted to kill him.

“I happen to be her fiancé,” Colt said.

“We’ll see about that. Now go get your clothes, Susan. We’re taking you home,” her father ordered her like she was ten years old.

“Not on your life. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Susan, we only want to help you.” Her mother stepped up next to her husband and looked up at Susan. The haggard look on her mom’s face almost convinced Susan to concede, but the cost would ruin her life. She couldn’t let sympathy rule her actions.

Distracted, she didn’t catch her father’s movement until his large hand circled the wrist of her good arm.

“We’ve had about enough of your disobedience.” He tried to drag her down the stairs.

“Dad, stop!” Susan yelled. Her bad arm couldn’t reach the railing. Her balance teetered on the steps.

“Susan!” Kelly cried, while Colt yelled, “Let her go!”

His angry words would have made Susan turn, but the scales tipped. She fell forward.

Putting her arm out to break her fall, the total weight of her body slammed into her father’s chest. Her cast led the way and drove him backward.

“Humph.” His discharged breath hit Susan in the face.

Her mom screamed, “Martin, watch out or you’ll fall!”

His eyes widened, and he shuffled his feet to gain his footing. He stumbled and released her wrist. His arms grabbed her, and he stumbled back down the stairs.

Caught up against him, Susan couldn't get a foothold. She closed her eyes, knowing their momentum would end with her getting hurt.

A loud thud sounded and she opened her eyes. Her father's arms loosened their grip at the sudden halt of their journey.

Surprised, she felt her feet touch the floor. Susan opened her eyes. Her father's pale face lay against the backdrop of the wall at the bottom of the stairs. His teeth clenched, his eyes closed, the wrinkled look of pain was evident on his face.

An arm circled her, yanking her free of her father, and she felt the solid wall of Colt's chest behind her. For one brief second, Susan almost felt some compassion for her father. Then the thought of how she could have been hurt exploded through her head.

"Are you crazy? What in hell were you thinking?" She let loose with her anger. Her right hand rose to hit him, but the arm securing her waist pulled her back.

"Let it go." Colt's voice rang in her ear. She looked over her shoulder at him and saw the glare he sent her father.

"Martin, are you all right?" Her mother surged forward to help him.

Susan stepped away from them into the doorway of the dining room. With Colt's arm still around her, she turned into his warm embrace. The brief shot of adrenaline brought on by her anger deserted her, leaving her knees weak. Fear raced through her system at what could have happened.

"Hold me, Colt," she whispered against his neck as her arm circled his waist. Eyes closed, she drew in his strength.

"Come on, Susan. Let's go into the kitchen. That way I can warm a bottle up for Calvin." Kelly put a hand on Susan's shoulder. "He thinks he should be fed."

The baby gave out a short cry. Looking at him in Kelly's arms, Susan couldn't hold back her smile. The little guy was sucking on his fist like it would give him the nutrients he needed.

"And I could use some coffee," Jason said from the hallway. "I think we all could."

Kelly smiled at him and led the way to the kitchen.

Walking away, Susan didn't bother to speak to her parents. She wanted to just ignore them. She followed Kelly into the kitchen and sat down on a stool at the bar. Colt stood beside her with his hand on the back of her chair. She could hear Jason still talking to her parents in the hallway.

"Do you want me to hold Calvin?" Susan offered when Kelly struggled to open the baby's bottle. "That way, you'll have two hands to use."

"Here, give it to me, I'll get it." Colt took the bottle from Kelly's hand. With a quick twist of his wrist, the cap popped off.

Kelly took back the top. "If you'll put the bottle in the microwave for a few seconds, we'll shake the formula up and see if it's warm enough."

Colt did her bidding.

Susan walked around the bar to the back counter and pulled out the coffee pot. "How many cups do you want me to make?"

"A full pot," Jason answered from the other side of the bar.

Her parents entered the room on his heels. Susan didn't want to deal with them, so she turned away to fill the carafe with water. She could feel her parents' eyes on her back. Their tense conversation hit her like knives between her shoulder blades. She tried to focus, to use the time to regroup.

Looking out the window over the sink, she saw the gray overcast sky. The cold, dreary signs of rain set the scene for her to tell her parents about her decision concerning Calvin's future. The microwave dinged. The sound let Colt know Calvin's bottle was ready. It told Susan the time had come for her to tell everyone her decision. If she wanted to pull this off, she needed to appear unruffled about her choice. She poured the water into the machine. The main thing she told herself was to remain calm. She finished the task of making the coffee, took a deep breath, and turned to face the firing squad her parents represented.

"So, Susan." Her father looked her right in the eye. A challenge lay in the depths of his. "Now you've had your fun. It's time for you to come home."

Her father's words grated over her skin like fingernails on a chalkboard. She looked at him sitting behind the bar and shook her head. "You are the most obtuse man I have ever met. I've told you and Mom and everyone else who's asked me that I am not going back to Gladewater." She leaned back on the counter. "I live in Dallas now. So what's it going to take for you to give it up?"

"But who's going to help you take care of your baby?" Her mother sent an evil glare in Kelly's direction.

"I don't have a baby." Shock passed over her parents' faces. Her father's eyes narrowed, and his cheeks grew red.

"What are you saying? Of course you do." He pointed at Calvin and rose to his feet.

Her mother stood up beside him. "Mrs. Harris is holding your baby."

"No, that's her baby. I gave Calvin to them," Susan said with certainty. Her decision would be best for him, too.

A loud "What?" echoed through the room, and every mouth hung open in shock.

Chapter Fourteen

“You can’t do that.” Her father’s face grew red in anger. He stepped to the end of the counter on his way to her. Jason grabbed his arm to stop him from getting any closer.

Her father snarled from a few feet away. “I talked to Carl Hawkins. He says he’ll sign over custody to us. Then you won’t be able to put Calvin up for adoption.”

“Wrong. Carl doesn’t want anything to do with my baby. He’s the one who told me to get an abortion.”

“I got him to change his mind.” Her father grinned like he had her pinned to the ground.

“You mean you paid him to agree with your plan. Well, it won’t work, because first, he’s going to have to prove he’s the father.” Susan didn’t back down.

“What do you mean? You told me he was the father.”

“Yes, well, I can’t really remember.” She looked over at her mother. “Mom, didn’t I go out with a few other guys we didn’t tell Dad about?”

Her mother’s face turned white. She groped for the edge of the counter with unsteady hands.

Susan almost retracted the lie, but her dad’s next words reinforced her decision.

“Why, you slut.” He jerked his arm from Jason’s grip. With a few quick steps, he stood in front of her. The hand across her face didn’t come as a surprise. He’d hit her before. This was just the first time he’d been sober when he did it.

Jason wrapped his arms around her father’s chest and yanked him away from her.

Her hand covered the stinging skin on her face. She refused to cry. Instead, she forced herself to stand up straighter. Colt stepped forward in reaction to her father’s abuse. She would not back down if he wanted to fight. “Well, then, I guess you can say good-bye now. I don’t have a baby, and you have no way of taking the one I gave to Kelly and Jason away from them.”

Susan crossed her arms over her chest. “So write me off your list, and leave me the hell alone. I resign as your daughter.”

With nothing else to say to her father, Susan walked past him on her way out of the room. He put out his hand to stop her, but Jason wouldn’t release him. She kept walking, suddenly tired of the whole scene.

“Honey, you don’t want to do this!” Her mother’s cry followed Susan, but her steps didn’t falter. She worked her way through the dining room and up the stairs. Her only thought was to get to the privacy of her room. Once there, she could deal with the pain of finally saying good-bye to her family.

* * * *

“Why would she do this? The doctor told us she might never be able to have another child.” Mrs. York’s words hit Colt in the chest. He paused on his way out of the room to catch up with Susan.

“What? Susan didn’t say a word about that to me.” Kelly looked up from feeding the baby. “Did she say anything to you, Colt?”

He faltered and shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts. Why wouldn’t she tell him about such an important prognosis?

Kelly’s eyes narrowed into a sharp glare pointed at Mrs. York. “What exactly did the doctor say?”

“That’s none of your business,” Mr. York interrupted, freeing himself from Jason’s grip. He stalked over to his wife and took hold of her arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Tugging his wife off the stool, he started for the front door.

“Wait a second,” Colt said and took off after them. He was not going to let the man get away with hitting Susan.

Mr. York stopped and looked over his shoulder just before he stepped through the doorway leading into the dining room. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Fine, but I have a few things to say to you,” Colt said and stepped forward with Jason.

“Like what?” Mr. York released his wife and turned to Colt.

He had to use all his self-control to keep from tackling the man and beating him within an inch of his life. “Stay away from Susan.”

“And don’t come here again. I will be in contact with my lawyer tomorrow. There will be an injunction placed against you. You are not to come to my door, or I’ll call the police.” Jason’s stern tone drove home his point.

Colt waited for Mr. York’s reaction, hoping the man would step forward and throw a fist.

Mr. York shrugged. “I don’t have any reason for coming here. You have nothing of mine I value.” He turned, took his wife’s arm, walked away, opened the front door, and left.

With Jason one step behind him, Colt followed the couple. He stood in the open doorway and watched while they got into their car and pulled out of the driveway.

“I hope he keeps his word.” Jason stepped back and shut the door.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t count on it.” Colt glanced up the staircase. What should he do now?

“Are you going up to talk to her?” Jason turned to Kelly when she walked up beside him.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Kelly handed the baby to Jason. “It took a lot to push Susan to this decision. She knew she had to tell her parents she gave Calvin to us, or they would never leave her alone. But I’m not sure that’s what she really wants.”

Colt had seen the look in Susan’s eyes when she told her parents. She was not going to change her mind about Calvin. Kelly put her hand on Colt’s arm. He could see the pleading look in her eyes.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to talk to her first.” Kelly waited for his answer.

Colt glanced up the staircase. Why hadn’t Susan told him what the doctor said? She knew how much he wanted children. “I want to know if it’s true that she may not be able to have children.”

Kelly shook her head. “I don’t really think Mrs. York was telling us the full story. Susan may not be able to have children, and I stress *may*. But knowing how her parents like to stretch the truth, I don’t believe it. They’ll say anything to get what they want, and they want Calvin.”

“Yes, but why didn’t she mention it?” Colt couldn’t let go of the idea that there was an element of truth in Mrs. York’s statement.

“Are you not going to marry her if it is true?” Kelly’s question hit him like an arrow through the heart.

He blinked.

“You better decide what you want to do before you talk to her, because if it is true, you may need to know whether or not you still want to marry her.” Kelly let go of his arm and walked up the stairs.

Rooted to the spot, Colt watched her until she disappeared around the corner at the top of the stairs. What was the answer?

“Come on, Colt, let’s go get some coffee.”

Colt felt unsure as to which way he really wanted to go. Susan had sent him a curve by announcing she was going to give Calvin up. Then her mother had blown him away with the news that Susan couldn’t have more children. His mind was in turmoil.

“Why don’t you pour us both a cup since my hands are full?” Jason rocked the baby in his arms. “I don’t like to give him up once I get the chance to hold him.”

Colt walked around the bar and opened the cabinet over the coffee maker. He had been at the Harrises’s house enough to know where things were. “Do you want cream or sugar?”

“No, just black,” Jason said, staring down at Calvin. “Why do you think she’d give him up if she couldn’t have another child?”

After pouring the coffee, Colt brought Jason his cup and sat on a stool. Colt didn’t have the answer, so he didn’t say anything. His heart ached when he saw Calvin’s angelic face.

“She wouldn’t.” Jason looked up. “Susan might be a lot of things, but she’s not dumb.”

Colt shook his head, trying to sort through the conflicting information in his head. Susan had told him the Hawkins kid was the only guy she’d ever slept with, but she indicated to her parents she’d had other lovers.

Whom was she lying to?

And her doctor’s prognosis, was it just an oversight that she hadn’t told him, or was she trying to deceive him? The questions beat against his skull.

He didn’t have any answers, and he wouldn’t until he talked to her about all that was said. But then Kelly was right, too. He needed to know what he wanted before he talked to Susan. After all, what would he do if she couldn’t have another child? Give her up, or demand she keep Calvin?

Colt set down his coffee. “Sorry, Jason, but I think I’d better go.”

“Okay.” Jason stood up and went with Colt to the front door. “Look, I know you’re confused, but don’t give up on Susan. There’s more to a marriage than children. And you can’t make an informed decision until you talk to her. You might not know all the facts.”

“Gotcha.” Colt walked away. He wondered if he’d ever feel like talking to her again. Right now, he felt too confused to think.

* * * *

Susan lay in the middle of her bed, staring at the ceiling. The tears she’d expected didn’t come.

The knock on the door didn’t surprise her. Colt would want to see if she was okay. “Come in.”

Kelly walked through the door. The concern on her friend’s face alarmed her, and Susan sat up. “You don’t have to worry. I knew they wouldn’t like my decision of giving Calvin to you guys.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Kelly shut the door, walked over to the bed, and sat down on the end.

“Yes.” Susan shoved Colt’s pillow behind her back. “Calvin and I decided last night. We think it’s the best choice for both of us.”

“But your mother mentioned your doctor said . . .” Kelly finished in a hurry, “that you might not be able to have another child.”

“Aw, shit.” Susan threw her fist down onto the bed. “He doesn’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said it depends on the amount of the scar tissue that forms in my uterus. If there is a lot, I might have trouble conceiving again.” Susan searched her room, trying to remember where she’d left her sling. “I took his warning to mean I shouldn’t wait a long time before I try to get pregnant again. Colt wants kids, so I figured I wouldn’t use birth control after we got married. I really don’t think it will be a problem.”

“But you don’t know for sure?” Kelly pressed.

“No,” Susan said and walked over to her dresser. Her sling lay over the corner of her mirror. She took it down and slipped it over her head. “I’m going on the assumption it won’t be a problem.”

“Then you shouldn’t give Calvin away.” Kelly stood. Her eyes full of tears, she stared at Susan. “You’re only eighteen. This might be your last chance to have a baby.”

“Kelly, look, even if I did keep Calvin, I would still want to have a child by Colt. He deserves a son of his own.” Susan went over to Kelly and took her hand. “You and Jason have been wonderful to me. You’ve been more like my family for the last few months than mine ever was. And after today, you might be the only family I have left. I want Calvin to have you as his parents. He deserves to have all the attention you have to give him.”

“But he’s your baby.”

Susan knew Kelly was trying to hold back her own hope for a baby by giving Susan the chance to change her mind.

“Yes, and he loves you. He knows you are his mother. I hate to admit it, but I also want some time alone with Colt.” Susan sat down on the end of the bed and pulled Kelly down next to her. “You know how hard it is to just be married. You and Jason make it look easy, but you’ve known each other for years. I’ve only known Colt for a few months. We deserve time for just the two of us.”

“But what if you can’t have another child?” Kelly shook her head.

Susan didn’t want to admit it could happen, but she considered the question. Would she mind not getting pregnant again? And if she couldn’t have children, would Colt still want her? Did he only want her for her ability to procreate?

The thought hurt. She wanted to be loved for herself, not for her ability to have a baby. She’d dreamed about a career in business since she’d started high school. To travel to new places, meet new people, to be respected for her skills, those were the things she’d wanted to do.

But what about Colt?

Her mind ran over the emptiness she’d feel if he wasn’t in her life. He had to know how much he meant to her. Why couldn’t she have both, a career and Colt? She just couldn’t believe she wouldn’t be able to give Colt a baby of his own.

“If I can’t have another child, I’ll have to accept the fact when it happens. Right now, I know I’m not ready to be Calvin’s mother. You and Jason can give Calvin so much more than I can. I have

other things I want to achieve.” Susan looked down at her hands and closed her eyes. “If you want, you can just call me selfish. By giving Calvin to you, I can get rid of my parents and follow my dream. And if Colt still wants to marry me, I can build a life with a wonderful guy, all without having to worry about whether or not Calvin is okay. I know he will be with you guys.”

Kelly’s arm landed on Susan’s shoulder. “Then you’ve made up your mind? This is really what you want?”

Susan lifted her head and looked at her friend’s face. “Yes, I’ve finally decided this is what I really want.”

A smile lit Kelly’s face. “And what are you going to do about Colt?”

“I guess I’d better go talk to him.” Susan gave Kelly a quick hug and stood to go downstairs.

* * * *

“So what do you think about going skiing with us?”

Colt looked over at his mother, who sat on the couch next to him. He couldn’t remember what they had been discussing. He’d only been there for a few minutes. “What?”

“I asked if you thought Susan would feel like going skiing with us. The drive to Durango takes about twelve hours.” His mother put her hand on his leg. “With her just getting out of the hospital a few days ago, we’ve been debating as to whether or not to go.”

“When are you guys leaving?” He didn’t want to stay in Dallas if the rest of his family was going to be in Colorado.

“I have to go into the office tomorrow morning. I have a few things I need to take care of. Then we thought we would head out of town around noon,” Colt’s dad answered from the recliner. He picked up the remote and lowered the volume of the game.

“How long are you going to be gone?” Colt tried to focus on what he wanted to do. He could go with them and give himself time to think and make a decision about Susan, or stay home and . . .

Do what?

“We want to stay until Saturday. You did say you had the week off, didn’t you?” His father glanced at the screen on the far wall. “You know, if Dallas doesn’t watch it, they’re going to get beat.”

Colt glanced at the men running down the football field. He didn’t care who won. He ran over the plans he’d devised for his time off. He’d wanted to spend it with Susan and Calvin. Now, he . . .

The ringing of his cell interrupted his thoughts. He dug his phone out of his pocket and looked at the number display. “Hello.”

“Where are you, Colt? You said you would come over today so we could talk.” Susan’s voice rang through the receiver.

He’d hoped to avoid her by staying away from his apartment. He should have turned off his phone. “I’m at my parents’.” Colt glanced at the television, trying to see the score of the game. “I’m over here watching the Dallas game.”

“So what time are you going to come over?”

“Later.” He waited for her snappy comeback, but the phone remained silent. After a long pause, he added, “I, uh, don’t really know exactly what time I’ll be over there.”

“Meaning you’re not going to come over at all.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you saying, Colt?”

He tried to think, but the hurt she’d inflicted by her lack of trust in him still burned in his gut. He wanted to hit something.

“Okay, you’re upset because I didn’t tell you what the doctor said. But my mom’s drama-queen statement is wrong, too. She doesn’t know any more than the doctor does. No one does until I try to get pregnant again.” Susan took a breath and released it. The sound whispered against his ear. When she continued, her voice was calmer. “Colt, we’ll just have to deal with the problem when it comes around.”

He didn’t want to discuss their future over the phone. “I’m thinking about going away for a few days. We can discuss it when I get back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Dalton’s in-laws have a house in Durango. Everyone is going to meet there for Christmas.”

“What about work?”

“I have the whole week off, so it’s not going to be a problem. And with you just getting out of the hospital, I didn’t think you’d want to go.”

His mother stood and walked away.

“Well, you were wrong. I want to go.” Susan’s words shocked him.

“What? Are you serious?” He couldn’t believe she would want to spend a whole week with his family. “We’re going to be gone almost a week.”

“I said I want to go. When are you leaving?”

He struggled to come up with a reason why she couldn't go. "But you can't ski. You just got out of the hospital."

"When are you coming back?"

"Saturday," he said and threw out his next question. "When is your doctor's appointment?"

"Not until next Monday, so it should be okay to go. Whose vehicle are you taking?"

"My dad's. There's no way my truck would make it." Colt glanced over at his father. His mother had left the room. "Dad, are we taking your car or the motor home?"

"Either one, the RV might be more comfortable for Susan. She could lie down in back. The trip will take us a little bit longer, though." His dad sat up and rolled to his feet. "Iris, how many bedrooms does the house in Durango have?"

His father left the room. Colt didn't know if he really wanted Susan to go with them. "Dad said—"

"I heard him. When are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow. Dad wants to leave around noon." Colt wasn't sure he wanted to deal with her on this trip. He still needed to figure out how he felt about everything that had happened.

"I'll be ready. Can you pick me up?"

"What if I don't want you to go?"

"A really good question." Susan's voice turned rough. "Add to it, do you still want to marry me, can I get along with your family, can you live with a woman that can't give you chil . . ." Her voice broke. "Children?"

"Susan." He felt like a cad.

"I guess you better figure out the answers before tomorrow." The line went dead.

She hadn't said good-bye or "I love you." Nothing.

What did she expect from him?

Chapter Fifteen

No one drove by.

Susan knew for a fact no more than two vehicles had passed the house in the last twenty minutes. The street in front of the Harris residence had no cars on it. She looked out the window again, and then checked her watch which read ten after twelve.

He isn't coming.

"Do you think he's blown you off?" Kelly walked into the dining room, carrying Calvin in her arms. She held the bottle while he gulped down his formula.

"Yes." Susan glanced back out at the quiet street. "I guess I can't really blame him. I should have told him what the doctor said." She let the curtain fall back into place. "I also didn't tell him I'd decided to give Calvin to you and Jason. He's probably just as upset about that. He really wanted to be Calvin's dad."

"Do you think he'd settle for being his godfather instead?" Kelly sat down in one of the dining room chairs. "That is, if he agrees to marry Calvin's godmother first."

"I don't think that will be reason enough for him to want to marry me. He sounded very angry with me yesterday when I talked to him on the phone. I don't think he's going to show up." Susan watched Calvin eat. Her son looked so content lying in Kelly's arms. The two of them together tugged at Susan's heart. She wanted to have the same type of relationship with Colt's child someday.

"He may just be running late." Kelly glanced out through the sheer curtains.

"No. If he was coming, he would have called." Susan walked over and pushed out the chair beside Kelly. "I screwed it up. I pushed him one time too many. Now I've got to figure out what the hell I'm going to do without him."

"You know he loves you."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean he can forgive me. I love my parents, too, but to tell you the truth, I'm hoping never to have to deal with them again." Susan wondered if she could ever forget the pain they had inflicted. They had wanted to help, but they had gone about it all wrong. They never considered what she might want.

"Just give it a little time." Kelly took the bottle from Calvin's mouth. She placed him on her shoulder. The baby wiggled unhappily, complaining about the break. She patted his back lightly. "Are you sure you wanted to go with Colt anyway? You really don't know his family that well."

"I wanted to get to know them better. Colt is closer to his family than I ever thought about being with mine. I guess I was hoping for a second chance." Susan wondered if it was over between them.

She hoped that if she went with him to Colorado, he'd see how much she wanted to work on their relationship. And with her being gone, it would also give Kelly and Jason time alone with Calvin.

A loud burp erupted from him. Kelly grinned and lowered him back down into her arms.

“I’m always amazed at how much noise such a little baby can make.” Susan slid her hand over the soft downy hair on top of Calvin’s head. He may not be her baby anymore, but it didn’t mean she didn’t still love him.

The doorbell rang, causing Susan to jump to her feet. Calvin let out a cry.

* * * *

Colt shut the door to the motor home.

“So, Susan, why don’t you tell me a little about yourself? Colt says you are planning to go to UTD and get a degree in business management,” Iris said.

For the past few hours, Susan had sat watching a video while Colt’s dad did the driving. After getting Susan settled in his parents’ motor home, Colt had engaged his mother in a game of cards. No one had said one word to her.

Now that they had stopped for gas, Susan stood and moved over to the table. “Yes, my father has a small plumbing business, which I helped him with. I thought if I could get a degree, I’d have the skills to grow with a large company.”

“That’s interesting. You sound like just the kind of girl Colt is looking for,” Iris said, directing Susan to take the seat across from her. “He’s always wanted to open his own computer geek’s store.”

“But he works for a computer store. Why would he want to have one of his own?” Susan tried to recall if Colt had ever mentioned wanting to open his own business. He’d said he liked his job.

“He says it doesn’t hit the niche market he wants to target.” Iris slid out of the booth and looked through the cabinet above the table. “Are you hungry?”

Before Susan could answer, Iris began setting packages on the table. “Let’s see, we have cookies, chips . . .” She dug around on the shelf some more and took down another box. “And here’s my favorite snack bar.”

“Oh my, do you realize the temptation?” Susan could feel her mouth water. The treats looked like sinful delights for her stomach. “I haven’t had most of these things in months.” She reminded herself she still wasn’t down to her ideal weight.

“Yes, I can remember when I was pregnant with Colt. I gained fifty pounds.” Iris opened the packages and then turned to the small refrigerator. “What would you like to drink?”

Susan didn’t think, she just answered, “Water.”

“We do have sodas.” Iris shifted out of the way so Susan could see inside. “You don’t have to drink water.”

“Maybe, but with all these other goodies, I don’t want to waste my calories on pop.” Susan picked up a cookie.

The chocolate wafer and creamy filling looked like a dream. Her mouth watered. She broke the cookie in half and laid one piece on her tongue. She closed her eyes and savored the flavor. “Ummm.”

“That good?” Colt stood in the doorway.

Their eyes met. A sizzle of longing coursed through the center of her body at the heated look in his eyes. She licked her suddenly dry lips and swallowed. “It’s been a while. I forgot what it’s like to enjoy what I eat.”

Colt stepped up into the motor home. “So you’re no longer worried about your weight?” He turned to shut the door behind him, so she couldn’t read what he meant by the comment.

“Colt, do you want something to drink?” his mother asked.

Susan didn’t answer his question. Instead, she looked down at the remaining cookie in her hand. Was he telling her she was fat? Forcing herself to eat the rest of her cookie, she didn’t enjoy her second bite as much as her first.

“Sure, I’ll have a cola. I told Dad I’d drive for a while. He can rest, and then we’ll switch off again in a few hours.” Colt took the can his mother offered him, took a few cookies off the table, and moved into the driver’s seat.

The door to the motor home opened again. His dad walked in. “Well, guys, I guess we’re ready to get going again.”

Susan forced a smile on her face and looked at John Lefevour. His wide smile helped her to relax.

“Good, maybe now I can have a chance to get to know both of you better.” The engine of the motor home turned over.

* * * *

The hum of the engine had lulled Susan to sleep, but the force of someone sitting down on the bed beside her woke her. She turned her head to see Colt take off his shirt in the muted headlights of the car behind them.

Watching him undress, she didn’t say anything. He hadn’t said much to her since the trip started. She didn’t think he’d want to start talking now.

The light on his tired face alerted her to the rough time he was having when he turned to slide under the blankets. She wanted to pull him into her arms but resisted the temptation.

He settled beside her, not touching or saying a word to her. Tears gathered in her eyes. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Now was not the time to get into a fight with him. They were both tired. It had been a long trip so far, and they still had miles to go.

Drawing in a shaky breath, she let it out slowly so he wouldn't notice she was awake. The desire to cuddle up beside him and forget the problems between them made her roll to her side. Her hands tingled with the need to touch him. She would never be able to sleep with him lying beside her. The smooth rhythm of his breathing told her he wasn't having the same issue. He appeared to be almost asleep.

"Colt, I . . ." she whispered, afraid she might disturb him. Yet she couldn't remain silent either.

"Yes?" he answered without moving. His eyes didn't flicker, nor did he change his position so he could look at her.

She placed her hand on his forearm. The warmth of his skin ran up her arm, drawing her closer. "I know you're upset with me, and I, uh, can understand."

He turned his head. "Susan, I'm tired. Can this wait?"

"Yes, if we can reach a truce." She used her cast to prop herself up and looked down at him. The fatigue on his face was real. "I don't want to keep you awake, but I'm not going to be able to sleep this close to you without touching you."

The arm under her hand moved, and she released her grip.

"Then I guess you'd better get up." His eyes glared at her for a brief moment before he rolled onto his side away from her.

His words hit her like a punch to the gut, and her breath blew out in a rush. She stared at his back for a moment, unsure if she'd heard him correctly. Reaching for his shoulder, she stopped her hand a few inches from its mark. She wanted to grab him, turn him over, and maybe land a good, solid punch onto his chest. She could yell, scream, and demand he listen to her reasons for making the decisions she had, but she knew it would do no good.

Instead, she placed her hand on the bed between them. Fighting with him was not a habit she wanted to start. She'd heard her parents argue many nights through the years. The noise would last for hours until she'd have to go hide in the closet to escape the violence. That wasn't her game.

"Okay." She rolled away from him, got out of the bed, and put on her clothes. The hurt look in the depths of his eyes before he turned away told her he wasn't ready to listen. He was suffering, too. She just had to give him time to work out what he really wanted.

"Good night, Colt." Susan closed the folding doors behind her and walked to the front of the motor home.

* * * *

Colt tracked her footsteps, fighting the desire to run after her. He couldn't understand why she'd given Calvin up without consulting him. And why she hadn't found the time to tell him about her doctor's prognosis.

Why couldn't she be honest with him?

He still wasn't sure he wanted her to come along on this trip. His parents, who had overheard his conversation on the phone with her, had thought it a good idea. They had insisted on going by and picking her up.

The picture of her excited face when she'd opened the door to come with them flashed through his head. Her bright eyes and shining smile almost helped him forget his anger.

But he couldn't get over the feeling they didn't want the same things. He wanted her, a family, kids, and he had a plan to lead them into a promising future. She wanted . . .

His mind stalled. What did she want, other than an education?

She didn't have Calvin. And she might not be able to have any children at all. What did she expect to have in the future?

He couldn't come up with the answer and exhaustion claimed him. He fell into a troubled sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

The view from the top of the mountain didn't capture Colt's interest. He stood staring off into space, held captive by the sounds of silence. The thick snow on the ground cushioned all noise. A blanket of peace lay in the air, soothing Colt's confused thoughts.

"Are you going down this hill?" Dalton stopped on the mogul a few feet away from Colt. "Or are you looking at the scenery?"

"Neither. I'm trying to think." He looked over at his older brother, who seemed to be the only other person in the world at the moment. The black course in front of them scared most of the other skiers away. "I can't figure it out, Dalton. Why did Susan want to come on this vacation with me?"

"Maybe for the wild sex you two have been having every night." Dalton shifted and slid a few feet down the slope, bringing him closer to Colt.

"Right, you know she just had a baby. I can't touch her until she gets clearance from her doctor." The frustration churning through his gut fueled his desire to wear himself out on the last run of the day. The cool air burned his lungs, but he welcomed the exertion. When he got back to the house, he had to be exhausted. Or he would be tempted to break down Susan's bedroom door.

He kicked off the wide curve of the mogul and skied down several yards. Stopping again after a few minutes, his breath fogged the air in front of his face. Just knowing she was alone upstairs in her room kept him awake at night while he tried sleeping on the couch in the den. He couldn't get her out of his head.

"She asked me this morning if I wanted to call off our engagement," Colt said when he saw Dalton stop below him on the mogul. "Why would I want to do that?"

Dalton shook his head. "Colt, are you crazy? You haven't even held the girl's hand since you've been here. Every time she walks into a room, you walk out. What's she supposed to think?"

"But . . ." He couldn't remember exactly why he was avoiding her. Was he still upset because of her lack of trust in him? Or was he dodging her for some other reason, like her messing up his plan for the future? He still thought they could've handled taking care of Calvin, but she only wanted to concentrate on school.

Maybe he was afraid if he ever got his hands on her, he wouldn't be able to stop?

"Well," he started again, and noticed Dalton had taken off down the slope.

Colt kicked off with his poles and followed his brother's trail. They were more than halfway down the slope when Dalton stopped again. Colt paused a few feet beside his brother.

"I told you I wanted to be Calvin's dad." Colt could still imagine how the small baby felt in his arms. How could she give up something so wonderful? He believed her to be different, that she really cared about her child.

Dalton shook his head. “Now you’re making me wonder if you want her or her child. Colt, you have to decide what you want. Either forgive her for giving up her baby and live with her not being able to have another child, or let her go. You can’t keep torturing the poor girl.”

His aggravating brother didn’t give Colt a chance to answer. With a salute, Dalton kicked off again and then stopped for a few seconds to yell back up at Colt. “Oh, and I’m not sticking around here! Mom wants us back at the house early tonight since it’s Christmas Eve! I’ll meet you at the car in fifteen minutes!”

Dalton raced off, hit the lower part of the hill, and cruised into the area near the lodge. Colt lost him in the crowd.

Not in a hurry, he breathed in the clean, crisp air. Colt needed to think, to clear his mind. He skied slowly across the mountain, trying to work out his plans for the future. With the week half over, Susan would want to know the arrangements he’d worked out for their wedding.

* * * *

The beauty of the falling snow still amazed Susan after four days. She stood by her bedroom window, staring at the crisp white scene and clutching her engagement ring. It hung around her neck on the chain Colt had given her. The swelling in her hand had gone down. She wanted him to slip the ring on her finger and tell her he still loved her.

Today was Christmas.

She could hear Colt’s nephew, Trevor, downstairs screaming with excitement at the toys under the tree. The whole house had to be awake. Dressed in jeans and a thick sweater, she could head downstairs, but she didn’t want to join them.

Last night had been hard enough to get through. With the smell of pumpkin pie floating in the air, they had opened gifts. Everyone had given her a present, while she had not bought a single thing for anyone, not even Colt. Embarrassed, she’d claimed to be tired to escape them. But when she got upstairs, she hadn’t been able to sleep.

Colt’s family was being very nice to her, except maybe Colt. Yet, even after he stayed out late the first night and got drunk, he still wasn’t cruel. He just didn’t let her get close to him. If she sat down beside him, he moved. If she walked into a room, he walked out. He was the first one out to the slopes in the morning and the last one back at night. He may have already left this morning, too. Her plan to force him to deal with her wasn’t working. He wouldn’t even give her a chance to explain.

A knock sounded on the door, and she turned from the window. “Come in.” She expected to see Iris and was shocked to see Colt open the door.

He glanced at each corner of the room like she had someone hiding in there. “Are you coming downstairs?”

She turned back to the window. The clean white snow made her feel dirty. For whatever reason, he didn't want her anymore. She better get used to the idea. "No, you'll have more fun with your family without me there."

The door closed.

She dropped her head to her chest and covered her face with her hands. Tears stung her eyes. She leaned on the windowpane to keep from collapsing to the floor. The past few days, she had cried more than she'd thought humanly possible. How in the hell was she ever going to make it through the rest of the week, much less today?

Colt's warm hands landed on her shoulders. She lifted her head. "What do you want, Colt?"

"I need to say I'm sorry, Susan." He ran his arms over her ribcage and drew her back into his strong embrace. She wanted to melt, to let the warmth of his body thaw the chill that lay around her heart when she imagined her life without him.

She stared out the window. "There's really no need for an apology, Colt. I'm the one who caused all the trouble between us. You had every right to be upset with me."

"I haven't been very nice to you. But I am glad you decided to come with us on this vacation. You're the reason I took this week off in the first place. I was planning to spend it with you and . . ." He paused for a moment. "Since we got here, I haven't been spending a lot of time with you." He pulled her tighter against him. "You must be having an awful time."

More tears fell from Susan's eyes. She didn't want him to feel guilty for avoiding her. "No, you had to come to terms with the decision I made to give up Calvin. I know how much you wanted to be his dad."

Colt laid his cheek against her hair. "I probably gave you the impression I wanted him more than you."

She nodded, unable to voice her pain.

"It's not true. I wanted him because he was a part of you." He loosened his hold and turned her in the circle of his arms. The concern on his face when he saw her tears hit a sensitive place in her chest, and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.

"Oh, honey, I didn't mean to cause you so much pain. I'm just struggling to figure out why you didn't tell me first. Instead, you made a grand announcement in front of everyone. I wasn't prepared."

Susan couldn't stand to see the hurt look on his face. Lowering her eyes to his chest, she fought with herself about why she'd chosen such a bad way of revealing her decision to him. "I'm sorry. I had planned to tell you, Jason, and Kelly that morning, but then my parents arrived." She looked up at him. "You saw them. They wouldn't let it go. They just kept pushing me until I wanted to explode. I had to get them to leave."

“Are they the reason you gave Calvin up?” Colt’s hands caressed her back.

She laid her hands on his chest and shook her head. “No. I know it might look that way, but it’s not their fault.”

Forcing herself to admit the guilt she felt for giving up her son, she stiffened her resolve. “I’m a selfish person, Colt. I didn’t want to share. Calvin has Kelly and Jason, who can give him time and attention and more love than he’ll ever need. I thought we could use some time to get to know each other, to concentrate on our lives, our future, and our dreams.” She gripped his flannel shirt in her hands. “I wanted a little time with just you.”

He blinked as if shocked by her statement. “You gave him up so you could have me to yourself?”

The incredulous tone of his voice told her he’d never felt unloved or unwanted. After seeing him with his family these last few days and the way they treated him, she should have guessed he wouldn’t understand.

Susan wanted the same for her son. She never wanted him to feel like an outsider. Pushing away from Colt, she stepped back out of his arms and stared at him. Right now, Colt thought he wanted to be Calvin’s dad, but she didn’t know how Colt would feel after he had a son of his own. Would he have still treated Calvin the same way, or would he have shown favoritism toward his own son?

Not having the answer, she wanted to provide Calvin with the best set of parents she could give him. Kelly and Jason had been her lifeline over the last few months. Susan could count on them to give Calvin the life he deserved. And the best part was they would let her be a part of his life.

“I just thought Calvin deserved two parents who could love and cherish him without the distraction of building a career.” The cold pane of the window hit her back. A chill raced through her. “With us just getting married, I didn’t want to have to divide my time between you and him. I didn’t think that was fair.”

She sidestepped him to get to her bedroom door and paused. “I think I’ll go downstairs now. I promised your mother I’d help her fix Christmas dinner.”

“Wait, Susan,” he started and took a step to her.

“No, Colt.” She gripped the doorknob in her hand. “Don’t say anything you’re going to regret. You know what I did and why I did it. Now, you have to decide if you still want me to be a part of your life.” She opened the door and walked down the hall.

The diamond of her engagement ring dug into her palm where she had it clutched in her hand. She refused to wear the ring on her finger until she knew for certain Colt was going to marry her.

Now she wondered how soon he’d ask for it back.

* * * *

The appetizing scent of ham filled the den. Colt walked back down the stairs. His mother wasn't letting anyone ski today. She had designed the day so the family would spend time together, but he wanted to avoid Susan.

Staying upstairs, he had used his parents' room to shower and change. His mind ran over what Susan had said about wanting him to herself. What did she mean when she said she didn't want to share him? Was she telling him she didn't want him dividing his attention between her and Calvin?

Colt couldn't help but think about Susan. He didn't see her as a selfish person, yet that's how she described herself. Why?

The laughter in the kitchen caused him to glance up. His two sisters-in-law were working at the counter with Susan. Spoons dipped into the pot were tasted and evaluated. His mother walked up beside Susan and placed an arm around her shoulders. A shocked look passed over Susan's face at the unexpected contact.

He recalled their visit to her parents' house. Her parents didn't even hug her after months of her being gone. He thought it strange at the time. Her abusive father cared for no one but himself, and her mother appeared to be nothing more than a doormat for Susan's father. What kind of life did Susan have growing up? Was that why she wanted him to herself? He couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever want children.

Sitting down in the den with his brothers and father, he observed Susan working with his mother in the kitchen. The two appeared to like each other's company.

"Hey, Colt, if you're going to sit there and stare at Susan, can you shift down a little? I'd like to see the game." His oldest brother, JJ, hit Colt in the arm to get him to move.

He shifted to the end of the couch and followed the women in the kitchen with his eyes. They divided up into pairs. His mother and Susan stepped over to the back counter, while his two sisters-in-law worked at the front counter.

If Susan was really selfish, why had she helped him with his English Lit class? And what did she gain from giving birth to Calvin? Selfish people didn't do things without getting something in return. The idea sent his thoughts down a dark path, and he wondered if Kelly and Jason were paying her for Calvin.

They had given her free room and board and didn't require her to do much as their maid. Was there more money on the table he didn't know about? Her father had accused her of selling her baby. Was he right?

"Would you quit?" JJ hit Colt in the arm again.

"What?"

"You're staring at Susan like she might pull out a gun. She's only helping Mom in the kitchen." JJ turned to his son who was playing on the floor by the couch.

“You don’t know anything about her.” Colt frowned at his brother. This was none of JJ’s business.

Dalton stood up from his place on the recliner, which was next to the couch. He walked over to Colt. Pretending to hold out a microphone, Dalton leaned in close to Colt. “And now from the guy who’s supposed to be in love with her. Please, sir, can you tell us about the crime she committed?”

“Bite me,” Colt said and knocked Dalton’s hand away.

“He’s right, Colt. Other than give her son up for adoption, what has she done?” His dad looked over at him from his place on the other couch.

“But you don’t know why she gave him up. She said she did it so she could have more time with me.” That didn’t sound like a valid reason to Colt.

“You’re a lucky man,” JJ said in a low tone while Dalton jumped up.

“Wow, the girl’s got to be nuts. Let’s get a rope, and I’ll help you hang her.” Dalton grabbed Trevor’s toy sword off the floor. “Or we could make her walk the plank.”

Swinging the sword through the air, Dalton stood and danced around Trevor, playing with the young boy. “Yes, my man, we have her now.”

Confused by his brothers’ comments, Colt shook his head. What were they telling him?

His dad got up from his place on the couch and walked over to sit next to Colt. JJ moved to the recliner. “Look, Colt, I don’t want to interfere, but marriage is a big adjustment. It’s hard enough for a young couple to make it without a child.”

“And a child changes the makeup of a marriage,” JJ said. His son ran at Dalton with a toy sword. He grabbed the blade and pretended to die.

His dad put his hand on Colt’s shoulder. “Your mother and I talked to Susan in the motor home on the way here. She told us about the couple who is going to adopt Calvin. They sound like they’ll be great parents, and they’re allowing her to stay in his life. What more could she want?”

“But she didn’t have to give him up. I could have helped her take care of him.” Colt argued, uncertain as to the point his father was making.

“At what price?” his father responded.

“What do you mean? It wouldn’t have cost her anything.”

“Son, you’re not looking at this correctly. If you two are both planning on going to school and working, you don’t have much time together as it is. Add a baby, and you’re down to almost no quality time.”

“But . . .” Colt could see his father’s point. Yet, he still didn’t want to admit they couldn’t have it all. “But what if she can’t have another child?”

“She told us her doctor wasn’t sure. It all depends on the amount of scar tissue that forms, which can prevent her from getting pregnant again.” His dad patted Colt’s shoulder. “You have to decide if it’s a risk you’re willing to take.”

Colt looked in the kitchen. Susan glanced at him at the same time. Their eyes met for a brief moment before she turned away. The long braid running down the line of her back rocked back and forth with her movements. He wanted to capture it and hold her until he could smooth out all the uncertainty in their lives. He thought about their future and how he had planned out their life so carefully. Had he been looking through rose-colored glasses?

His eyes fell on his nephew who was again playing on the floor by himself. Did Colt value having a child more than having a wife who loved him?

Tired of muddling through his thoughts, he stood and walked into the kitchen. “Hey, ladies, what can I do to help?”

* * * *

“Look, beautiful, why don’t you join us on a sleigh ride through the snow?” Dalton’s suggestion hit Colt in the chest like a brick. “It’s our last day in Colorado.”

“No way, you already have one gorgeous girl. I’m not letting you take mine.” Colt slipped his arm around Susan’s waist. He winked at Dalton’s wife, Ashley, when she stood up from the dinner table. “I have plans to build a snowman.”

“But a sleigh ride doesn’t require any work.” Ashley took Dalton’s arm. “Susan should get to see some of the countryside. She hasn’t been out of the house all week.”

Colt looked down into Susan’s face. He’d spent more time with her over the last couple of days, but he didn’t want her to overexert herself. “Do you want to go on a sleigh ride?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It might be fun.”

“Then a sleigh ride it is.”

A half hour later, with Ashley and Dalton already in the sleigh in front of them, Susan sat down on the seat of her and Colt’s sled. The rest of the family had elected to stay at home.

Colt joined her and covered them both with a thick blanket. “Are you sure you’re warm enough? Once the driver gets started, it can get very windy back here.”

“I’m good, thanks.” Susan snuggled closer. The last few days, Colt hadn’t been avoiding her like he had when they started their vacation. He would hold her hand or seek out company, but he didn’t try to get her alone.

Susan glanced at him and wondered what he was thinking.

Tomorrow, they were heading back to Dallas with his parents. He hadn't mentioned what he wanted to do about their engagement. She thought he'd just drop her off at Kelly and Jason's, and then go home. After a few days, she expected him to call and break it off.

The bells on the sleigh jingled when the horses started down the snow-packed trail. Susan recalled the old movie with Bing Crosby. With all the trees and plants covered in snow, she figured Hollywood couldn't make the setting any more beautiful.

But they might be able to arrange a happy ending.

She smiled when Colt glided his arm around her shoulders. Her heart swelled with joy at the warmth in his green eyes. She hoped it meant he still loved her.

Over the last few days, he'd captured her heart. Not only had he been nice to her, but she admired the way he treated the other people in his family. If someone needed a hand, he was there to help. He didn't complain or argue. His presence was easygoing and undemanding.

"I know this vacation has been hard for you, Colt. I hope my being here hasn't ruined it for you." Susan leaned in closer so he could hear. "I only wanted to give us a chance to get to know each other better."

"And you wanted to push me into dealing with you so I'd know what I wanted to do about our engagement." Colt grinned and nudged her closer. "Mom told me that was your plan."

Susan put her gloved hand on the thick padding of his coat, which covered his chest. What would he think about her talking to his mom about their problems? "I, uh . . ."

He shook his head. "You can't tell anyone in this family anything without it getting back to the person you said it about."

"I wanted her to see why I wanted to come along." Susan waited for him to get angry.

"It's not a problem. You were right. I'm a person who likes to make plans and follow through with them. I had our future all mapped out with Calvin being the center of our world."

"And now that Calvin is not a major player in our world, you've decided you don't want me in it either." Susan wondered if his next words would end their engagement.

"No, I just needed to rethink how we want to proceed. I know you plan to go back to school in January." Colt looked at the driver to see if the man was listening. "I'm not going to graduate until next year. There's no real rush for us to get married now. So I thought we might slow down the process. See if we still wanted to be together."

"A wait-and-see attitude?" Susan tried to force herself to think rationally about the idea, but his words stung.

“Yes, you can go on living with Kelly and Jason. Then when spring semester starts, you can go back to school. We’ll keep dating, and once we figure out for certain what we want to do, we can start making plans.”

The cold, methodical way he described it sent a chill down her spine. Was this the first step before he suggested dating other people?

Could she get him to alter his idea? Or was he expecting her to bow to his will and do whatever he wanted?

Irritated by the assumption, she straightened her back. He wasn’t the only one who could make a decision. She had a few plans of her own. “I’m not sure I want to keep living with Kelly and Jason. They deserve some time alone with Calvin, and I don’t want to be in their way.”

“Then where are you going to live?”

Susan fell back on the plans she’d devised before she met Colt. “I figured I could find a roommate at school, but first, I need to find a job.” She didn’t mention she really wanted to live with him. “I’m not sure I’ll have much time to date.”

“Are you saying you want to break up?”

She shook her head. “No, but I think we need to decide on our future together, Colt. When you thought I was going to keep Calvin, you worked everything out without telling me what you were thinking. Then you were devastated when I changed the game plan. I’m just saying you can’t make decisions concerning both of us without knowing what I want too.”

“But this is the best plan for both of us.” Colt pulled his arm from her shoulders. In a rough voice, he added, “I’m not going to be rushed. I want us to make the right choices for our future.”

Her temper rose. She wanted to yell and scream and cause a scene. She gripped her hands into fist. Just a week ago, he’d wanted to get married right away because he thought she needed a father for her baby. Yet now, when there was only the two of them to be concerned about, he wanted to wait until who knows when.

A set look marked his face. A cold breeze blew across her cheek, turning her heart to ice. He wasn’t going to compromise on his views. The man she gave her love to wanted to control her. She couldn’t live in that type of environment again. “Right, and what I want doesn’t matter?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Funny, that’s the way it sounds to me. First, you decide we should get married right away. Now, you’ve decided we should wait. Next, you’ll think it’s a good idea if we start seeing other people.” Susan shifted on the seat and reached for the ring that hung around her neck. “Don’t do me any favors, Colt. If you want to call off our engagement, just do it now.”

“Are you sure it’s not you who wants to end our engagement?” Colt glared at her with eyes on fire with anger. “I’m not the one who keeps asking if I want my ring back or not.”

“Right, that’s why I came to Colorado with you, so I could break up with you.”

“Where else did you have to go?”

The truth of his statement hit her like a slap across the face. Tears formed in her eyes. Years of stinging comments helped her tighten her emotions so he wouldn’t see her cry.

She bowed her head and slid the chain with his ring on it over her head. “You’re right, Colt. You have all the answers. You’re older, wiser, and know exactly what’s best for me, but I don’t want to burden you with my petty problems. I think it’s best if you take back your ring.”

Susan dropped the chain and his ring in his lap seconds before the sleigh pulled to a stop.

Chapter Seventeen

For days now, she'd endured the pain of losing Colt. Her angry tirades in her car didn't help. Crying, yelling, hitting her hand against the seat, nothing calmed the hurt burning through her soul. Even the doctor telling her she could drive again hadn't cleared the depression clouding her mind.

She looked up at his apartment window. The blinds were closed, but light peeked through the cracks. He had to be there. His truck sat right next to her car.

Why hadn't he tried to talk her out of it? He'd taken his ring, walked away, and managed to leave with his brother for home before she got up the next day. She'd had to ride home with his parents and answer their questions.

Okay, she'd acted rashly when she gave him back his ring. But the man refused to listen to her. She told him she didn't like his plan. Did he compromise? No, he wanted her to do things his way. He must not think she has a brain. Or he can't see past his own blind logic.

First, he wanted her to keep her son when she knew in her heart that he would be better off with Kelly and Jason. With just one look, Susan could tell how much they had bonded with their son. Every time she saw them, she wanted to cry. She wanted Colt and her to have the same type of connection with their own son someday.

But damn it, Colt was being stubborn. She wanted to hit the man upside the head. He was the one who barged into her life, demanding she help him with his English Lit class. She didn't ask him to marry her. He asked her.

She opened the car door, got out, and slammed the door shut before stomping up the stairs to his front door. If it took everything she had, she was going to make him see reason. He may have gotten his ring back, but he wasn't going to get rid of her that easily.

* * * *

Colt stood in the shower, hot water raining down on his head. For the last few days, he'd thought of nothing but Susan. Too late he learned he should have never asked her out. She'd been nothing but trouble. Yes, she'd helped him with his English Lit class, and he did get an A. But the cost to his heart was too high.

He wanted to figure out why he couldn't get over her. Okay, she was pregnant when he met her, which was an enticing benefit when he thought about what Dee did to his baby. But he refused to believe it was the only thing about Susan he liked.

Smart and strong, she drew him like a moth to a flame. He wanted to be with her, so he could talk to her, make love to her, and hold her in his arms for hours at a time. Her desire to make something out of her life is what initially attracted him to her, but then she had to go and blow it by being stubborn.

By his wanting to help her with Calvin, she claimed he was trying to control her life. He'd offered to marry her, to take care of her son. And what did she go and do?

She called off their engagement.

“Well, let her stew,” he grumbled. He poured shampoo into his hand and rubbed it through his hair. A picture of the way she looked right before she gave him back his ring flashed in his head. Her head bowed, she’d looked defeated before she raised her head and fire flashed in her eyes.

He’d let his anger get the better of him. His cruel words had hurt her feelings. Her only recourse was to strike back. Now he had to decide what he was going to do, either let her steam for a few more days or go over there and have it out with her today.

His body tightened when he thought about her doctor’s appointment. Was it okay for them to make love again?

When they were in Colorado, her sexy body drove him crazy. Her luscious curves had taunted him with visions of what it would be like to make love to her. That was probably some of the reason why he’d gotten so angry with her that last evening.

He loved her and had wanted to show her he wasn’t giving up on them. Any thought of living without her formed pictures of hours, days, and weeks spent alone. No relief for his misery lay in his future.

Calvin or not, Colt needed her in his life.

If she wanted to decide their future, he’d let her plan every detail. As long as she agreed to be with him, they could do whatever she wanted.

A chime sang through the apartment. Someone was at the front door.

“Damn.” He would have to get rid of whoever it was quickly and go see Susan.

* * * *

The door remained closed. Susan waited for some sound to tell her he was on his way. She punched the button again and the bell rang. She knocked on the door several times. “Come on, Colt, I know you’re in there.”

His muffled voice answered, but she couldn’t understand his words. The lock slid back, and the door squeaked open. He stood on the other side of the doorway. A gasp caught in her throat.

“Susan, what are you doing here?” He had on nothing but a towel.

She grinned and stepped forward. The crisp, clean smell of his soap greeted her senses. His green eyes narrowed. His hand on the doorknob slipped when he took a step back. He looked good enough to eat.

His raw strength caused Susan’s mouth to water. Stray drops of water clung to the curly hair covering his chest. The white towel around his waist covered the midsection of his body down to his

knees. She walked over the threshold and closed the door behind her. He took another step back and ran into the table.

“What are you doing here, Susan?” One hand held the knot which kept the towel in place. He looked embarrassed that she’d caught him just coming out of a shower.

She leaned back against the door, afraid if she got any closer she’d fight him for his towel. “Just like you, there are some things I can’t let go of. I came by to see if you’re ready to talk.”

“I might be if you let me put on some clothes.” He backed up around the table. “But you’re the one that called off our engagement.”

“True, but I didn’t say we were through.” She watched a drop slowly make a path down the center of his chest and end in the narrow divot of his belly button. The thought of running her tongue down the same course forced her away from the door.

She stepped past the card table. “You said you want us to get to know each other better. I thought the best way to do that was to start over. No strings, no expectations, no promises, no rules.”

Surprised by her sudden appearance, Colt’s gaze ran down her body. She let him drink in the sight of her and shifted her shoulders back to force her breasts forward. His clean smell tickled her taste buds. The towel over his groin tented with his growing need. She took a step forward, and he shifted back and hit the wall next to the kitchen doorway.

“And what if I want more?”

Susan placed her index finger in the center of his chest. The moisture hidden in the blond curls caressed her finger. She teased him by running a path down to his navel. Her eyes stayed glued to his. She read the desire that sparked in the depths of his. “More what, is the question. More time? More sex? More money? Which one were you thinking?”

Colt let go of the towel and grabbed her wrist. He stopped the finger that teased its way down the center of his body.

“I’m a reasonable person. I think we can negotiate a deal that can make us both happy.” Susan stepped closer, moving her cast-covered arm out of the way and laying her left hand on the knot at his waist.

His eyebrow lifted. “You know me, Susan. I’m a planner. Before long, I’ll have us married with two kids and a dog.”

“And does that include a daily allowance of you naked?” Susan pulled the towel from his waist. Cool air blew over the private parts of his body. He released her wrist and found the bottom of her sweater. “I might be willing to concede the point, if I get the same amount of time with you not wearing clothes.” His hands found their way under her sweater to the waistline of her jeans.

“I think I’m going to have to confer with a friend.” She slid her hand down the front of his body until she had him firmly in her hand. “I wouldn’t want to get shafted.”

He gasped for air. "I, uh, can't make any promises. My ability to think at the moment is being restricted by a lack of blood flow."

"Really?" Susan loved the idea that he couldn't think coherently with her touching him. "I may need to use this bargaining tool more often."

"Not a wise idea." He smiled, and his warm hands ran over her sides on their way upward. She waited for him to discover she hadn't bothered to put on a bra.

"I have a few tricks I can use too." He caressed her breasts and squeezed them before toying with her nipples.

"A truth that makes me wet just thinking about." She closed her eyes to enjoy the tingling sensation coursing through her body.

Oh, how she needed this man. Good thing the doctor cleared her to have sex.

He leaned forward and his breath blew against her lips, teasing her with the possibility of a kiss. "I think we may have reached a stalemate."

She released him and placed her hand on his shoulder. The arm in the cast she left at her side. "No, I think a subcommittee needs to review all the finer points of the deal. We should reconvene to a new location. It always takes a little time for each party to hammer out exact what they want."

He grinned, bent his knees, and scooped her up in his arms. "I know just the place."

"A nice, quiet place, where there are no interruptions and both parties can relax." She smiled when he laid her down on his bed and sat down beside her.

"Yes, but one half of the party is overdressed for the negotiations." He took hold of the bottom of her sweater and jerked it up over her head. "She'll have to rectify the problem or the details of the venture could lose some of their luster."

"A valid point."

He tossed her sweater on the floor, and she undid the snap of her jeans. He sat up and took off her shoes. With his help, she worked her legs out of her jeans and underwear.

"I think, sir, we're still not on even ground." She wrapped her arm over his shoulders, trying to bring him back down beside her.

"Not yet. What did the doctor say about such activities?" Colt wouldn't move, even though she tried to pull him closer.

"I'm free to do whatever I want."

"And the possibility of children?"

“Still unknown.” Susan ran her hand around the back of his neck and tugged him closer. “But I’m willing to risk it if you are?”

He jerked back as if she hit with a stun gun. “Are you saying you want to get pregnant again?”

“Maybe, if I’m pregnant with the right guy’s baby?”

While Colt absorbed her change of heart, Susan thought about being around Kelly and Calvin the last couple of days. Being a mother might not be so bad.

“But I thought you wanted to go to school and have a career.” He stared at her like he didn’t know who she was.

“Now here’s the interesting part about this negotiation process. If one party does one thing, the other needs to do something else.” Susan stroked the soft hair at the back of his neck. “If, let’s say, we decide to have a baby, then we have to figure the incubation period will take almost a year. By that time, someone I know will have graduated and can get a full-time job. He should be able to support a wife who wants to go to school and a newborn in day care.”

She could see him considering the idea. The man loved to plan. “Of course, there are other considerations. If a certain party wants to open his own business, then it might be wise if the other party is able to support him during this endeavor. This means she should probably finish school first.”

He ran his hand along her side, and then slid it between her legs. “You’re just trying to distract me. I move we table all discussion.” He didn’t give her a chance to argue. He kept her lips busy with other endeavors.

* * * *

“Are you ready to do this?” Colt stepped up beside Susan and took her hand.

“As I’ll ever be.” Susan walked to the door of the church.

The choir sang and the usher motioned them to start down the aisle. Kelly and Jason, with the priest, led the way to the baptismal pond at the front. Friends and family filled the pews on either side of the church.

Susan glanced around for her parents when they stopped and turned to the congregation. The soft melody of water cascading into the pond sang through the room when the hymn ended.

Colt caught her waist and whispered in her ear, “It won’t be long until we’re up here for a different reason.”

She couldn’t hold back the excitement that rushed through her at the thought of their wedding. A smile bloomed on her face. Colt looked handsome in his black suit, but in a tux, he would be gorgeous.

His eyes twinkled as if reading her mind.

She mouthed at him, “Not until February.”

The priest started talking. Susan turned and scanned the church again. She wondered where her parents could be. For weeks now, they had worked to resolve their issues, and her mom had assured her they would be here today. Her parents had even helped plan the festivities. Her father had even agreed to give a toast at Calvin’s party. She couldn’t imagine what could have gone wrong, but she would call them after the service to see what had happened.

She turned her attention back to the service. The priest raised Calvin up and presented him to the congregation. Dressed in a white gown, Calvin cooed at the crowd. People stood and cheered.

Colt drew her closer and wrapped his arm around her waist. She glanced at Kelly and Jason and saw the love shining from their eyes. Tears formed in Susan’s eyes. No matter what her parents thought, Calvin had the best set of parents she could have found him.

She snuggled closer to Colt. He was perfect.

She’d made the right decision for all of them.

The End

About the Author

Tina Gayle is a person that enjoys learning new things. After trying several different careers, she decided that she really wanted to be a Pretender. She discovered as a writer, she could go anywhere and do anything, the perfect job for her. Already a natural storyteller, she worked to convert the skill she developed as a child into creating characters and stories with passion and ambition.

In her free time, she's busy with her husband, two active boys, a large extended family and many friends.